

Travel behavior and fan identification in the context of mega-events – an example of fan communities of national team sports in Germany

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Aim of study

This study is focused on international fan communities whose members feel strongly attracted to mega-events like the Olympic Games or FIFA World Cups. As these events take place only every four years, while changing from one country to another, many fans consider the visit of the host nation and the 'live' experience of the event as a once-in-a-lifetime chance. It is common for these passionate sports fans that each individual goes through an internal travel negotiation process between motivating factors and constraints. Though high travel intentions may exist, actual travel behavior might not occur. At this point this study aims to examine the travel behavior of fan communities further and thereby to contribute to the body of knowledge in sport tourism and fan identification.

Literature review

Although there has been various interest among scholars to study intentions of attending mega-events (Kim and Chalip, 2004, Neirotti and Hilliard, 2006), evidence-based information about the performed attendance remains underdeveloped (Funk et al., 2009). Travel constraints play an important role in a person's travel decision making. Crucial factors such as monetary costs, long distance flights, family obligations, and factors being characteristic for the host destination such as health and safety risks may be perceived as travel inhibitors (Kim and Chalip, 2004). Kim and Trail (2010) picked on the negotiation proposition in the context of sport consumer behavior. They found that internal motivators such as 'attachment to the team', 'coach', 'sport level' and 'sport itself' functioned as the most important variables for sport event participation. Funk et al. (2007) found that travel motives differed among gender and cultural backgrounds of participants of an international running event. However, not much is studied about passive sports participants in team sports.

During the last decade numerous fan clubs were founded by national sport federations in Germany aiming to support their national teams for international competition. These fan clubs have not been studied yet in regards to travel behavior. Therefore, this study shall provide more insights into travel motives and constraints of members of these fan communities, so called 'fan clubs national teams'. It shall also examine if travel factors differ based on individual characteristics, gender, and socio-demographics within and across these fan clubs.

Methodology

During and after the 2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil, the author executed a qualitative study by interviewing members of the most important fan club in regards to their membership, team identification, and travel behavior. The Fanclub Nationalmannschaft is a commercial supporters' club of the German Football Association (DFB), which has more than 50,000 paying members. By running it, the DFB aims to activate German football fans to attend important tournaments and to support the national team. The

DFB offers flights, hotels accommodation, transportation, and match day tickets.

The author interviewed 'event visitors' (n=25) and 'non-travelers' (n=6) starting during the World Cup in July 2014 until April 2015. He conducted face-to-face, phone, and Skype interviews following a semi-structured interview guide. All interviews were transcribed, anonymized, and coded according to qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000).

Results

The author found out that 79% of the participants rated themselves as 'highly committed' football fans, ranging between level 3 (attachment) and level 4 (allegiance) of the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) (Funk & James, 2001). Main travel motives were 'attending solely the FIFA WC Brazil' (51%) or 'seeing both World Cup and touristic highlights' (47%) such as the Copacabana and Sugar Loaf. Among the 'event visitors' the main travel constraints were 'work', 'costs of travel', and 'family obligations'. In contrast, the main travel constraints for 'non-travelers' were 'lack of speaking Portuguese', 'deficient infrastructure of the host country', and 'no personal Brazilian network'.

Regarding the performed travel behavior, it seemed that the higher the fans ranged on the PCM levels, the less influence structural travel constraints, which are based on the host nation, had on actual travel behavior. The majority of the sample indicated to be financially independent by having good jobs (61%) or being self-employed (26%). This may be one reason to explain the overcoming of financial constraints for the trip to Brazil. Considering gender specifics, it stood out that all women of the sample group (n=6) became fan club members right after the successful appearance of the German national team during the 2006 World Cup Germany. In contrast all men had strong affiliation with one of the German Bundesliga clubs before. Finally, when it came to preferences to attend upcoming World Cups, the majority of participants expressed high reluctance to travel to either Russia 2018 or Qatar 2022.

Next step

The author is in process of conducting a quantitative study to reassess the results of his initial qualitative research and to allow for statistical inference. He got approval from the management of the DFB and the German Volleyball Federation (DVV) to apply online surveys addressed to the members of their fan clubs national teams: DFB, section Rhineland (n=1,100); DVV, nationwide (n=3,200), examining travel behavior regarding past and future mega-events. The author will present the results during the 24th Conference of EASM in Warsaw.

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