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*Published in:*  
Tourism Analysis

*DOI:*  
[10.3727/108354222X16450234944191](https://doi.org/10.3727/108354222X16450234944191)

*Publication date:*  
2022

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in ResearchOnline](#)

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Peng, N, Chen, A, Barnes, B & Kladou, S 2022, 'Cultivating a sense of belonging and promoting sports fans' travel intentions: evidence from an emerging economy market', *Tourism Analysis*, vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 285-297. <https://doi.org/10.3727/108354222X16450234944191>

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## CULTIVATING A SENSE OF BELONGING AND PROMOTING SPORTS FANS' TRAVEL INTENTIONS: EVIDENCE FROM AN EMERGING ECONOMY MARKET

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The aim of this study is to examine Chinese football fans' sense of belonging to the virtual communities of their favorite European teams and their intention to visit Europe and watch a live match. Drawing on a survey of 488 Chinese football fans, the findings reveal that ideal self-congruence, brand identification, and the ability of virtual communities affect fans' sense of belonging. Finally, sense of belonging influences fans' travel intentions, and a positive attitude toward the destination and city strengthens the positive relationship between sense of belonging and the intention to travel.

**Key words: Sports fans; Travel intentions; Sense of belonging; International travel; Virtual community**

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### Introduction

Sports tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors in tourism (UNWTO, 2021). The global sports tourism market size was estimated at US\$323.42 billion in 2020. It is expected to reach \$1,803 billion by 2030 (Kadam & Deshmukh, 2021). Among different regions, Europe was the largest market in 2018 and still has huge potential as it offers a range of diverse events for participants (CBI, 2020). As for consumers of sports tourism, Parker (2019)

highlighted Asia-Pacific's market significance, suggesting many countries in this region are economically robust or are emerging rapidly. In this research, sports tourism is defined as specific travel outside the customer's usual environment for either passive or active involvement in sports activity where the activity is the main motivation to travel (Klaus & Maklan, 2011).

Researchers have noticed the importance of the sports tourism segment. Chhabra (2007) suggested that sports tourism has grown unprecedentedly and

additional research in this area from multiple directions is much needed. Over the last 15 years there has been growth in sports tourism studies that have examined various topics within the discipline (e.g., Chang et al., 2020; Erbas, 2016; Hallmann et al., 2015; Pouder et al., 2018; Toh et al., 2007). However, there appears to be further gaps in the sports tourism literature.

First, existing studies have tended to address sports tourism from a pure macroperspective, through studying mega-events, such as the Olympics (Chang et al., 2020; Pouder et al., 2018). Although these attract a significant number of visitors (Cooper & Alderman, 2020), smaller scale sports events, such as the National Basketball Association (NBA) games and Premier League games, can provide steady traction for fans who are able to make a longer term contribution to the relationship between a particular sports team affiliation and travel intention than mega-events (Martín et al., 2020; Pu & James, 2017). However, how to utilize relatively smaller scale spectator sports events, such as professional soccer, to promote tourism activities can be further explored (Kwiatkowski & Oklevik, 2017).

Second, when studying sports fans, researchers and experts generally agree that international fans are important because having a large number of these fans can lead to lucrative sponsorship agreements and merchandize sales for sports teams. Nevertheless, very little research has been conducted to explore tourism opportunities associated with international sports fans (Lianopoulos et al., 2020; Parker, 2019; Pouder et al., 2018; Pu & James, 2017; Santos et al., 2020).

Overseas tourism is generally considered a complex and resource consuming activity (Girish et al., 2021; Pappas, 2019). Therefore, being a team's fan may not necessarily lead an individual to become a sports tourist unless they also have a favorable attitude associated with a particular location. Quintal et al. (2010) and Lee (2009) suggested that destination attitude is critical for consumers in deciding whether to make overseas visits. Filieri et al. (2015) similarly suggested that consumers' preexisting attitudes are important when the offering is intangible and has high symbolic value. Therefore, the attitude surrounding a particular destination can influence a sport's fan and arguably serves as a factor that can moderate fans' decision to travel

internationally and participate in watching a live match.

Fans who travel from abroad will normally have leisure time to explore the city and surrounding destinations both before and after games. In addition, many sports teams are even named after their home cities, which implies the sports club's role in creating a unique association with its physical location (Carlson et al., 2015). However, few sports tourism studies have empirically examined the attitude surrounding a particular destination and its effect. In this study, destination attitude is defined as the degree to which a fan has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of their favorite sports team's home city as a tourism destination (Deng & Li, 2014).

Third, being a sport tourist implies that the individual's main motivation to travel is to be involved in sports activity (Klaus & Maklan, 2011). Having a positive attitude toward a destination alone may not be sufficient to influence a sport tourist's travel intention. In the case of spectator sports, such as soccer, the tourist is often a fan of a team or an individual player. However, there may well be a gap in the literature relating to how a sports event, or in this case a soccer club, interacts and builds relationships with an international fan base (Lianopoulos et al., 2020; Pu & James, 2017). When marketing to sports fans, researchers have suggested that the ability to participate in sports team events and to create a community is important for a fan's experience (Sorrentino et al., 2020). However, sports teams have to use other methods such as social media to create a sense of belonging in virtual communities. This is because international fans usually have limited or no access to a team's community or events (McCarthy et al., 2014).

Of the studies that have examined these types of consumer consumption behavior, there appears to be a gap in these current approaches. One approach that is frequently used to examine consumers' participation in a brand's virtual community involves the exploration of symbolic benefits (Ekinci et al., 2013; Ogbonna & Harris, 2014; Tucker, 2016). Another approach to examining consumers' virtual community participation and belonging focuses on investigating how brand virtual communities can provide value to users through design, hardware, software, and services (Kim et al., 2012; Lim, 2014). The former may overlook the significance

of virtual community platforms, whereas the latter could undermine the relevance of fan–team and fan–fan congruence. An integrated approach may therefore be beneficial in adding to existing literature and practices.

To contribute to the sports tourism literature, the aim of this study is to investigate Chinese football fans' sense of belonging to their favorite European clubs' virtual communities and their ultimate intention to visit the team's home city (as tourists) to watch live matches. Furthermore, this research has the following objectives. First, drawing on the extant symbolic consumption literature, this study attempts to test how fans' sense of belonging is affected by ideal self-congruence, brand identification, and lifestyle congruence. Second, an attempt is made to demonstrate how fan appraisals of football clubs' virtual communities contribute to sense of belonging. Third, this research intends to explore the relationship between fans' sense of belonging and their travel intentions. Fourth, the study plans to examine how fans' attitudes toward a club's location can potentially moderate the relationship between fans' sense of belonging and travel intention.

### Research Framework and Hypotheses

#### *The Influence of Symbolic Consumption Variables on Sense of Belonging*

This study draws on the symbolic consumption concept to examine Chinese football fans' travel intentions. Symbolic consumption refers to the meanings conveyed by items such as a tourism destination or sports team affiliation in a broader social group (Banister & Hogg, 2004). Research relating to symbolic consumption dates back to the 1950s (Gardner & Levy, 1955). Over time, the notion of symbolic consumption has progressed and researchers generally agree that it helps consumers categorize themselves in society, so as to achieve a sense of community (Hung et al., 2019).

Symbolic consumption has gradually been applied in the fields of leisure and tourism, including sports tourism (e.g., Ekinci et al., 2013; Moran et al., 2018). This is because these activities represent specific lifestyles and enable participants to become deeply involved in affiliating themselves

with specific teams. The concept of being symbolic is particularly suitable for this research because sports teams create and promote a large number of symbols, such as logos and mascots (Burkley et al., 2015). In addition, successful sports teams understand how to engage with their supporters through both virtual and nonvirtual communities, emphasizing certain symbols to create a sense of belonging (Ogbonna & Harris, 2014; Tucker, 2016). The following conceptual framework and hypotheses are posited (see Fig. 1).

The first hypothesis that this research aims to examine is ideal self-congruence's influence on fans' sense of belonging. In this study, sense of belonging can be defined as a fan's feeling of identification with, or attachment to, the virtual community of his or her favorite team, which represents an important factor for building a successful virtual community (Lin et al., 2014). Ideal self-congruence refers to the degree to which a football fan uses his or her favorite football team's image to sustain or enhance his or her own ideal self-image (Hung et al., 2019).

Customers frequently consume products that are aligned with their desired image. Football teams often conjure up and portray different images (Ogbonna & Harris, 2014). However, the issue of whether images that are designed to help fans sustain and enhance their ideal selves contribute to a club's virtual community membership has not been addressed. This study extends the literature by proposing that ideal self-congruence can positively contribute to Chinese fans' sense of belonging to European soccer teams. This could be evidenced by fans spending more time than expected in interacting with the virtual communities associated with their favorite teams (Lin et al., 2014). In response, the following hypothesis is posited:

**H1:** Ideal self-congruence has a positive and significant effect on fans' sense of belonging.

Second, this study proposes that brand identification can positively affect Chinese fans' sense of belonging. Brand identification is defined as the extent to which a fan is affiliated with his or her favorite European football team (Tuškej et al., 2013). Research suggests that individuals identify themselves with brands that influence their reputation in

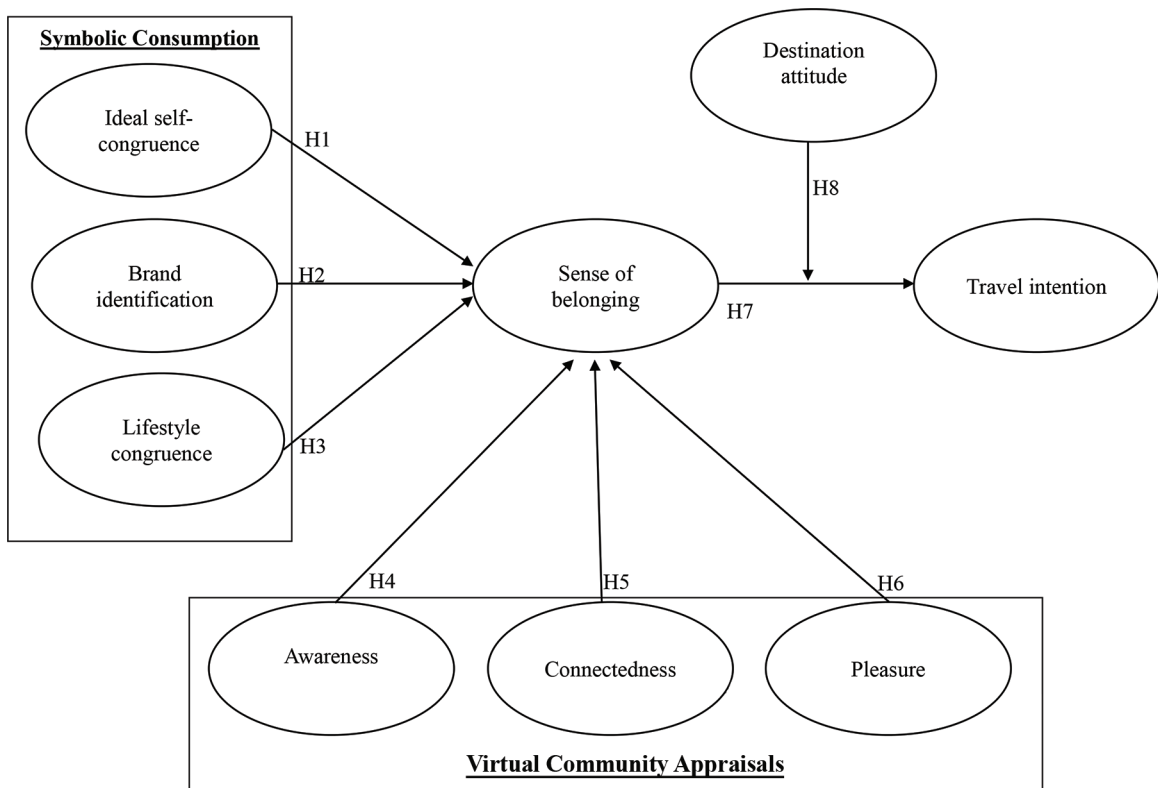


Figure 1. Conceptual framework and hypotheses.

social groups that they aspire to belong to (Ekinci et al., 2013; Hung et al., 2019). Such individuals buy certain branded merchandize, which they use to identify themselves. These individuals may also look to engage with specific brand communities committedly (Carlson et al., 2008; Coelho et al., 2018; Rather, 2018).

Certain football teams have distinctive images and, similar to other commercial brands, such images are valuable to their supporters (Bodet & Chanavat, 2010; McCarthy et al., 2014). It has also been recognized that soccer brand identification is pivotal for building a team's community (Yoshida et al., 2015). Such fans are therefore likely to spend significant time and interact with other fans associated with their team's virtual community if they identify themselves with a certain club. As a result, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H2:** Brand identification has a positive and significant effect on fans' sense of belonging.

Third, this study hypothesizes that lifestyle congruence can positively affect sense of belonging. Lifestyle congruence is defined as the degree of alignment or misalignment between a team and a fan's lifestyle (Nam et al., 2011). Scholars have confirmed that lifestyle congruence can affect consumers' evaluation of and commitment to destinations (Chen et al., 2015; Wen & Huang, 2021). Consumers like to visit destinations that either reflect or are in line with their lifestyles.

Soccer teams reflect on and promote lifestyles to their supporters in order to create more opportunities to interact with their fans and the football community (Pietsch et al., 2020). For example, Pringle et al. (2013) highlighted that English Premier League teams have collaborated with national health organizations to promote a healthier lifestyle to their supporters. Such campaigns have encouraged increased exercise and lower alcohol consumption. Bodet and Canavat (2010) suggested that Chinese soccer fans' sense of community might be affected by their ability

to associate lifestyle values with their favorite teams. It is therefore proposed that fans may wish to spend more on their team's virtual community if they feel that the team's image is in line with their lifestyles. This discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

**H3:** Lifestyle congruence has a positive and significant effect on fans' sense of belonging.

#### *The Influence of Virtual Community Appraisal on Sense of Belonging*

In addition to the symbolic consumption variables, this study considers the influence that user appraisal of virtual communities has on their sense of belonging. This study hypothesizes that awareness can positively affect sense of belonging. The research draws on Lin et al.'s (2014) definition and uses "awareness" to refer to the degree to which a user remains informed and current with the activities of others through a team's official virtual community.

Several studies on virtual communities have confirmed that social network sites provide benefits that enable users to be informed about the activities of others (Arli, 2017; Lin et al., 2014; Tsai & Bagozzi, 2014). When social network sites (SNS) allow users to exchange and gather information, this can improve users' sense of belonging (Lin et al., 2014). Many soccer teams have attempted to manage fans' awareness through online channels. For example, information related to virtual community events is highlighted on social network sites. The ability of such social network sites to raise fan awareness about events is central to building a successful community of supporters (McCarthy et al., 2014). This study proposes that Chinese fans' sense of belonging will be higher if they perceive their favorite team's virtual community serves to keep them informed and aware of relevant team activities. The following is therefore hypothesized:

**H4:** Fans' awareness of the activities within the team's virtual community has a positive and significant effect on their sense of belonging.

The second virtual community appraisal variable to be tested is connectedness. Connectedness relates to the degree to which a team's official virtual community helps users stay connected and maintain

social relationships (Lin et al., 2014). The pertinent literature has stressed the significance of using SNS to facilitate relationship connections (Kwon et al., 2019). Individuals therefore use such sites to both nurture their existing relations and connect with new friends, who may not be closely located (Kim & Kim, 2018). Connecting fans with one another and with teams through actual and virtual communities is essential for sports teams (Martín et al., 2020; Pu & James, 2017). In recent years, teams have been willing to take additional measures to connect with their supporters by responding to concerns raised in fan discussion forums and by helping those with similar interests to form subdiscussion groups (McCarthy et al., 2014). This research posits that Chinese fans' sense of belonging will be higher if they perceive the virtual communities of their favorite teams keep them connected and they are able to make friends with other supporters. The following is therefore hypothesized:

**H5:** Fans' connectedness with their virtual community has a positive and significant effect on their sense of belonging.

The third virtual community appraisal variable to be tested is pleasure. Pleasure refers to the enjoyment users gain from being a member of a soccer team's official virtual community (Lin et al., 2014). Scholars agree that pleasure, which relates to enjoyment, is key to a virtual community's success (Bianchi & Andrews, 2018). Research also suggests that hedonic feelings can have a significant impact on user commitment to websites. Pleasure has therefore been integrated as an important factor in website success and has been found to positively impact both satisfaction and commitment (Chen, 2013). Similar trends have also been observed in the context of professional soccer. For example, in an attempt to make their fans happy, sports teams host games and competitions for their virtual community members. This study proposes that Chinese fans' sense of belonging will be higher if they perceive their favorite team's virtual community provides them with some degree of pleasure:

**H6:** The pleasure that fans obtain from a sports team's virtual community has a positive and significant effect on their sense of belonging.



### *The Influence of Sense of Belonging on Travel Intention*

The seventh relationship to be examined involves the influence of sense of belonging on travel intention. There are multiple ways for distant or international fans to support their favorite team, such as buying merchandise. However, traveling internationally to see a live game generally requires a higher level of dedication (Cooper & Alderman, 2020). Travel intention is defined as a fan's desire to watch his or her favorite European soccer team play a live game in its home city (Deng & Li, 2014). Prior studies have confirmed that a positive relationship exists between sense of belonging and behavioral intention in an online environment (Lim, 2014; Lin et al., 2014). If individuals have a strong sense of belonging to a particular site, this process motivates increased usage. However, findings on whether sense of belonging can affect user behavioral intentions, such as traveling intentions, in offline environments may also be examined (Casaló et al., 2010). This study hypothesizes that football fans who feel they belong to virtual communities of their football club intend to visit their soccer team's home city. As a result, the following is hypothesized:

**H7:** Sense of belonging has a positive and significant effect on fans' travel intentions.

### *The Moderating Effect of Destination Attitude*

The final relationship to be examined considers the potential interacting effect of destination attitude on the relationship between fans' sense of belonging and their travel intention. Consumer behavior related to making overseas visits or tourism is generally considered to be much more of a planned activity than a spontaneous reaction (Girish et al., 2021; Pappas, 2019). A consumer's travel intention may be conditioned by the image that such individuals have of the focal place or destination (Li et al., 2010). Travel intention relating to large sports events has previously been examined; however, the moderating effect of attitude on travel intention should be explored in the context of sports teams, as the attitude surrounding a destination may well have the potential to make a longer term contribution to the relationship between sports team affiliation and travel intention.

There are circumstantial findings to support attitude's moderating effect. From a theoretical perspective, de Matos et al. (2009) confirmed attitude's interaction on the emotional reaction–consumer intention relationship. Lin et al. (2014) posited sense of belonging as an emotional reaction construct. Based on such studies, it is inferred that attitude can moderate the relationship between sense of belonging and travel intention. Thus, if a fan has a positive attitude toward a given destination, such as perceiving it as exciting, his or her sense of belonging to that club's virtual community will have a greater impact on their travel intention. The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

**H8:** Sense of belonging has a stronger relationship with travel intention for individuals with a more positive destination attitude than for those with less positive attitudes.

## Research Methodology

### *Research Context*

China provides a suitable context for this study for three main reasons. First, the Chinese soccer market has attracted attention from European clubs because it has significant growth potential compared with other emerging economies (Bodet & Chanavat, 2010; Parker, 2019; Risum, 2015). Second, China has the largest number of Internet users in the world and still has room for further expansion (The World Factbook, 2021). Thus, a study providing insights of Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo users can add further value to marketing practitioners. In realizing that there is a strong desire among a significant number of Chinese to follow European soccer, clubs often seek more innovative ways to promote their teams to such fans through online media. Third, each year 22 million Chinese tourists travel outside their country and European countries are among their favorite destinations (Li et al., 2010). A growing number of tourists may also wish to visit the team they follow to attend a live game.

### *Sampling and Data Collection*

Trained research assistants were used to collect data. Respondents were contacted at a number of

preselected locations, such as soccer grounds, as individuals in these locations were likely to have interest in participating in such activities. On-site purposive sampling was used to recruit participants and an interception technique was adopted. This procedure was considered suitable because a complete sample frame of soccer club online community members in China did not exist. The research was conducted in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. These cities were selected because they have the largest number of potential outbound tourists (Li et al., 2010).

To qualify for the survey, participants had to be over 18 years of age, be members of the

official Sina Weibo and Tencent Weixin virtual communities of their favorite European teams, and reside in China. This study focused on fans of Manchester United, Manchester City, Barcelona, Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Bayern Munich, Tottenham Hotspur, Real Madrid, and Paris Saint-Germain (Rai, 2015). These teams represent the 10 most followed European soccer clubs. They all have a significant number of followers who can interact with other fans as well as with the team. All of the teams included in the study have a presence on Sina Weibo and Tencent Weixin. Of the surveys returned, 488 were considered usable (85.2%).

Table 1  
Descriptive Analysis of the Measures

Variable (Adopted From)/Items	Factor Loading	$\alpha$	KMO	Bartlett's $\chi^2$
<b>Ideal self-congruence (I)</b> (Nam et al., 2011)		0.92	0.83	617.15
I1: The typical Team X fans has an image similar to how I like to see myself.	0.86			
I2: The image of Team X is consistent with how I like to see myself.	0.85			
I3: The image of Team X is consistent with how I would like others to see me.	0.95			
<b>Brand identification (BI)</b> (Hung et al., 2019)		0.90	0.82	535.66
BI1: If I talk about Team X, I usually say "we" rather than "they".	0.81			
BI2: If a story in the media criticizes Team X, I would feel embarrassed.	0.91			
BI3: When someone criticizes Team X, it feels like a personal insult.	0.93			
<b>Lifestyle congruence (L)</b> (Hung et al., 2019)		0.91	0.85	852.21
L1: Team X reflects my personal lifestyle.	0.91			
L2: Team X is totally in line with my lifestyle.	0.90			
L3: Supporting Team X supports my lifestyle.	0.89			
<b>Awareness (A)</b> (Lin et al., 2014)		0.87	0.80	179.30
A1: Team X's official virtual community, such as SNS, keeps me informed of Team X's activities.	0.88			
A2: Using Team X's official virtual community keeps me aware of Team X's activities.	0.89			
<b>Connectedness (C)</b> (Lin et al., 2014)		0.91	0.84	674.16
C1: Using Team X's official virtual community helps me stay connected with other supporters.	0.87			
C2: Using Team X's official virtual community helps me maintain social ties with other supporters.	0.89			
C3: Using Team X's official virtual community helps me maintain friendship with other.	0.91			
<b>Pleasure (P)</b> (Lin et al., 2014)		0.91	0.84	614.73
P1: Reading and posting to Team X's official virtual community gives me pleasure.	0.90			
P2: Reading and posting to Team X's official virtual community makes me feel good.	0.90			
P3: Reading and posting to Team X's official virtual community makes me happy.	0.88			
<b>Sense of belonging (SB)</b> (Lin et al., 2014)		0.92	0.84	712.14
SB1: I feel I belong to Team X's virtual communities.	0.90			
SB2: I spend more time than I expected navigating in Team X's virtual community.	0.90			
SB3: My postings on Team X's virtual community are often commented by other members.	0.90			
<b>Travel intentions (TI)</b> (Chen & Tung, 2014)		0.88	0.86	852.21
TI1: I am willing to watch Team X's live match.	0.85			
TI2: I plan to watch Team X's live match.	0.87			
TI3: I will make an effort to watch Team X's live match.	0.94			

Note. <sup>a</sup>In the survey, "Team X" is replaced to the team supported by the respondents.



### Measures

Each participant completed a 27-item survey that evaluated ideal self-congruence (Nam et al., 2011), brand identification (Hung et al., 2019), lifestyle congruence (Hung et al., 2019), awareness (Lin et al., 2014), connectedness (Lin et al., 2014), pleasure (Lin et al., 2014), sense of belonging (Lin et al., 2014), destination attitude (Carlson et al., 2015), and travel intention (Chen & Tung, 2014). All of the variables in the model were measured using multiple items. These items were generated from a review of the previous literature on virtual communities or from tourism studies and were therefore considered relevant for this study. The items for each variable are presented in Table 1.

### Data Analysis and Results

#### Measurement Model and Common Methods Bias

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was initially carried out on the data using principal components analysis with a varimax rotation to determine the dimensions of the scale. After a series of EFA to purify measurement indicators, the factor structure of this research model was deemed reliable using Bartlett's chi-square test, the KMO test, and Cronbach's alphas. The Cronbach's alphas for all the constructs were above 0.70, indicating satisfactory reliability for the overall scale and all the extracted factors (see Table 1). Following EFA, a two-step approach to structural equation modeling (SEM) was administered—that is, an examination of the measurement model via confirmatory factor

analysis (CFA), followed by the structural model, to test the hypotheses (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

CFA was conducted to analyze convergent validity, discriminant validity, and composite reliability of the constructs and measurement items. AMOS 20 was used to analyze the data. First, all the items loaded on their intended factor and exceeded 0.7 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The squared multiple correlations supported the reliability of the measurement items. Second, convergent validity was examined in terms of the factor loadings and the average variance extracted (AVE), which is the average variance shared between a construct and its measurement (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table 2, the AVE values ranged from 0.78 to 0.83, suggesting that convergent validity was achieved (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Third, discriminant validity was evaluated by comparing the AVE of each individual construct with the shared variances between the individual construct and all the other constructs. Because the AVE value for each construct was greater than the squared correlation between the constructs, discriminant validity was confirmed (Table 2).

The overall model fit was also assessed. The following four common measures were checked: normed chi-square (CMIN/DF), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). For the model to have sufficiently good fit, these measures needed to be  $<3$ ,  $0.90$ ,  $\geq 0.95$ , and  $\leq 0.07$ , respectively (Hair et al., 2006). The results ( $\chi^2/df = 2.91$ ; GFI = 0.900; CFI = 0.952; RMSEA = 0.07) from the analysis revealed a good fit between the data and the measurement model. During the

Table 2  
Correlation Between Variables Following CFA

	Mean	SD	CR	AVE	I	BI	L	A	C	P	SB	TI
Ideal self-congruence (I)	5.19	1.19	0.91	0.83	<b>0.91</b>							
Brand identification (BI)	5.04	1.18	0.91	0.78	0.55	<b>0.88</b>						
Lifestyle congruence (L)	5.25	1.06	0.92	0.81	0.57	0.56	<b>0.90</b>					
Awareness (A)	5.17	1.16	0.86	0.80	0.58	0.57	0.54	<b>0.89</b>				
Connectedness (C)	5.05	1.08	0.90	0.81	0.55	0.58	0.53	0.50	<b>0.90</b>			
Pleasure (P)	5.17	1.16	0.91	0.79	0.59	0.54	0.51	0.54	0.58	<b>0.89</b>		
Sense of belonging (SB)	5.02	1.09	0.93	0.81	0.59	0.50	0.56	0.54	0.56	0.57	<b>0.90</b>	
Travel intentions (TI)	5.02	1.20	0.91	0.79	0.34	0.33	0.33	0.34	0.38	0.32	0.38	<b>0.89</b>

Note. Bold numbers on the diagonal parentheses are square root of each variable's AVE value. CR, composite reliability; AVE, average variance extracted.

analysis, no items were removed, and no changes were made to the factors.

Common method variance was tested using the common latent factor (CLF) method (Podsakoff et al., 2003). For this test, a latent variable was added to the CFA model and was then connected to all the observed items in the model. The standardized regression weights of the new model were then compared with those of the original model. The comparison showed that the results were similar between the two models, supporting the assumption that common method bias was not a significant issue.

#### *Structural Model*

After running the measurement model, the structural model was administered to test the hypotheses. The model fit was good ( $\chi^2/df = 2.98$ ; RMSEA = 0.066; CFI = 0.940; GFI = 0.902). H1 was supported ( $t = 2.51$ ;  $\beta = 0.19$ ;  $p < 0.05$ )—that is, ideal self-congruence has a positive impact on Chinese fans' sense of belonging. H2 was also confirmed ( $t = 2.41$ ;  $\beta = 0.18$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), signaling that brand identification has a positive impact on sense of belonging. In contrast, H3 was not supported ( $t = 0.17$ ;  $\beta = 0.02$ ;  $p > 0.1$ ), suggesting that lifestyle congruence does not affect fans' sense of belonging.

H4 posited that awareness would positively influence fans' sense of belonging and the results support this hypothesis ( $t = 3.44$ ;  $\beta = 0.19$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). H5 was also supported ( $t = 4.35$ ;  $\beta = 0.63$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). However, H6 was rejected because the results were nonsignificant ( $t = -1.06$ ;  $\beta = -0.04$ ;  $p > 0.1$ ), whereas connectedness positively affects fans' sense of belonging, pleasure does not appear to do so. Hypothesis H7 was also supported ( $t = 7.55$ ;  $\beta = 0.50$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), signaling that fans' sense of belonging positively influences travel intention.

#### *Moderating Effects*

To test the hypothesized moderating effects of destination attitude, multigroup invariance analysis was performed. This allows participants to be divided into high ( $N = 278$ ) and low ( $N = 210$ ) positively inclined destination attitude groups. To test the differential effect between the high positive destination attitude group and the low positive destination

attitude group, the chi-square difference between the constrained and unconstrained models was assessed by the difference in degrees of freedom (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). In the unconstrained model, all path coefficients in each group were freely estimated. In the constrained model, the path coefficients for the relationship between sense of belonging and travel intention was set equally across the two groups. The chi-square difference between the constrained model and the unconstrained model was significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). The result demonstrated that the high positive destination attitude group and the low positive destination attitude were significantly different on the model level.

To identify where the statistical differences appear, coefficients for the relationships between sense of belonging and travel intention were compared between the two groups. Statistical tests revealed that the moderating role of tourists' positive destination attitude existed. The structural path coefficient indicated that there was a positive relationship between sense of belonging and travel intention in the high positive destination attitude group ( $t = 5.03$ ;  $\beta = 0.58$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). In the low positive destination attitude group, the structural path coefficient revealed that sense of belonging did not affect travel intention ( $t = 1.15$ ;  $\beta = 0.13$ ;  $p > 0.1$ ). Because the difference in the regression coefficients between the constrained and unconstrained models was significant [ $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 14.36$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ], H8 is supported.

#### Discussion and Conclusion

This section further elaborates on the implications of this study for theory and narrowing the gaps in the literature. First, when compared to studies on large-scale sports events, fewer sports tourism studies have focused on smaller scale events, even though they might be able to make a longer term contribution to tourism activities. In addition, experts have suggested that Europe has huge potential to attract tourists from emerging economies in the Asia-Pacific region. To add value to the sports tourism literature, this research investigates and confirms that European soccer teams have the ability to attract international tourists to visit and watch a live match. Chinese tourists who have a positive attitude towards their favorite team's home city will want to visit if they feel that they belong to this team's community.

Second, the existing sports tourism literature might not have placed sufficient attention in exploring the factors that contribute to international fans' intentions to participate in sports tourism activities. The findings relating to destination attitude's moderating effect on the relationship between sense of belonging and travel intention confirm that being an international sports tourist not only requires a strong sense of belonging, but the individual also needs to have a favorable attitude towards a team's home city. In other words, positive attitudes toward the destination (i.e., the city where the football team is based) leads to sense of belonging having a stronger influence on travel intention. Previous studies have analyzed how city and destination image may impact on travel intention and how being affiliated with a sports team might lead to merchandize purchase intention. However, this study is unique in capturing destination attitude's moderating effect and uniquely brings together sense of belonging, destination attitude and travel intention in an emerging market economy and non-mega-event context.

Third, although having a strong sense of belonging alone might not be sufficient to stimulate an international fan's travel intention, building a virtual community that international fans feel that they belong to is an important antecedent to facilitate travel intention. In addition, it might lead to other benefits, such as online merchandize sales. However, little research has explored how sports teams can build virtual communities where international fans feel a strong sense of belonging. Through testing an integrated framework that incorporates virtual community appraisal with symbolic consumption variables, the study makes a conceptual contribution to the sports tourism literature. The findings reveal that the application of the hereby proposed model to the context is appropriate. That is, the appraisal of a sports team's virtual community is essential when examining the sense of belonging of fans.

The significant influence of connectedness and awareness are consistent with prior online brand community research in a consumer behavior context (Kim et al., 2012; Lin et al., 2014; Tsai & Bagozzi, 2014). Having confirmed that, the study also reveals that the pleasure gained through reading and posting messages does not affect Chinese fans' sense of

belonging. One explanation could be that the importance of having fun online becomes less significant over time because, over the long term, users tend to participate in online activities for functional benefits rather than fun (Xu et al., 2012).

The influence of symbolic consumption variables on consumers' sense of belonging was also examined. As expected, brand identification and ideal self-congruence had significant positive effects on user's sense of belonging. Consumers who have a strong sense of belonging are often those who use their favorite team to project their ideal self-image or regularly use products that have their favorite sports team's brand name (Nam et al., 2011). Contrary to this study's hypothesis, the degree of alignment between a team and a fan's lifestyle has no bearing on a fan's sense of belonging. One possible reason to explain this may relate to the study's context. While local fans of soccer clubs often reside close to their team and buy into a soccer lifestyle with other loyal fans (i.e., they have a close alignment) (Nam et al., 2011), this may not be easy to replicate in countries such as China, where many followers rely on TV footage to engage and support their team.

## Implications, Limitations and Future Research

### *Practical Implications*

The study generates several practical implications. First, sports teams' marketing managers who wish to attract more fans from emerging markets and create a sense of belonging with their teams' virtual community may consider promoting their club's positive brand image and other attributes to their team's virtual community. Individuals responsible for running virtual community sites can share stories related to their team's recent success, past glory, history and other aspects that may provide value to an international fan base.

Second, sports teams' web designers may purposely design their SNS to highlight community utilitarian benefits and potential cocreation of the destination experience. When developing a team's official virtual community on SNS or other social media, marketing managers would be wise to adopt their platform to align with foreign users. This could be achieved through activities such as

hosting competitions that require fans to collaborate with one another. Although Chinese fans generally have limited opportunities to engage with supporters from other countries, being connected to other Chinese fans and the team can help further develop their sense of belonging. In addition, teams must maintain and regularly update information on their virtual communities by posting game results, providing up-to-date status on current players, new signings and recent news on team-related events.

Finally, the literature suggests that individuals act in favor of a brand or company if they feel they belong to its community. However, virtual community brand managers must be cautious, as the link between online affiliation and offline behavior may be moderated by other factors. Given that traveling to their favorite team's home city to attend a live match can be considered resource consuming for fans who reside in China, a sense of belonging to a club's virtual community is not sufficient to stimulate travel intention unless fans also have a favorable destination attitude. This implication may also be useful for other destination stakeholders that want to convert online community success into offline travel behavior.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

First, because Chinese fans' access to Western platforms such as Twitter is regulated and restricted, they may have limited opportunities to engage with supporters in other countries. Future studies may therefore wish to examine whether such issues may influence the travel intentions of fans by focusing on supporters from other emerging markets where Western SNSs are less regulated and restricted, such as in Thailand or the Middle East. Second, the "destination attitude" of this research was operationalized at the city level rather than at the continent level. This approach is appropriate because football teams are usually located in a city. However, this may not take certain situations into account. For example, fans may choose to visit multiple European cities during their trips. In such scenarios, participants' attitudes toward Europe in general may be a factor that is worth considering. Exploring sports fans' travel intentions under different scenarios may therefore provide fresh insights for both scholars and practitioners alike.

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