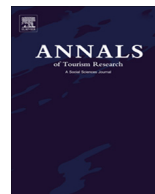




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Research Note

Chinese football fans' intentions to visit Europe

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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.

Fig. 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.

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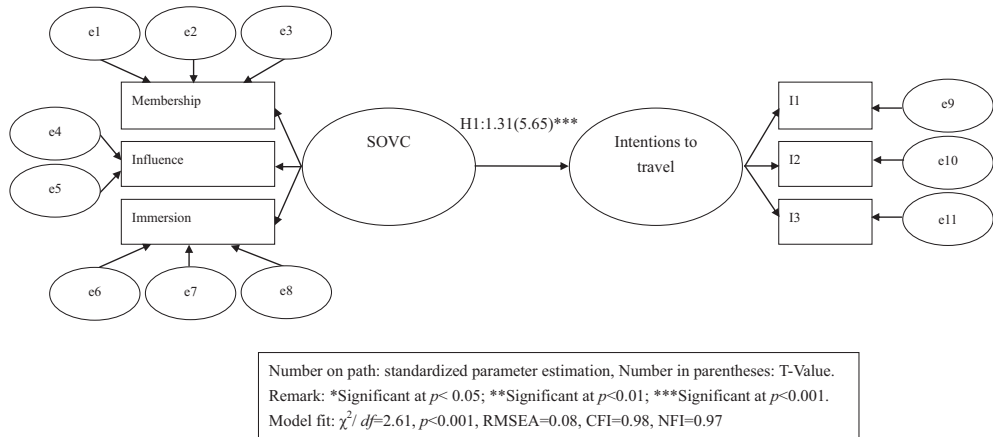


Fig. 1. Research framework-main model ($N = 122$).

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, Breitbart, 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.

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 A). 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
 Characteristics of the participants ($N = 122$).

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

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