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What Is Wrong With Chinese Soccer? Consumers' Attention, Involvement, and Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

While Chinese supporters represent one of European soccer's fastest-growing fan bases (Sporting Intelligence, 2011), the high-level of enthusiasm surrounding the European soccer leagues does not seem to be shared with China's domestic league, the Chinese Super League (CSL). Soccer is in fact the most popular sport in China; however, locals have developed an attitude of resentment toward the product as they appear unhappy and unwilling to attend and watch CSL events, nor consume licensed CSL products. Based on these observations, the purpose of this study was to investigate Chinese soccer fans' levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction on the basis of their attention to and involvement with the CSL and its teams.

According to Lavidge and Steiner's (1961) hierarchy of effects model, there is an inherent sequence in cognition, affection, and conation, whereby awareness and attention can be linked to customer satisfaction. Seeing, experiencing, and evaluating form the essence of initial satisfaction (Oliver, 1997) and will lead to a consumer's further attention, interest, and ultimately commitment to purchase a product or service (Anderson, Fornell, & Lehmann, 1994; Shank, 2009). Literature has shown that consumers with high levels of brand attention cope better with price changes that could potentially impact their behavioral intentions and satisfaction levels (Oh, 2000). Therefore, consumer attention to the CSL would experience higher levels of satisfaction with the league's operations and marketing efforts (Hypothesis 1). Involvement is also known to play a critical role in determining consumer behavior because people with feelings of involvement tend to have expectations toward products or services that they consume or are planning to consume. Prior studies have identified the direct and indirect effects of involvement on levels of satisfaction (Mano & Oliver, 1993; Richins & Bloch, 1991; Swinyard, 1993). When an individual is continuously involved with a product or a service, he or she likely to be reasonably satisfied with the product or service and displays a high level of brand commitment. It was therefore hypothesized that consumers with a higher level of involvement would be more likely to search for information about a product or a service; when mediated by their satisfaction toward the product or service, they would be more likely to repurchase or reuse it (Hypothesis 2).

Research participants ($N = 926$) were spectators at five CSL games, involving 10 of 16 CSL teams, held in five major Chinese cities. Based on the literature review and interviews of 26

CSL team administrators and coaches, a questionnaire was formulated that contained items geared toward measuring consumer attention, consumer involvement, and consumer satisfaction. The sample was randomly split into three sub-groups ($n = 309$, $n = 309$, and $n = 308$), which were respectively used to conduct an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) for the consumer satisfaction variables, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for the consumer satisfaction variables, and structural equation modeling (SEM) for examining the impact of consumer attention and involvement on consumer satisfaction. The EFA suggested three consumer satisfaction factors with 10 items retained. These factors were labeled as satisfaction with policy, satisfaction with operations, and satisfaction with marketing. The factor loadings ranged from .482 to .899. CFA confirmed the data fit of the model derived in EFA ($\chi^2/df = 2.154$, RMSEA = .061, CFI = .963, SRMR = .042). Furthermore, the model displayed good reliability and validity evidence ($AVE > .5$, $CR > .7$, $\lambda > .6$, $r_{\text{inter-factor}} < .85$). In SEM, the data fit the specified structural model reasonably well ($\chi^2/df = 2.463$, RMSEA = .069, CFI = .945, and SRMR = .048). Among the proposed structural relationships, consumers' attentions negatively influenced their satisfaction with marketing ($\beta = -.169$, $p < .05$) and consumers' involvements negatively influenced their satisfaction with operations ($\beta = -.162$, $p < .05$). The relationships between attention and satisfaction with policy ($\beta = -.025$, $p > .05$), between attention and satisfaction with operations ($\beta = -.117$, $p > .05$), between involvement and satisfaction with policy ($\beta = -.108$, $p > .05$), and between involvement and satisfaction with marketing ($\beta = -.114$, $p > .05$) were not statistically significant.

Contrary to the common beliefs that consumer' attentions and involvements would positively affect one's satisfaction, the findings of this study revealed opposite relationships between consumer cognition and affect. A reasonable explanation is that the CSL has serious issues in its operations and marketing, both of which are often resulted from the league's administrative policies although consumers may not fully understand the presence, relevance, and impact of the policies on the other two observable aspects, namely operation and marketing. Many soccer fans in China very much care about the CSL and the general growth and development of soccer in China; however, they are very discouraged by the CSL's ineffective administration and numerous corruptions, errors, and scandals in recent years. Constructive suggestions are offered at the end of project to improve the CSL's operations and marketing efforts. Beyond China, it is hoped that the findings of this study can also aid league administrators in other countries where soccer fans give priority to foreign soccer games over their domestic products.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Bo Gong received his doctoral degree at Shanghai University of Sport (China) and currently is the professor at Shanghai University of Sport. Dr. James J. Zhang received his doctoral degree at Springfield College and currently is the professor of sport management at University of Georgia. Dr. Minkil Kim received his doctoral degree at University of Florida and currently is the assistant professor at Tory University. Mr. Nathan D. Pifer, Jerry J. Wang, Minhong Kim, and Tyreal Y. Qian are doctoral students at University of Georgia.