

## **Is There A Difference Between Hardcore and Casual Baseball Fans? An Empirical Study of Taiwan's 2023 WBC Spectator Motivations.**

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### **Abstract**

**Background.** In 2023, the World Baseball Classic (WBC) in Taiwan signified the resumption of international baseball competitions post-pandemic, drawing an eclectic mix of spectators, from Chinese Professional Baseball League (CPBL) enthusiasts to first-time attendees. **Objectives.** This study delves into the diverse motivations behind fan attendance, exploring factors such as team identification, the attractiveness of the event, the stadium environment, social media purpose demand, and social media emotional social relationships. **Methods.** We collected 321 valid questionnaires and conducted a t-test analysis. Through a comparative analysis of fans with varying levels of CPBL viewership, the research uncovers nuanced differences in motivations, offering valuable insights for marketers and event organizers in the sports industry. **Results.** The empirical results showed that compared to casual fans who don't frequently attend CPBL games, hardcore fans who regularly attend CPBL games had stronger motivations related to team identification and event attractiveness when attending WBC. **Discussion.** Hardcore fans watching games have a strong sense of identification with Taiwanese professional baseball teams. This sense of identification

makes them more deeply engaged in the games during the WBC. Moreover, fans with a wealth of viewing experience typically have a deeper knowledge and understanding of baseball, enabling them to better interpret various situations in the game, while also holding higher expectations for the team's performance.

**Keywords:** World Baseball Classic, Spectator Motivations, Team Identification, Event Attractiveness

## **Introduction**

The World Baseball Classic (WBC) stands as a preeminent global baseball tournament, epitomizing the sport's international appeal and competitive spirit. Since its inception, the WBC has convened five editions, with the 2023 tournament marking a pivotal resurgence of international sports in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Delayed to 2023 due to health concerns, the event's relocation to Taiwan for the preliminary rounds not only underscored the country's pivotal role in international baseball but also attracted a diverse array of spectators. This study aims to dissect the myriad motivations driving fan attendance at the WBC, transcending beyond mere appreciation of athletic excellence to encompass a broader spectrum of social and cultural engagements. By juxtaposing the motivations of regular Chinese Professional Baseball League (CPBL) viewers against those of newcomers, our analysis seeks to unravel the complex fabric of global sports fandom, shedding light on the evolving dynamics of spectatorship in the post-pandemic landscape.

## **Team Identification**

Supporting a sports team serves as a crucial indicator of an individual's identity. It engenders a sense of belonging and community, ultimately fostering loyalty and identification with the team (1). Team identification can transcend other identity

markers, emerging as the primary source of an individual's sense of self. This form of identification plays a significant symbolic role, particularly in terms of geography and ethnicity (2). Attending live sporting events signifies the extent of a fan's team identification. Fans perceive themselves as integral members of a collective, firmly belonging to that group. Consequently, fans with more extensive attendance experience typically exhibit a higher degree of team identification. Therefore, this study posits the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Fans with greater attendance experience are expected to manifest higher levels of team identification when viewing the WBC than fans with less attendance experience.

### **Event Attractiveness**

Event attractiveness is a crucial factor influencing spectators' decision to attend sports events. Spectators may be drawn to the event due to motives such as escapism and the desire to acquire more knowledge about the event. Therefore, the event attractiveness referred to in this study encompasses escapism and knowledge motives. Escapism refers to spectators temporarily escaping the pressures and worries of daily life by watching sports events, allowing them to shift their focus (3). Fans' escapism motives assess their desire to temporarily escape or avoid their everyday lives, enabling them to momentarily forget about their troubles, dissatisfaction, or dullness. They can fully immerse themselves in the exhilarating scenes on the field, experiencing the passion and excitement of the game, thereby providing themselves with a sense of psychological relief (4, 5).

Knowledge motive refers to spectators' considerable understanding of the team's background, history, and culture, as well as a certain level of familiarity with the team's players (6). Fans with high team identification tend to possess a richer and deeper

knowledge of the team compared to players and historical knowledge. This implies that they have a better understanding of the team's background, achievements, and players' personal information (3). Fans with high team identification excel in overall sports knowledge, indicating their broad knowledge and comprehension of sports (7). The more frequently spectators watch sports events, the more they are attracted to attend matches due to escapism and knowledge motives, meaning they are more likely to attend matches due to event attractiveness. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Fans with more extensive attendance experience are expected to exhibit a higher degree of event attractiveness motivation when watching the WBC than fans with less attendance experience.

### **Stadium Environment**

The viewing experience at the stadium is also one of the crucial factors considered by fans when attending matches. The sense of community fostered by the stadium and the openness of new stadiums and arenas can enhance the brand image (8). Fans with extensive viewing experience have had more opportunities to watch matches, thus they have a better understanding and experience of aspects such as the quality of stadium services, the aesthetic characteristics of the venue, and the sense of community brought about by the stadium. Therefore, their motivation for the stadium environment may be relatively higher. These fans may have already established expectations for the stadium viewing experience and are motivated to watch the WBC World Baseball Classic due to these experiences. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Fans with more extensive attendance experience are expected to have a higher motivation for the stadium environment when watching the WBC than fans with

less attendance experience.

### **Social Media Purpose Demand**

Social media has become an indispensable part of contemporary society. The utilitarian needs of social media reflect people's use of it for exchanging information, sharing content, interactive communication, and acquiring the latest information (9). Particularly in the field of sports, social media not only provides a platform for fans to participate online, co-create, and share information but also plays a positive role in enhancing fans' engagement and experience. Fans can engage with other fans, and share their opinions, feelings, and perspectives through social media platforms (10). Moreover, social media provides fans with more access to specific information about athletes, teams, actual games, or upcoming sports events (11-14). When watching sports matches, fans use social media to acquire event-related information and express their sports knowledge while interacting with peers who also use social media (15). Sports consumers use social media to conveniently access information without interruption and further disseminate this information, thus reinforcing the purpose value of social media (13, 15). This study infers that fans with more extensive viewing experience, due to their deeper understanding of information related to athletes, teams, and matches, are more likely to attend live events and share various information about the game through social media with a larger audience. Based on the above discussion, this study proposes the following hypothesis regarding the purpose needs of social media:

Hypothesis 4: Fans with more extensive attendance experience are expected to have a higher motivation for Social Media Purpose Demand when watching the WBC than fans with less attendance experience.

### **Social Media Emotional Social Relationships**

One of the primary motivations of social media is to facilitate community-oriented commentary, which refers to discussions or comments on social media platforms primarily centered around specific communities or groups, often related to particular sports domains, enabling interaction and socialization among individuals, sports consumers, fans, and enthusiasts (13). When individuals post content on social media, it reflects their self-referential thoughts (16), and any comments from their social companions on these posts often create a cognitive environment conducive to promoting individual sports knowledge and interests, fostering identity identification, and facilitating peer socialization. Especially in the sports domain, social media provides a platform for fans to share their positive or negative fan experiences, thereby encouraging group belongingness through social media interactions. Through social media interaction, individuals can express their interest in sports events and their sense of belonging, thus forming a form of sports social cohesion (17). This study infers that fans with less attendance experience may want to keep up with current events or trends after learning about this major international tournament from social media. They may attend the event and use social media to promote this international event to attract more attention to national consciousness. Hence this study proposes the following hypothesis regarding social media emotional social relationships:

Hypothesis 5: Fans with less attendance experience are expected to have a higher motivation for social media emotional relationships when watching the WBC than fans with more attendance experience.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the differences in team identification motivation, event attractiveness motivation, stadium environment motivation, social media participation willingness, and media emotional social relationships motivation

among fans with different levels of attendance experience in sports events.

## **Materials and Methods**

### **Participants**

This study distributed questionnaires to fans who attended WBC baseball games in Taiwan through baseball-related online forums. The survey was conducted from March 8, 2023, to March 29, 2023. After excluding incomplete or contradictory responses, a total of 321 valid questionnaires were collected.

### **Questionnaire Design**

The questionnaire first measured the frequency of fans attending CPBL games last year, classifying fans based on the number of games attended. Fans who attended 5 games or fewer were categorized as having relatively less experience, while those attending more than 5 games were classified as fans with relatively richer experience. Additionally, questions were designed to assess team identification, event attractiveness, stadium environment, social media purpose demand, and social media emotional social relations. A five-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree, strongly disagree, very unimportant" to "strongly agree, strongly agree, very important" was used to measure responses. Based on participants' answers, scores ranging from 1 to 5 were assigned, with higher scores indicating higher levels of agreement.

### **Statistical Methods**

Descriptive statistics, factor analysis, and t-tests were employed for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to outline participants' basic information. Principal component analysis was conducted using the maximum variance method to extract motivations for attending games. T-tests were performed to confirm whether fans with different levels of attendance experience differed in motivations such as team

identification, event attractiveness, venue environment, purpose demand, and emotional social relations on social media.

## **Results**

### **Participant Description**

The gender distribution of the participants was 68% male and 32% female. Most fans were in the age range of 21-30 years, comprising 49% of the sample. Regarding disposable income, the most common range was 25,001-50,000 New Taiwan Dollars per month, accounting for 31% of the participants. Furthermore, 52% of the fans had rich attendance experience (attended at least 6 Chinese Professional Baseball League games last year), while 48% had less attendance experience (attended less than 6 Chinese Professional Baseball League games last year).

See Table 1.

### **Factor Analysis and Reliability Analysis**

In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for each construct exceeds 0.7, indicating good reliability of the constructs. Moreover, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values for each construct are all above 0.6, demonstrating suitability for factor analysis.

See Table 2.

### **Motivational Difference Analysis**

This study employs independent sample t-tests to investigate whether there are significant differences in the motivations for watching international baseball games among fans with varying degrees of experience in watching the Chinese Professional Baseball League (CPBL). The results indicate significant differences in the impact of different levels of attendance experience on the "team identification watching motivation" and "event attractiveness watching motivation." Fans with richer



attendance experience demonstrate higher levels of both team identification-watching motivation and event attractiveness watching motivation. This suggests that fans with richer attendance experience exhibit higher loyalty to the national team and pay closer attention to the team's performance and achievements. Moreover, fans with richer attendance experience possess a deeper understanding of professional baseball sports, pay more attention to game information, and immerse themselves more in the atmosphere of watching the game. The results are presented in the Table 3:

## **Conclusion**

Fans with richer attendance experience demonstrate higher levels of team identification motivation and event attractiveness motivation when watching the WBC World Baseball Classic. They exhibit a stronger sense of identification with their supported team and possess a deeper understanding and anticipation of the game scenario, as well as stronger support for the team. However, the influence of attendance experience on stadium environment motivation, social media purpose motivation, and social media emotional social relationship motivation is not significant.

In terms of research limitations, since this study conducted online surveys through internet communities, its sample may not accurately reflect the actual distribution of the audience. It is recommended that future research could more accurately represent

the actual audience ratio by distributing questionnaires in the field.

## **Discussion**

These research findings provide important insights into fan behavior and motivation, which can be utilized for the planning and promotion of future sports events and serve as a reference for related research areas.

Fans with rich viewing experiences have a strong sense of identification with the teams representing them in international competitions. This sense of identification may stem from their long-term support and attention to professional baseball teams. These fans frequently watch games in the Chinese Professional Baseball League and have in-depth contact with the team's history, the players' performance, and the team culture. When these fans with rich viewing experiences watch the World Baseball Classic (WBC), they feel a stronger sense of identification and understanding of Taiwanese professional baseball players participating in the national team's games. Fans with rich viewing experiences recognize and understand the abilities and contributions of these players, and they are aware that they represent the teams they support. This sense of team identification makes it easier for experienced fans to get involved in the games and form emotional connections with the team.

Fans with rich viewing experiences usually have a deeper knowledge and understanding of baseball. Their understanding of the team's history, the players' performances, and tactical strategies allow them to better interpret various situations during the games. At the same time, they have higher expectations for the team's performance. Moreover, experienced fans are better able to use the WBC to temporarily distance themselves from the pressures and worries of daily life. As their viewing experience accumulates, their understanding and emotional connection to the game may deepen, allowing them to escape from the troubles of real life and seek a temporary sense of psychological relief by watching the WBC.

### **Applicable Remarks**

This study suggests that audiences who habitually watch professional baseball may not have the same motivations for participating in international competitions. This finding can contribute to formulating marketing strategies for organizing international events. Different strategies should be considered for audiences who regularly watch professional baseball and those who seldom do.

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Table 1 Participant Demographic

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Observations</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Gender	Male	218	68%
	Female	103	32%
Age	Below 20	71	22%
	21-30	158	49%
	31-40	74	23%
	41-50	15	5%
	Above 50	3	1%
Disposable Income per month (NT dollars)	Less than10,000	93	29%
	10,001-25,000	68	21%
	25,001-50,000	101	31%
	50,001-100,00	52	16%
	More than100,001	7	2%
Attendance Experience	Richy (at least 6 CPBL games last year)	169	52
	Less (less than 6 CPBL games last year)	152	48

Table 2 Factor Analysis

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Factor Loading</b>	<b>Cronbach's <math>\alpha</math></b>	<b>KMO</b>
Team Identity	TI1	0.756	0.795	0.667
	TI2	0.796		
	TI3	0.591		
Event Attractiveness	EA1	0.637	0.709	0.651
	EA2	0.702		
	EA3	0.446		
	EA4	0.417		
Stadium Environment	SE1	0.829	0.903	0.750
	SE2	0.863		
	SE3	0.824		
Social Media Purpose Demand	SMPD1	0.799	0.808	0.699
	SMPD2	0.750		
	SMPD3	0.672		
Social Media Emotional Social Relationships	SMESR1	0.724	0.797	0.724
	SMESR2	0.752		
	SMESR3	0.490		

Table 3 Results of the t-test

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Attendance</b>	<b>Observations</b>	<b>mean</b>	<b>Difference in mean</b>	<b>Standard Error</b>
Team Identity	Less Attendance	169	4.391	-.16868	0.754*
	Rich Attendance	152	4.559		
Event Attractiveness	Less Attendance	169	3.935	-.37759	0.857
	Rich Attendance	152	4.313		
Stadium Environment	Less Attendance	169	3.781	-.19043	0.964
	Rich Attendance	152	3.972		
Social Media Purpose Demand	Less Attendance	169	4.594	.04325	0.581
	Rich Attendance	152	4.550		
Social Media Emotional Social Relationships	Less Attendance	169	3.942	-.13499	0.850**
	Rich Attendance	152	4.077		

Note: \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01