

EUROPEAN FOOTBALL CLUBS AND THEIR ASIAN SUPPORTERS: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL SPORT MARKETERS

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INTRODUCTION

The financial value of European football is undoubted: Europe's and the world's biggest football club, Real Madrid, has recently reported an annual turnover of approximately £200 million; the English Premier League alone is thought to generate around £1.5 billion worth of economic activity each year; and the biggest five leagues in Europe (England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain) generated almost £5.8 billion of revenue in 2003/2004. In generating this activity, a number of European clubs have entered new markets in Asia in order to strengthen their revenue streams, build their brands and overcome the challenges posed by mature or saturated European markets. This strategy is characterised by varying degrees of success, some studies showing that European clubs have been both commercially successful and popular in Asia. Other commentators have been less impressed, arguing that European football clubs have poorly marketed themselves in Asia. Amongst the criticisms that have been made are that clubs have failed to understand the specific nature of Asian markets and what motivates Asian fans. Indeed, some commentators have suggested that markets have effectively been homogenised, something akin to a form of imperialism. As such, this paper sets out to identify and examine the factors that motivate fans in two Asian countries (South Korea, Japan and China) to support European football clubs and concludes by recommending how clubs can more effectively market themselves.

METHODS

The paper draws from three studies undertaken at Birkbeck over the last two years. The studies were conducted longitudinally in three countries – South Korea, Japan and China – involving 60 face-to-face interviews and almost 2,000 survey responses. In each case, a four-stage methodology was used to collect data. The first stage involved the collation of data from secondary sources to assist in understanding sports fan motivation, which informed the second stage during which semi-structured interviews were conducted with fans from each country, specifically people who stated they had an interest in European soccer. Responses were then coded and analysed by a team of researchers, their findings leading to the development and translation of a research instrument that was employed during the third stage. The model hypothesised at this stage contained the following variables: Success; History; Community; Player Interest; Identification; Excitement; Team Interest; Sport Interest; Aesthetics; Economy; Atmosphere, Knowledge; Eustress; and Nationalism. In order to identify Asian fan's motivation for supporting a European team, information about the G14 football clubs was also included in the model. A survey approach was adopted, with almost 2000 questionnaires being administered amongst a random sample of fans in each of the respective countries, with responses subsequently being analysed using SPSS. Finally, a small number of face-to-face interviews were conducted with native fans from each of the three countries involved in the study.

RESULTS

The results derived from each of the three countries confirms the popularity of European football in Asia, most notably English, Spanish and Italian football (in that order). Overall, Manchester United was identified as the fans favourite European club, with Real Madrid, Barcelona and AC Milan also recording strong scores, although in Japan, for instance, Barcelona had more supporters than United. Other clubs, such as PSV Eindhoven, appeared to be surprisingly popular. In each country, different modes of consumption were observed; for instance, in South Korea, fans were more likely to follow the club they support through chat room participation

or blogging. As regards the specific motives of fans, in all three countries the clubs with an appropriate native player in their squad were more likely to be supported by fans. Otherwise, the presence of a specific international 'star' player in the squad was an motivator for fans. In each country, specific and different motives characterised team support; in China for example, history and prior knowledge were important determinants of team support whereas in South Korea associations with fashionability and glamour were observed as being more important. Fans in all three countries exhibited some significant common characteristics, notably that fans wanted to be as close as possible to their normally geographically remote icons. Thus, during activities such as tour games, fans expressed a desire to be close to players of their favourite team and to have as much information as possible about 'their' team and its players. In addition, fans expressed a desire for their favourite clubs to engage with them rather than keep them isolated or remote from the team or its players.

DISCUSSION

The study concludes by proposing a ten-point plan for European football clubs seeking to successfully establish themselves in Asia: 1) European football clubs should be careful not to employ a generic approach to marketing themselves in Asia, that is a global strategy that effectively homogenises local populations and fans; 2) Clubs must appreciate and accept the size and cultural diversity of Asia and market themselves accordingly; 3) Clubs must understanding fan motives in different countries, and specifically responding to them must form a central part of a club's global marketing strategy; 4) Clubs must not overestimate the power of their brands, especially when compared to other international and global brands they are in competition with; 5) Clubs must ensure they do not adopt a myopic view of competitors that include other football teams, rival sports and other distinctive brands available to consumers; 6) Clubs must continue to build their profile and image in Asia e.g. by signing high quality, globally recognisable players; 7) Clubs must field their strongest teams and players must perform with maximum effort during tour matches in Asia; 8) Clubs should be foster and promote the identity and image of key, iconic players; 9) Clubs should adopt a competitive and serious approach to the matches in which they are involved; 10) Clubs must employ a coherent communications strategy, incorporating media relations, public relations and marketing promotions to establish and maintain profile and presence in Asia.

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