Grow tennis in China

How to popularize professional tennis tournaments in China through customer engagement

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Abstract

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As a highly commercialized sport, tennis is growing rapidly in the Chinese market. With robust economic growth and various supports from the government, China is becoming more and more valuable in the eyes of professional tennis tournament organizers. Nevertheless, those tournaments do not receive the same amount of popularity as they do in other countries like US and Japan. The purpose of this paper is finding effective ways to improve the popularity of professional tennis tournaments in China from the aspect of customer engagement. Comments from people who are closely involved in the events will be the most relevant empirical material for this study, because they are the group engaged in, or most likely to be engaged in the event. The comments collected will be coded and compared with theories in the field of customer engagement. A conceptual model and practical suggestions will be provided as the result of study.

Keywords: customer engagement, education, participation, satisfaction, conceptual model, qualitative content analysis
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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Sport has been playing an important role in human’s life from the very beginning, which is also considered as part of industrial and urban revolutions in historiography (Hardy, Norman and Sceery, 2012; Liu, Zhang and Desbordes, 2017). However, sport industry has never been as globally popularized and commercialized as they are today (Gratton, Liu, Ramchandani and Wilson, 2012).

The nature of modern sport is transforming “from amateur-based playful activity into a serious multi-billion dollar global business” (Liu et al., 2017, p. 3).

Tennis, as a highly commercialized sport, is growing rapidly in the Chinese market (Liu et al., 2017). With robust economic growth and various supports from the government, China is becoming more and more valuable in the eyes of professional tennis tournament organizers (Xu, Tian, Liu and Wang, 2017). China hosts three out of eight ATP (Associations of Tennis Professionals) and five out of twelve WTA (Women’s Tennis Association) tournaments in Asia, and the tennis-related population in China goes over 14 million—1.03% of the whole population—by 2017 (Xu et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, compared to 10% tennis population in US and 4.7% in Japan, there is still a long way to go before tennis actually becomes popular in China (Xu et al., 2017). Considering the special socialistic ideology in modern Chinese history and the current stage in the journey of development as a country, promoting tennis tournaments and tennis-related event is an ideal way to nourish the foundation of tennis population in China (Xu et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2017).

China Open, held at the beginning of October every year in Beijing since 2004, is a professional tennis tournaments hosted by international tennis organizations such as ATP and WTA together with multiple departments from the Chinese government. In 2009, the level of China Open was upgraded to Premier Mandatory Event in WTA and World Tour 500 tournament in ATP. The total reward of which has also come to the top of Asia and still increases every year. Hence it becomes one of the most important stations for elite tennis players in their Asian tour (China Open, 2018).

Over the past decades, sports psychologists and sports marketing practitioners have dedicated to investigate how to make sports consumption popular among public (Wann et al., 2008), how to add more value to the customer’s experience as well as to the company (Grönroos, 2012; Carlson,
Rosenberger and Rahman, 2015), and what people expect from a sport events (Higgins and Scholer, 2009). Those aspects lead to the term customer engagement according to academicians. Correspondingly, the solution could be found by approaching this situation from the aspect of customer engagement. Many researchers have reached to agreement that customer engagement is a comprehensive, multidimensional subject, which contains cognition, behavior and emotion as three main segments (Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011). However, what else needs to bring into the theoretical structure in order to make customer engagement more clear, specific and measurable has been of great interest to academic community (Vivek et al., 2012; Pansari and Kumar, 2016).

1.2 Problem discussion

The term customer engagement, emerging from the discipline of relationship marketing and service management, was rarely explored in academic community prior to 2005 (Brodie et al., 2011; Harmeling, Moffett, Arnold, and Carlson, 2017). Now it has generated a growing amount of interests in lots of subjects such as psychology, sociology and organizational behavior (Hollebeek, 2011). Customer engagement works like an invisible contract in the world of business (Pansari and Kumar, 2016). Engagement occurs when a customer is being involved and taken in the scene of on-going activity to a very large extent (Higgins and Scholer, 2009; Brodie et al., 2011). High level of customer engagement is the foundation of obtaining strong and sustainable customer loyalty in the long run (Brodie et al., 2011; Grönroos, 2015). Enduring engagement to an event like competition or festival can strengthen the relationship and increase the relevance to the participants, which motivate them to physically attendant the event as ticket buyer, or indirectly consume the experience of the event in front of their TV (Gration, Raciti, & Arcodia, 2011 cited in Carlson et al., 2015). Consequently, the popularity of that event will be significantly improved.

When individual’s cognition, behavior and emotion get fully occupied, the experience will become more memorable and meaningful to him or her in the long run (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011). In this paper, conceptual antecedents including education, participation and satisfaction are going to correspondingly represent and contribute to the cognitive, behavioral and emotional aspects of customer engagement. The study is conducted around customer education, participation and satisfaction because they are the foundation and prerequisite in establishing high quality of customer
engagement (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011). How they work as conceptual antecedents helping to establish customer engagement is of great importance to this study, which will also be further discussed in the following chapters.

The tradition of playing tennis can be traced back to hundreds years ago. However, tennis is not in the gene of consumer culture in China. There were few people playing tennis in China 15 years ago due to the high cost in equipment in training and low amount of fields available (Xu et al., 2017). Today, the booming economy and growing urbanization in China create a welcoming environment for tennis. Although the Chinese market has become more and more attractive and strategically important for the organizers of professional tennis tournaments, it still takes something more to enhance the engagement of public to this sport (Xu et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2017). According to Liu et al (2017), theoretical models generated from the societal background of Western countries may not solve the problem very well in China due to the huge difference in cultural, historical and governmental settings. China is the manufacturer of 65% sporting goods in the market, but its sports service consumption is still underdeveloped and lack of guidance (Liu et al., 2017). Hence in this paper, the author will try to fill this research gap by developing a model of customer engagement that fits the situation of tennis tournaments in China to a larger extent.

1.3 Purpose

Taking China Open as an example, the purpose of this paper is to find out the major cause of low attendance and consumption of customer for professional tennis tournaments in China, and propose theoretical and practical solution accordingly.

1.4 Research question

From the aspect of customer engagement, what can be done to improve the customer attendance and consumption for professional tennis tournaments in China?
2. Theoretical framework

This chapter is going to present the theoretical framework regarding customer engagement, with its underlying factors including education, participation and satisfaction. Academicians have concluded that there are three main dimensions of customer engagement: cognitive, behavioral and emotional (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011). In this paper, three of the most important influencing factors—education, participation and satisfaction—will be discussed as antecedents to the customer engagement accordingly (i.e. education→cognitive dimension; participation→behavioral dimension; satisfaction→emotional dimension) (Brodie at al., 2011; Pansari and Kumar., 2016; Harmeling et al., 2017). How they work exactly will be illustrated in detail in this chapter.

2.1 Education

Customer education is a key contributor to the cognitive dimension of customer engagement (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011). Holding enough information towards the value of a product, event or brand as a customer is the prerequisite to long-term customer engagement, which is the main purpose in pre-purchase learning (Harmeling et al., 2017). During pre-purchase learning, customers could be notified, guided, motivated and empowered by different parties, such as the firm (e.g. advertisements, brochure), Internet (e.g. background information, pros and cons) and word-of-mouth (Hollebeek et al., 2016; Harmeling et al., 2017).

Basic insights will be formed in customers’ mind in pre-purchase learning, which makes it possible for the company to invite their customers into a more dynamic phase of educational experience: relationship building (Pine and Gilmore, 2011; Harmeling et al., 2017). Generally, a perceived level of sincerity, understanding, empathy and respect is the goal in relationship building, which is pinpointed as rapport, according to Hollebeek (2011). This could be achieved by reciprocity (Hollebeek, 2011; Vivek et al., 2012). Reciprocity, rooting from social psychology, indicates that one party will provide positive, rewarding kind of action in return to the favor from another party previously (Li and Dant 1997 cited in Vivek et al., 2012). Besides, people tend to do it in proportion to the benefit they received, regardless they requested the favor or not, in order to avoid the possible guilt for violating the norm (Vivek et al., 2012). “Customer perceives that he or she receives greater
value from an offering or activity, the customer in turn becomes more involved and participates more
with the offering or activity, producing a feedback loop” (Vivek et al., 2012, p. 134).

Notably, customer education requires active participation from people, mentally or physically, in
order to help them have a better understanding towards the target event (Pine and Gilmore, 2011).
“Potential or current customers build experience-based relationships through intense participation
with the brand by way of the unique experiences they have with the offerings and activities of the
organization” (Vivek et al., 2012, p. 133). Which will be further discussed in the following
paragraphs.

2.2 Participation

Customer participation, also known as “task-based engagement” (Harmeling et al., 2017),
contributes to the behavioral dimension of customer engagement (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek,
2011). Participation refers to the degree to which customer gets involved as a co-creator in the
producing or delivering process of an offer or an offer-related activity (Brodie et al., 2011; Vivek et
al., 2012; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014).

Facilitating customer’s active participation is a key driver to customer engagement (Vivek et al.,
2012). Customer-owned resources such as expertise, creative ideas and network assets can be very
beneficial to the implementation marketing communication strategies, which would not be accessible
to the company without establishing a good level of customer participation at first (Pansati and
Kumar, 2016; Harmeling et al., 2017). Purchasing behavior is one of the most common forms of
participation (Pansati and Kumar, 2016). Paying for the entry and buying some souvenirs are two
typical examples of purchasing behavior for an event (Wann et al., 2008). Pansari and Kumar (2016)
pointed out what intrinsically contributes to customer engagement is additional and repeat
purchasing behavior.

Furthermore, making people contribute cognitively and naturally beyond the purchase (e.g. sharing
knowledge, idea, suggestions etc.) is also essential and rewarding for companies to work on
(Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Hollebeek et al., 2016). That type of voluntary knowledge exchange
is an important indicator of customer engagement (Harmeling et al., 2017). Through which,
companies can get feedback, ideas for improvement and innovation, and customers at the same time
would have the opportunity to know more about the company and its offering (Pansari and Kumar,
2016).
*Network asset* is a valuable resource that company can gain from customer participation. By flowing the information within the network, interactive communication between marketers, customers and other potential customers would happen (Vivek et al., 2012; Harmeling et al., 2017). Vivek et al. (2012) claimed that existing customers have lots of opportunities to interact with potential customers of the company, and they are more influential to the consuming decisions of the potential customers compared to the advertising from the company. Customer’s social media posts, comments and recommendations as influencers help a lot in customer acquisition and retention for a company (Doorn et al., 2010; Pansari and Kumar, 2016; Harmeling et al., 2017). “Referrals help in attracting customers who would otherwise not be attracted through traditional marketing channels” (Pansari and Kumar, 2016, p. 302).

Companies invest a great deal of money reaching out to their potential customers, aiming to enhance the value of their brand and their offering in the future (Vivek et al., 2012). However, “[the] level of perceived value created in the customer’s mind arising from interactive, joint, and/or personalized activities for and with stakeholders” (Hollebeek, 2011, p. 793), which is closely related to the level of customer satisfaction.

### 2.3 Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction drives to the emotional dimension of customer engagement (Harmeling et al., 2017). A customer is satisfied when his or her overall expectation to the performance of the core product and its enabling service are fulfilled (Hollebeek, 2011; Grönroos, 2015; Pansari and Kumar, 2016). Scholars started to pay recognition to the meaning of enabling service from a long time ago (Lovelock, 1995). They believed that core product can respond to customer’s need, but it is the enabling service that has a profound influence on how consumer would evaluate the consuming experience in general (Carlson et al., 2015; Grönroos, 2015).

However, a fulfilled customer would not become an engaged customer without holding high customer-perceived value in their mind, which can be achieved by providing *memorable experience* and building *emotional connection* (Doorn et al., 2010).

According to Wann et al. (2008), offering excitement is an effective strategy to make consuming experience more memorable. Seeking excitement could be a common motivation for individuals when consuming experience (Hardy et al., 2012). Besides, enthusiasm is also a valuable player in creating memorable experience “engaging the customer in an interactive situation that is of common
interest to the firm as well as the customer, [which] can produce higher levels of enthusiasm and subsequently greater engagement with the entity” (Vivek et al., 2012, p. 134).

Customers with positive emotional connection with the firm are more likely to become satisfied and engaged (Doorn et al., 2010; Vivek et al., 2012; Pansari and Kumar, 2016). Emotional connection refers to a subjective and personal response to the firm-related stimuli based on their consuming experience in the past (Hollebeek, 2011; Vivek et al., 2012). According to Hollebeek (2011), trust and commitment are two indicators of a customer’s emotional connection. First of all, customers need to know that they can trust the company (Doorn et al., 2010; Pansari and Kumar, 2016). By trust, it means “consumer-perceived security and reliability in brand interactions, and the belief that the brand acts in the consumer’s best interests (Delgado-Ballester et al. 2003 cited in Hollebeek, 2011, p. 794). Specifically, it means that the company is capable of delivering high-quality products or services constantly, and caring about the well being of its customer, employee and society in general (Vivek et al., 2012). For customers, trust is also working as the cornerstone of commitment: the desire and effort to value and take care of the ongoing relationship with the company in the long run (Hollebeek, 2011). Which could further lead to customer engagement and customer loyalty.

2.4 Prototype of customer engagement model
The prototype of customer engagement model based on literature review is presented as following:

![Customer Engagement Model](image)

Figure 2.4.1 Customer engagement model (prototype)
3. Method

3.1 Research approach

3.1.1 Deductive Research

According to Bryman and Bell (2015), taking the existing theory and finding corresponding evidence for it from the studying object is the most commonly used guiding thought in deductive research. The researcher obtains the awareness of outcomes from previous studies and the research issues still unfixed through reviewing the published literature. The formulation of model or hypothesis shall be independent to empirical material.

In this paper, a literature review with the topic of customer engagement was conducted first in order to generate the theoretical foundation as well as the research gap pointed out by other scholars. The most acknowledged influencers of customer engagement were pinpoint as concepts, which were further specified as sub-concepts in order to be more researchable and measurable. Eventually, the author came up with more detailed items, which were holding to match up with the empirical material collected later on. The model built in the end is made of concepts, sub-concepts and items.

3.1.2 Qualitative Research

According to Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2016), quantitative and qualitative research are two of the most commonly used methods in business research. Quantitative research strategy is about collecting numbers as hard data and testing the hypothesis with the help of statistical tools. In contrary, qualitative research strategy emphases more about contextual interpretation and understanding (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Saunders et al., 2016).

The type of knowledge that the author intends to generate belongs to the domain of epistemology (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Specifically speaking, this study is aiming to extract the information of three dimension of customer engagement—cognitive, behavior and emotional—related to popularizing professional tennis tournaments in China. Correspondingly, as what has been mentioned before, the types of empirical material in this study would be insight, attitude and feelings from the customers. Based on the description above, qualitative research strategy would be more suitable for the purpose of this paper, due to its advantages in capturing people’s perception,
presenting the variety of scope and opinion and generating in-depth knowledge to the chosen object (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Saunders et al., 2016).

3.2 Data collection method
Content analysis will be applied as the data collection method in this paper. Budd et al. (1967) defined content analysis as “a systematic technique for analyzing message content and message handling – it is a tool for observing and analyzing the overt communication behavior of selected communicators” (p.2). As a research method with high flexibility to use, content analysis is suitable in dealing with rich, textual data and extracting thorough, in-depth knowledge (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

In this study, content analysis helped to pinpoint the main idea of the chosen comments. Since this study is aiming to collect people’s opinions towards China Open as a professional tennis tournament, employing content analysis to collect empirical material can avoid people’s unwillingness to reveal and hence obtain more real feelings and insights (Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas, 2013; Bryman and Bell, 2015).
3.3 Data collection instrument—operationationalization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Sub-concept</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td>Giving customer cognitive information and building relationship with them</td>
<td>pre-purchase learning</td>
<td>information</td>
<td>Pine and Gilmore, 2011; Vivek et al., 2012;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>relationship building</td>
<td>reciprocity</td>
<td>Hollebeek et al., 2016; Harmeling et al., 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>rapport</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participation</strong></td>
<td>Degree to which customer gets involved as a co-creator in the producing or</td>
<td>purchasing behavior</td>
<td>entry</td>
<td>Brodie et al., 2011; Vivek et al., 2012;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>delivering process of an offer or an offer-related activity</td>
<td></td>
<td>souvenir</td>
<td>Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>knowledge exchange</td>
<td>repeat purchasing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>network assets</td>
<td>feedback</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>idea</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>interactive communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Satisfaction</strong></td>
<td>A customer is satisfied when his or her overall expectation to the</td>
<td>fulfillment</td>
<td>core product</td>
<td>Doorn et al., 2010; Hollebeek, 2011;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>performance of the core product and its enabling service are fulfilled</td>
<td></td>
<td>enabling service</td>
<td>Grönroos, 2015; Pansari and Kumar, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>memorable experience</td>
<td>excitement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>enthusiasm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>emotional connection</td>
<td>trust</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>commitment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3.1 Operationalization

3.4 Sample selection

The sample object selected for the study is China Open, one of the professional tennis tournaments held in China. Since all the tournaments in China are arranged by the same organizations, they are more or less facing the same challenges and opportunities. Besides, the high level and large impact of China Open make it reasonable to represent the general circumstance in China.

Weibo is chosen as the main channel to collect empirical material. As one of the most powerful social media platform in the Chinese market, Weibo provides the opportunity for information to spread fast and wide among its large user group. Besides, its high level of interaction with public makes it an ideal choice for lots of companies and organizations to communicate with their customers, and China Open is one of them.

In this case, the population of the sample is all the existing comments on Weibo China Open since 2010 when this account was created. The sampling frame of this study is the published time of the
comments and its relevance. The time span of the empirical material is set from mid-September to mid-October, 2017, during which the latest tournament was held. Weibo China Open becomes very active during the tournament and hence is able to show the most direct and timely insights. Due to the limitation of researching time, it is impossible to investigating its entire history. Selecting the freshest material to study helps to pinpoint the problems more accurately and come up with more constructive suggestions. Besides, only the comments directly related to the event of China Open 2017 and its spectators are considered as relevant to this study. Comments under the posts like promotion for certain top tennis players attending the match and news about the Wuhan Open and Tianjin Open—which are the tournaments right before and after China Open respectively—will not be included in the review.

3.5 Data analysis method
Thematic analysis will be applied as data analysis method in this paper. According to Bryman and Bell (2015), thematic analysis refers to the process in which textual material will be broken down and classified with labels, i.e. codes. “The analyst searches for recurrences of sequences of coded text within and across cases and for links between different codes” (Bryman and Bell, 2015, p. 13).

In the coding process for the theory, the author conducted literature review of scientific articles of customer engagement and tried to find out how those researchers broken down the concepts into more specific, narrow segments, i.e. sub-concepts. Then the author read through the argumentation and justification for those sub-concepts and extracted the key words. Finally the author held all the key words and examined their difference, similarity as well as the relevance to the research purpose of this paper, which eventually turned out to be the original codes generated from theoretical literature (see from the table of operationalization).

In the coding process for the empirical material, the author went through all the contents posted during the time of China Open tournament from the Weibo of China Open, as well as all the comments under each post. With the aim of finding out the insights related to customer engagement, the author of this paper firstly excluded all the irrelevant material and secondly wrote down all the insightful and constructive comments in order to guarantee the variety of scope and opinion. Then, the author classified the collected comments according to its theme and translated the representatives of them into English, which can be seen from the quotes in italic in chapter 4. The author added description to the contextual background of the quotes in order to make it clear and easy to
understand for the reader. The themes were used as codes generated from the comments, which can be seen from the subheading in chapter 4.

Looking at the codes generated from theoretical literature (left column) and from empirical investigation (right column):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information</th>
<th>Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
<td>Ticket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapport</td>
<td>Complains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entry</td>
<td>Lucky dip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Souvenir</td>
<td>Rivalry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeat purchasing</td>
<td>Star power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Media match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idea</td>
<td>Nostalgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core product</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enabling service</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.6.1 Codes from theoretical literature and empirical material

The author made a comparison to see how they can match up with each other. Ticket from the empirical material has the same meaning as purchasing for entry. Complains are a part of feedback provided by customers, which may come from the dissatisfaction towards any component of the offer. Lucky dip is a form of online promoting campaign, aiming to enhance interactive communication and involve more people in the network. Rivalry and Star power are parts of the nature of sport event, the common thing of which is to create excitement and enthusiasm for the spectator. Media match indicates that China Open is more than a professional tennis tournament. Amateur tennis players can also participate in and become a part of the event. Nostalgia is a type of emotional connection, which is different from trust and commitment, according to the author of this paper.
3.6 Quality Criteria
According to Bryman and Bell (2015), the trustworthiness of a qualitative research can be evaluated through four main criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The empirical material used in this paper is primary data. Which also means it is not manipulated due to certain research needs. Knowing the understanding and interpretation scope will be inevitably subjective, the author of this paper provided very specific and detailed description towards sample selection, coding process as well as the guiding thoughts in analysis. The purpose of which is to make the whole researching process as transparent as possible. The following research will be able to trace back to each and every step and assess its quality.

Notably, the quotes presented in this paper were translated from Chinese to English by the author, which might cause minor twist in meaning delivery due to language and culture issues.

3.7 Ethical Considerations
According to Bryman and Bell (2015), social and ethical issues need to be thoroughly considered when conducting research within the field of social science. This applies for both quantitative and qualitative approach. “Unless there is some breaking of ethical rules, we would never know about certain social phenomena” (Bryman and Bell, 2015, p.131). Nevertheless, a researcher has the duty to minimize the ethical harm. Specifically speaking, the author tried her best to interpret the text based on what it originally meant in order to avoid enlarging the bias. The author is aware that the researching object is an internationally known sport event, so the copyright of information and possible impact towards Chinese society and international tennis community are carefully treated.
4. Empirical investigation

4.1 Education

4.1.1 Pre-purchase learning
The link to the official webpage of China Open (Chinaopen.com) is provided at the webpage of ATP. After clicked in, the author found out that there are only two options for language setting: Chinese and English. Moreover, the content displayed are different from English webpage and Chinese webpage: the amount of information displayed on its English version is much less than its Chinese version. Notably, the ticket-booking webpage is only available in Chinese. In which the information contains a few mistakes, such as wrong birthday and nationality of the players; outdated match schedule and court arrangement.

Besides, inadequate awareness towards the etiquette for watching tennis match is also a problem in pre-purchase learning. Noisy crowd and loud chatting during the match made some ticket-buyers quite annoyed. Many comments on Weibo were complaining about this issue (Weibo, 2017).

4.1.2 Relationship building
(No empirical information found)

4.2 Participation

4.2.1 Purchasing behavior
China Open offered student discount for entry ticket. Limited amount of student tickets were released during the chosen days online. It was very popular and sold out very quickly. In contrary, the sales of ordinary type of tickets and VIP box did not go very well. Lots of empty seats could be seen even in the semi-final and final match (Weibo, 2017).

As for the additional purchasing, there are a couple of issues for the organizer to pay attention to. Since no liquid was allowed to bring in the stadium, the spectators had to abandon their own bottles and buy drinks after entry. However, all the available options of the drinks were the products from the sponsor companies of the match, and the prices were much higher than its ordinary retailing price.
The sales of souvenirs were also poorly arranged. There were very few choices and the products looked boring and irrelevant to tennis, according to the comments from the spectators (Weibo, 2017; Chinaopen, 2017).

4.2.2 Knowledge exchange

The organizer of China Open arranged a series of activities regarding knowledge exchange. Kids from local primary school were invited for a visiting, and their paintings were made into posters for the match (ATP, 2017).

As one of the Premier Mandatory tournaments in WTA and World Tour 500 in ATP, China Open paid lots of efforts in volunteers recruiting and training. Which is also a form of knowledge exchange between the organizer and the public (Weibo, 2017).

However, some spectators commented on Weibo that their complains were completely ignored by the staff. One person pointed out that one of the entrance of the stadium was left without any guard or check-in staff, and people did not buy the tickets could get in freely. Another person said the weather got very cold during the nighttime match and there was no warm drinks or blankets available from the store. He talked to the staff after the match as well as wrote to China Open online, but he did not get any reply and the problem stayed unsolved either (Weibo, 2017).

4.2.3 Network assets

With the help of social media platforms, China Open launched many campaign to spread the information to its network. Online lucky dip is a typical activity that they have used consecutively for years. Free tickets or products from the sponsors would be given away as the prize for the winners. Users of Weibo and other well-known video websites in China got notified and actively participated in the campaign (Weibo, 2017).

4.3 Satisfaction

4.3.1 Fulfillment
According to the comments collected, there were complains about the online payment system broken down and did not get fixed in time, which was a big inconvenience for ticket purchasing. Besides, lots of ticket buyers were unsatisfied with the arrangement of match schedule: it was always a “last minute” announcement and changed very often. Some customers complained that they paid very high price for the matches at the main court, but the top-level players who were supposed to play at the main court were moved to other smaller courts instead, which was quite unreasonable and disappointing (Weibo, 2017).

During the match, there were people talking loudly among the audience, which was very disturbing to the spectators sitting next to them and also a disrespectful manner to the players. Besides, kids’ crying could be heard very often during the match, and it held true even for people watching TV at home. This is not something happening very often for other tennis tournaments at the same level as China Open, which might because there was no kid-care center in the stadium and the staff and volunteers did not provide enough guide and assistant, according to comments from some experienced tennis spectators (Weibo, 2017).

Typical comments (translated by the author):

Strongly advise the organizer to promote etiquette for watching match among the ticket buyers!

Kids’ crying and audience chatting loudly during the match are really annoying!

4.3.2 Memorable experience

According to the collected comments, getting autograph from their favorite tennis player was one of the most memorable experiences for tennis fans at China Open. The event organizer set up plenty of autograph around players’ practice court, sponsors’ activity, and fans’ interactive area. Comments and pictures related to autograph could be seen from Weibo quite frequently.

Typical comments (translated by the author):

Got Da Shi Xiong (Del Potro’s nickname in China)’s autograph! Wonderful memories...

Great to see Maria back in China Open! Got her autograph on her new book!

I’ve got all my favorite players’ autograph except from Djokovic... hope to see him next year.
The opening ceremony and the pre-match players party are also memorable experience for the audience. It is the Chinese features make the event unique and memorable. Participants found it interesting to see those top tennis players (mostly from western world) dressing in delicate tradition Chinese clothes, and learning to write with Chinese writing brush (Weibo, 2017).

4.3.3 Emotional connection

1st of October is the National Day of China, and many tennis fans in China enjoyed spending their vacation at China Open. Retired tennis legendary Li Na and other fellow Chinese tennis players who are still active as professionals were put under the spotlight and closely interacted with the visitors. Many comments indicated that people felt that tennis became more relevant for them as a sport after seeing those professional Chinese players (Weibo, 2017).
5. Analysis

5.1 Education
Based on the empirical material collected above, pre-purchase learning is a session needs fundamental improvement for China Open. Ticket-booking webpage only available in Chinese makes it hard for non-Chinese customers to access the information they need. Wrong introduction about the players and outdated schedule delivered inaccurate information to customers, and hence left the impression as unprofessional in their minds. Which is a disadvantage for China Open to build strong relationship with their customers.

The empirical evidence of relationship building regarding reciprocity and rapport was not found in this case. It is partially because China Open is still a relatively “young” tournament and it does not have everything it takes to be operated like business. Nevertheless, building relationship is still a direction for the development in the future.

Notably, the necessity for educating the ticket-buyers with correct etiquette for watching tennis match becomes quite obvious for the tournament organizers, according to the collected comments from the match spectators. This is a crucial step to provide a less annoying and more enjoyable match-watching experience, which is also the starting point of reciprocity with customers in the future, according to the theories from Hollebeek (2011) and Vivek et al. (2012).

5.2 Participation
Low-priced student entry ticket was very popular for consumers but the sailing of other type of seat ticket did not perform very well, which indicates that price was the dominant influencer in the purchasing decision making process. Likewise, public’s interest in tennis has not become strong enough to win over the price yet. As for the knowledge exchange, the organizer of China Open has been actively inviting people to contribute their own ideas to the event. However, what needs to be pointed out is they should pay more attention and respect to the feedback from their customers. Otherwise fewer participants and less opportunity of improvement and innovation for the event would be inevitable in the future. Interactive communication is the aspect China Open has been doing very well. Various campaign launched on its webpage and social media effectively spread the information and attracting more potential customers participating online. This type of network asset
has been utilized properly in influencing potential customers (Doorn et al., 2010; Pansari and Kumar, 2016; Harmeling et al., 2017).

5.3 Satisfaction
For the ticker-buyers of China Open, the “core product” of the offering would be the experience of watching tennis match, and the “enabling service” refers to everything else provided by the event organizer in order to deliver the match-watching experience. Generally speaking, customer’s expectation has not been completely fulfilled in either of the aspect yet. Late-announced unreasonable match schedule made some spectators lose the opportunity to see their favorite players, and nothing could be more disappointing than that for a tennis fan. Kid’s crying became a disturbance to the match because their parents did not get assistance from the staff and there was no kid care center in the stadium.

Excitement has always been one of the most charming parts of sports match, and there is no exception for China Open. From the pictures and comments posted, it is clear to see that the fans got very excited when they got the autograph and selfie taken with their favorite players. Fans greeted their idol outside the practice court and interactive area at China Open, showing their great enthusiasm, which enhanced the engagement to the event and made a memorable experience to both the audience and the athletes (Weibo, 2017).

For those tennis fans who got to know and play tennis because of Li Na, coming to watch China Open every October has become an emotional connection with their idol. In 2015, the legendary Chinese tennis player, Li Na, held the retirement ceremony at the national tennis stadium of China Open. Retired with ranking as world number two, Li Na is the proud of Chinese tennis, and she still shows up as the event ambassador of China Open every year (Weibo, 2017). The long-lasting star power and influence of Li Na would be used to build stronger emotional connection and commitment with the audience, from the perspective of nostalgia.

Although the other Chinese tennis players who are still active as professionals do not have very outstanding world rankings as Li Na had, they still received lots of attention and support from the organizer of China Open as well as their home crowd (Weibo, 2017; China Open, 2017). Chinese audience and journalists enjoy having more face-to-face interactions to know more about the players from their own country, which can make them feel more emotionally connected to the event (Hollebeek, 2011; Vivek et al., 2012).
5.4 Re-coding
Based on the discussion above, the re-arrange of codes can be seen as following:

The arrows are marked with different colors in order to make it easier to read. The column on the left is the codes generated from theoretical literature, among which the terms marked with square have no empirical evidence found. The author of this paper believes that those aspects are too advanced to the current stage of China Open. It is clear to see that China Open has not been commercially operated to a large extent. Hence building the tennis tournament into a hedonic experience is not what China Open is capable of.

The column on the right side is the codes generated from empirical material i.e. comments regarding China Open 2017 from its Weibo account. Those codes can be classified into the category of codes from theories, except the term nostalgia. Nostalgia is a code emerging from empirical material, which has something to do with the development background of tennis competition in China. The organizer of China Open could pay more effort in this direction to make tennis tournaments more popular by building emotional connection with public.
6. Conclusion and research implications

6.1 Theoretical implication

The major theoretical contribution of this paper is developing a model of customer engagement what is more practical and applicable for popularizing professional tennis tournaments in China:

![Customer Engagement Model](image)

*Figure 6.1.1 Customer Engagement Model*

For the future studies, enlarging the sample size to investigate more tournaments in China would be an ideal direction to go. Combined with quantitative research approach such as hypothesis testing and frequency analysis, researcher will be able to uncover the insights applying to the bigger picture.
6.2 Managerial implication

Based on the analysis of empirical material regarding the feedback from the audience, this study uncovered several managerial implications for the organizer of China Open. First and foremost, promoting match-watching etiquette among ticket-buyers and implementing control action accordingly. That is the foundation for enjoyable and pleasant match-watching experience. Secondly, providing all the instruction notice in both Chinese and English to reduce the obstacles in accessing information. Thirdly, the organizer should pay more attention and respect to the feedback from customers, especially the complaints. Last but not least, from the perspective of building emotional connection with customer, choosing an elite tennis player who has star power and emotional connection with China as ambassador could be a practical strategy for the event organizer in the future.
Reference list


