Chinese Football Fans' Intentions to Visit Europe

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1. Introduction

With China appearing in the World Cup for first time in 2002, interest in European football has increased significantly for Chinese fans. To increase their fan bases, some European football clubs have been trying to promote themselves to Chinese football fans (Duggan, 2015). Because Chinese fans have limited opportunities to participate in European football clubs' non-virtual community events, one approach these clubs have used to engage with Chinese fans is to build virtual communities on social network sites. Increasing club fan bases online is a relatively new but rapidly growing phenomenon (McCarthy, Rowley, Ashworth, & Pioch, 2014). For example, Manchester United opened its official Chinese account on Sina Weibo in July of 2013, and the club has accumulated 8.87 million followers as of April of 2015 (Rai, 2015).

Considering that Chinese tourists like to travel to Europe and that European football clubs are affiliated with European cities (Li, Harrill, Uysal, Burnett, & Zhan, 2010), certain enthusiastic Chinese fans may want to travel to the home cities of their favorite teams to watch live matches. Tourism bureaus in Europe could collaborate with local football clubs to promote tourism activities to Chinese fans. However, the question of whether Chinese fans' sense of virtual community (hereafter SOVC) toward their favorite club can be converted into travel intention remains to be investigated. Additionally, the research of Djaballah, Hautbois, and Desbordes (2015) suggests that the ability of non-mega sports events to encourage tourism activities could be explored.

2. Research Hypotheses

Figure 1 shows this research's proposed framework. The first relationship that will be examined is the impact of SOVC on intentions to travel. In this research, SOVC is defined as fans' feelings of belongingness, influence, and attachment to

other fans in the virtual communities of football clubs (Tsai, Cheng, & Chen, 2011). SOVC is a key element of successful virtual communities. Intention to travel is defined as the desire of fans to travel to their favorite club's home city to watch a live match (Chen & Tung, 2014). SOVC's influence on online consumption intentions has been confirmed by Tsai et al. (2011). Nonetheless, whether SOVC can affect offline behavioral intentions, such as fans' intentions to travel to their favorite club's home city to watch a live match, remains under-studied. The following hypothesis will be examined:

H1: Chinese football fans' SOVC positively influences their intentions to travel.

The second hypothesis that will be examined is the ability of destination attitude to moderate the relationship between SOVC and intentions to travel. In this study, destination attitude is defined as the degree to which a fan has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation or appraisal of their favorite European football club's home city as a tourism destination (Chen & Tung, 2014). When studying New Zealand fans who travelled to Germany to watch the 2006 FIFA World Cup, Florek, Breitbarth, and Conejo (2008) revealed that participating in tourism activities was as important as watching the game. It is likely that Chinese football fans will have leisure time before and after watching football matches; therefore, their attitudes toward their favorite team's home city as a tourism destination might have an impact on the relationship between online affiliation and intentions to travel. This study examines the following hypothesis:

H2: SOVC has a stronger positive relationship with intentions to travel for fans with more positive destination attitude versus fans with less positive destination attitude.

*Figure 1 here

3. Methods

To examine this study's proposed framework, an online survey was used. The hyperlink to the online Chinese questionnaire was posted on the survey website. The researchers started with 40 Chinese students who did not fill out the survey themselves; the individuals were asked to share the hyperlink within their social networks. To qualify for the interview, potential participants needed to 1) have followed their favorite European football club's official social network sites, 2) have not previously travelled to their favorite club's home city, and 3) reside in China at the time of filling out the survey. This research focused on the ten most followed European clubs on Weibo to ensure that all the clubs included in this research have official virtual communities (Appendix 1). After a month, 212 responses were collected, of which 122 were deemed effective (Table 1). Participants completed a 15-question survey that evaluated destination attitude, SOVC, and intentions to travel (Table 2).

*Table 1 here

*Table 2 here

4. Data Analysis

SPSS AMOS 20 was used to analyze the data. Following Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step approach, a measurement model was first estimated using a confirmatory factor analysis. The high factor loadings, composite reliability, and average variances extracted (AVE) for each construct were used together to confirm the reliability, discriminant validity, and convergent validity of the instrument. Bootstrapping was used for a robustness check. The results gathered after using structural equation modeling (SEM) showed a good fit between the data and the main model (χ^2/ df=2.61, p<0.001, RMSEA=0.08, CFI=0.98, NFI=0.97). On the basis of

the statistical results, H1 is supported (β=1.31; t=5.65, p<0.001). SOVC will positively affect intentions to travel.

To test the hypothesized moderating effects of destination attitude, a multi-group invariance analysis was performed, and the procedure recommended by Bell and Menguc (2002) was followed. These methods allowed participants to be divided into high (N=61) and low positive destination attitude groups (N=61). The structural path coefficient indicated that there was a positive relationship between SOVC and intentions to travel in the high positive destination attitude group (β=0.95, t=2.79; p<0.05). In the low positive destination attitude group, the structural path coefficient revealed that SOVC did not affect intentions to travel (β=0.41; t=2.13, p>0.1). Based on the above results, H2 is supported (Figure 2).

*Figure 2 here

5. Discussion

This research extends the existing sports tourism literature in three ways. First, previous studies have established that SOVC can influence online consumption behavioral intentions, but this research revealed that SOVC can influence travel intentions as well. Second, this research supports the notion that Chinese fans are aware that they will spend time in the city before and after the match; therefore, they take the city's appeal into consideration. Third, like mega sports events, this research confirmed non-mega sports events can be used to encourage tourism activities.

Europe's tourism bureaus that want to promote tourism activities to Chinese football fans through collaborating with football clubs first need to evaluate whether fans feel they are part of the club's virtual community, whether the virtual community makes fans feel that they are influential in the club's virtual community, and whether fans are immersed in club's virtual community. Second, before promoting tourism activities with football clubs, tourism bureaus need to ensure that their cities are

perceived as exciting, pleasant, arousing, and / or relaxing by Chinese football fans. Chinese fans are likely to remain virtual fans if they do not hold a positive attitude toward the city.

6. Conclusions

Although this research makes contributions to the sports tourism literature, it has limitations. First, data obtained through online survey might have bias. Future studies could use other data collection methods to verify this study's results. Second, future scholars should explore SOVC's antecedents by adopting the self-regulation framework.

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Table 1- Characteristics of the Participants (N=122)

	Demographic traits	%
Gender	Male	82.7
	Female	17.3
Respondent's age	Between 18-30 years old	46.0
	Between 31-40 years old	35.2
	Between 41-50 years old	13.1
	Between 51-60 years old	5.7
Education	High school degree	4.9
	College degree	13.1
	University	61.5
	Postgraduate degree or above	25.4

Table 2 Descriptive Analysis of the Measures

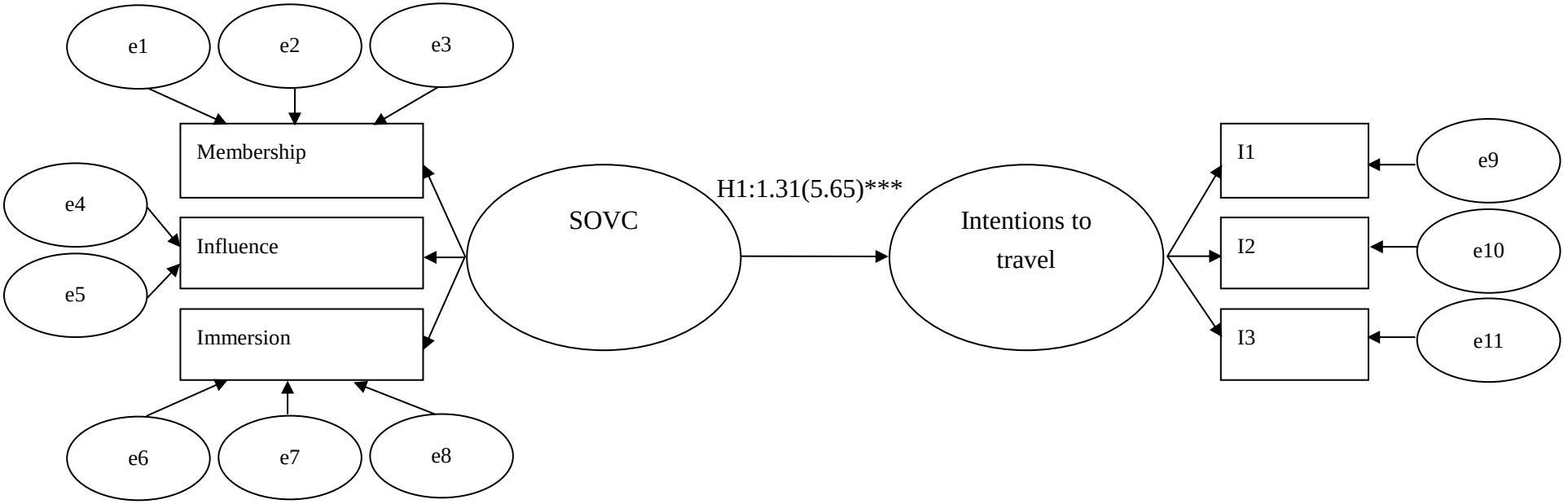
Variable / Adopted from	Measurement items*	Mean	SD	α	AVE	CR
Sense of virtual community (SOVC) / Tsai et al. (2011)	*Membership*	5.40	1.02	0.95	0.52	0.76
	SOVC1: I feel as if I belong to my favorite club's virtual community.[1]					
	SOVC2: I feel as if other virtual community members are my close friends.[1]					
	SOVC3: I like the members of my favorite club's virtual community.[1]					
	Influence	5.39	0.98			
	SOVC4: On my favorite club's virtual community, I am a well-known member.[1]					
	SOVC5: On my favorite club's virtual community, my postings are often reviewed by other members.[1]					
	SOVC6: On my favorite club's virtual community, replies to my posting appear frequently.[1]					
	Immersion	4.86	0.99			
	SOVC7: I spend more time than I expected navigating in my favorite club's virtual community.[1]					
	SOVC8: I feel as if I am addicted to my favorite club's virtual community.[1]					
Intentions to travel (I) / Chen and Tung (2014)	I1: I am willing to travel to my favorite club's home city to watch live matches.[1]	5.03	1.01	0.97	0.92	0.97
	I2: I plan to travel to my favorite club's home city to watch live matches .[1]	5.04	1.02			
	I3: I will make an effort to travel to my favorite club's home city to watch live matches .[1]	5.01	1.08			
Destination attitude (DA) / Carlson,	In my view, my favorite European football club's home city as a tourism destination is--					
	DA1: Gloomy / Exciting[2]	5.03	1.01	0.73	0.56	0.79
	DA2: Unpleasant / Pleasant[2]	5.04	1.02			

Rosenberger III, and Rahman (2015)	DA3: Sleepy / Arousing[2]	5.02	1.08
	DA4: Distressing / Relaxing[2]	4.95	0.92

[1]. Strongly disagree (1) / Strongly agree (7)

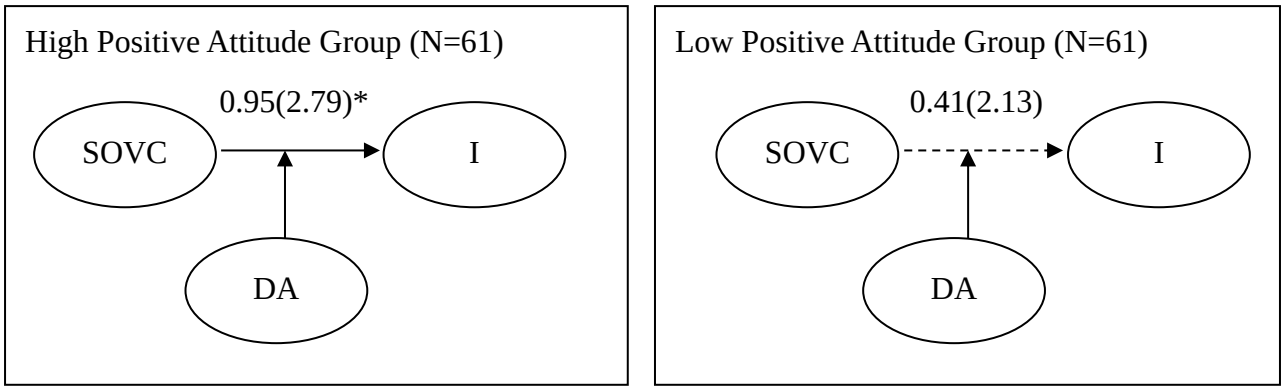
[2]. A series of seven semantic differential scales were used

Figure 1. Research Framework- Main Model (N=122)



Number on path: standardized parameter estimation, Number in parentheses: T-Value.
Remark: *Significant at $p< 0.05$; **Significant at $p<0.01$; ***Significant at $p<0.001$.
Model fit: $\chi^2/ df=2.61$, $p<0.001$, RMSEA=0.08, CFI=0.98, NFI=0.97

Figure 2. Destination Attitude's Moderating Effect (H2)



Number on path: standardized parameter estimation, Number in parentheses: T-Value.
Remark: *Significant at $p< 0.05$; **Significant at $p<0.01$; ***Significant at $p<0.001$.
Model fit: $\chi^2/ df=2.04$, $p<0.001$, RMSEA=0.08, CFI=0.961, NFI=0.929

SOVC= sense of virtual community, I= intentions to travel, DA= destination attitude

The threshold that separates the two groups was 4.51

Appendix 1. The ten most followed European clubs on Weibo

Ranking	Team
1	Manchester United F.C.
2	Manchester City F.C.
3	FC Barcelona
4	Arsenal F.C.
5	Chelsea F.C.
6	Liverpool F.C.
7	FC Bayern Munich
8	Tottenham Hotspur F.C.
9	Real Madrid C.F.
10	Paris Saint-Germain F.C.

(Organized from Rai, 2015)