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Taking the Ballgame Out to the World: An Analysis of the World Baseball Classic as a Global Branding Promotional Strategy for Major League Baseball

Benjamin D. Goss

KEYWORDS:

baseball, Major League Baseball, World Baseball Classic, globalization, internationalization, international sport management, global brand, global brand consumers, global media, global events, sport promotions, branding strategy

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the 2006 World Baseball Classic as a promotional strategy by Major League Baseball to further its global branding pursuits. The WBC is qualified as a global sport event that is a marketing function of MLB in its efforts to emerge as an international brand; elements of the WBC are examined in the context of a global brand strategy. WBC promotional execution elements are studied in light of dimensions upon which consumers evaluate global brands. Four customer segments targeted through the WBC are characterized before the paper examines future WBC marketing approaches in the context of cultural production.

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Overview of World Baseball Classic

After years of planning, Major League Baseball (MLB) staged an international baseball tournament known as the World Baseball Classic (WBC) from March 3-20, 2006. Formally approved by MLB owners in 2004, World Baseball Classic, Inc., is a company created by MLB and the Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA) labor union to operate the WBC tournament, which is sanctioned by the International Baseball Federation and is supported by professional baseball leagues and players associations around the world (MLB.com, 2006). According to Paul Archey, MLB's senior vice president of international business operations, the purpose of the WBC was to "build a platform where the best players in the game could play on behalf of their countries and get baseball better global exposure" (Lefton, 2006).

The WBC staged 39 games at seven international venues over 18 days ("Final

WBC," 2006; Fisher, 2006b). The tournament, which featured three rounds of competition, sold 737,112 tickets, was broadcast in nine languages, and was covered by 5,354 credentialed media members (Bloom, 2006; "Final WBC," 2006). In the championship game, Japan defeated Cuba 10-6 to claim the title for the inaugural tournament that featured 16 competing teams (see Table 1).

Financially, the WBC was deemed successful, with MLB garnering an estimated \$10-15 million past costs of \$45-50 million, buoyed by \$5 million in television rights fees paid to it by ESPN only three months in advance of the tournament (Fatsis, 2006). Half of the profits went to the MLBPA, and half went to the baseball federations of the participating nations in order of their tournament finish. Television ratings for the tournament were deemed solid in the U.S. and soared in Asian and Latin American nations, including a 36 share in Japan for that country's semifinal game with Korea (Bloom, 2006; Fatsis, 2006).

Beyond the revenue generation capabilities of the tournament and the worldwide excitement that overrode initial waves of skepticism and apathy, MLB's vision for the WBC was to create a platform from which it could market itself and the sport of baseball on a greater international level, according to MLB Commissioner Allan H. "Bud" Selig (Bloom, 2008a).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the 2006 World Baseball Classic as a global branding promotional strategy by Major League Baseball to further its global branding pursuits. This strategy will be examined in light of marketing theories concerning sport event scope (Shani & Sandler, 1996), a four-step global brand strategy (Gillespie, Jeannet, & Hennessey, 2007), consumer evaluations of global brands, global consumer segments (Holt, Quelch, & Taylor, 2004), cultural production (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006).

Table 1

National Teams Participating in the Inaugural 2006 World Baseball Classic By Pool

Pool A	Pool B	Pool C	Pool D
China	Canada	Cuba	Australia
Chinese Taipei	Mexico	Netherlands	Dominican Republic
Japan	South Africa	Panama	Italy
Korea	United States	Puerto Rico	Venezuela

Source: "Final WBC," 2006

Overview of Globalization

Because of its complex and multifaceted nature, precisely defining the term globalization becomes difficult and can be approached from numerous perspectives (Anderson, 2004). Some of the more prominent perspectives of globalization involve concepts of economic

transition, including that of Rodrick (1997), who defines the term as "the international integration of markets for goods, services, and capital" (p. 1). One of the more widely embraced definitions of the term is offered by Friedman (1999), who defines globalization as "the integration of capital, technology, and information across national borders in a way that is creating a single global market and, to some degree, a global village" (dust jacket). Other characterizations of globalization include historical and political shifting (Toulmin, 1999), and even a multifaceted conglomeration of connective processes that involve every aspect of life on the planet and that have been unfolding over the entire course of human evolution (Anderson, 2004).

However, consensus among later expert writings on globalization indicates that the phenomenon cannot be accurately characterized by singularly oriented definitions of the term. Waters (1995) defines globalization as "a social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding" (p. 3) and offered discussion of three distinct yet equally important arenas of social life in which discussion of globalization could be contextualized: the economy, the polity, and the culture. In seeking to build on Waters' (1995) conceptualization and widen the definitive scope for the term, Anderson (2004) offers a brief but broadly reaching list of human processes that have been accelerating because of globalization: human mobility, information technology, communications technology, organizations, and international trade/investment. Anderson (2004) further postulates that these processes are each evolving concurrently, frequently overlapping, and often are reinforcing one other, creating an environment that is simultaneously problematic and promising.

MLB & Globalization

MLB is no stranger to far-reaching global business initiatives in recent decades. Typical of their era-specific organizational strategy and pioneering efforts to comb and farm the globe for baseball talent, the Los Angeles Dodgers franchise sent a contingent of executives and coaches to China in 1980 (Henson, 2008c). While its 2008 season-opening series between the defending World Series champion Boston Red Sox and Oakland Athletics drew considerable attention, the series was the third time MLB opened its season in Tokyo (also done in 2000 and 2004), and the fifth non-U.S. opening series, including Monterrey, Mexico in 1999 and San Juan, Puerto Rico in 2001 (MLB.com, 2007). However, aside from location, these initiatives lacked strong local connections, presence past one or two games, and perpetuity.

Prior to the WBC, many pundits and certain MLB stakeholder groups widely and vocally expressed pessimism about the event, calling it a futile attempt by MLB to create an international tournament equivalent to the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup soccer tournament (Bloom, 2006; Fisher, 2005). However, Selig and other MLB senior officials persisted in their establishment of the event as a tool to perpetuate and enhance internationalization of the sport of baseball, as well as to create interest in the sport within nations where none previously existed (Bloom, 2006). After the WBC, Selig stated, "...by any stretch of the imagination, this tournament exceeded my expectations in a myriad of ways" (Bloom, 2006, ¶ 2).

Why globalization for MLB?

In assessing MLB's logic for undertaking the WBC, MLB President Bob DuPuy stated, "Our world has become increasingly smaller. As a result, entertainment product—our product—is going to be worldwide. You can't be parochial

anymore. It can't just be about the United States" (King, 2006, ¶ 50).

Reasons for MLB's focus on global growth are numerous yet are not unique to major professional sport properties. First, as sport crosses international boundaries with increasing regularity due to the influx of worldwide talent, global television audiences, and greater access to licensed merchandise, globalization has become a top priority of all major U.S. sports properties (Barr & Hums, 1998; Fullerton, 2007; Gladden & Lizandra, 1998). These sports properties seek growth outside American borders both to showcase their sports to international audiences, thereby encouraging international participation; and to increase consumption of their own particular product(s) (Fay, 2003; Gladden & Lizandra, 1998; Lizandra & Vail, 2005). Efforts to exploit such opportunities typically involve movement in three primary areas: development of the live audience size and/or experience, development of the media-based audience size and/or experience, and the expansion of related merchandise, sporting goods, and licensed items (Fullerton, 2007).

Concurrent to the previous general discussion of the phenomenon of globalization, Gladden and Lizandra (1998) indicate that sport is subjected to many of the same forces that are presently increasing global distribution of consumer and entertainment products. Gladden and Lizandra (1998) also highlight the maturation of American sports markets and the relatively unsaturated nature of overseas sports markets, as well as technological advances and availability, which increase international accessibility.

Globalization is also a major focus within the arena of competition for most major American sports properties, with perhaps the exception of the National Football League (NFL). Like the National Hockey League (NHL) has done for decades, and like the National Basketball

Association (NBA) in the 21st Century, MLB has become dependent on international talent pools, not only for developmental league and journeyman players, but for its marquee talent (Fay, 2003).

Context of WBC Event

Though the terms international and global may be interchangeable in most contexts, two constructs offered Shani and Sandler (1996) and Gillespie, Jeannet, and Hennessey (2007) that can appropriately contextualize the WBC make distinctions between the two terms in order to differentiate events and brands seeking to compete on a worldwide level.

To determine the precise context of an event, Shani and Sandler (1996) offer a five-tiered classification system called The Sports Event Pyramid (see Figure 1) based on two criteria: width, or the geographic reach of the event, which may span worldwide, across one or two countries, within an area of a country, or within a specific community; and depth, or the level of interest in the event, which may be great or low. Accordingly, on the top tier of events are ones that have worldwide width coupled with great depth, which are classified as global events, e.g., the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup. Events on the second tier are classified as international events; these events may have: national width and great depth, e.g., the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Cup in soccer; or global width with low depth, e.g., the Wimbledon tennis tournament and the Tour de France bicycle race. Events on the third tier are classified as national events and are characterized by great national width and great depth, e.g., MLB's World Series. Fourth-tier events are classified as regional events having narrow national width and great depth within a specific area of a country, e.g., the Southeastern Conference (SEC) men's college basketball tournament. Events on the fifth tier are classified as local events with narrow width and low depth, e.g., a specific minor league

baseball team.

Context of MLB Brand

The terms global and international are also distinguished in the context of branding, as offered by Gillespie et al. (2007). A global brand implements a marketing strategy that is standardized across all national markets yet adapts key elements of the marketing mix (e.g., product features, distribution, and promotion) to local tastes, while an international brand follows a general global strategy but does not maintain a strictly standardized marketing strategy or marketing mix across all national markets.

When conjoinedly considering Shani and Sandler's (1996) Sports Event Pyramid and Gillespie et al.'s (2007) branding distinction, MLB must contextualize the WBC as a global event with worldwide width and great depth, but because of the varying impact of the sport of baseball around the world, MLB must market itself as an international brand. Specific reasons why MLB must market itself with differentiated marketing strategies and marketing mixes are detailed in the following three sections about the WBC global branding strategy, consumer evaluations of global brands, and MLB's consideration of cultural production.

WBC's Four-Step Global Brand Strategy

Gillespie et al. (2007) advocate four steps in developing and administering a global brand: identifying consumer needs, communicating brand identity, tracking global brand identity, and determining the movement of branding decisions. These four steps can clearly be seen when examining MLB's construct of the WBC.

Identifying Consumer Needs

In the initial step, a firm must identify recurring customer needs worldwide and determine how its brand can bring both functional and emotional benefits to these

customers (Gillespie et al., 2007). Though perhaps the functionality of the MLB brand could be disputed in its purest sense (as compared to food, clothing, shelter, transportation, etc.), according to Schirato (2007), sport can exist as entertainment to serve the leisure needs of the population, therefore qualifying MLB's brand of professional baseball as one with the capacity to deliver functional benefits.

Emotional benefits of the inaugural WBC were well documented by media accounts of the unbridled nationalism by fans attending WBC games, including the Dominican fans' formation of a conga line and orchestration of rudimentary musical instruments; the complete filling of lower-level seats by Dominican and Venezuelan fans to watch batting practice 90 minutes prior to the start of a game between the two countries; the rabid West Coast support of the Japanese and Korean teams; the request from Cuba to play the WBC every two years instead of every four years; and flag-waving pageantry from Dominican and Venezuelan fans of such magnitude and proportions that Selig cited it as his personal favorite WBC moment (Bloom, 2006).

Such passion was also a critical measure of success for WBC sponsors, who in some cases had directly pinned the success of their marketing campaigns to the transference of the passion generated by the implosion of nationalism and the sport of baseball directly to their brands. One such sponsor was Empresas Polar, Venezuela's largest brewery and a 10-year veteran of MLB sponsorships in that country, which placed its logo on the jerseys of the Venezuelan team, whose sports marketing director described the fans' passion exhibited at the Orlando, Florida, tournament site as "very valuable" to his company's brand (King, 2006, ¶ 7).

Figure 1

The Sports Event Pyramid



Source: Shani & Sandler (1996)

Communicating Brand Identity

The second step proposed by Gillespie et al. (2007) is the establishment of a process to communicate the brand's identity to consumers, channels, and the firm's own employees. Concerning the WBC, MLB did this on both big-picture and small-picture levels.

From a gestalt perspective, MLB officials and other experts clearly indicated that the purpose of the WBC was to build a bridge to audiences outside the United States: "The impression I got was that this was more important... for the international teams than it was for the U.S. team and the general-market audiences," said Raul Lopez, president of a multicultural marketing research company (Fatsis, 2006, ¶ 13). In a response to a question about the U.S. team's elimination from the tournament after six games, Selig expressed no remorse or any preconceived notion (officially or personally) that MLB had in any way established the U.S. team's success as MLB's benchmark for WBC success. Instead, he directly stated MLB's desire to globalize the MLB brand through the

WBC regardless of the fate of the U.S team: “We were here not only to perpetuate and enhance the internationalization of the sport, but to create interest in a lot of places where there hasn’t been any. And we’ve achieved that” (Bloom, 2006, ¶ 17). Specifically, according to MLB’s Executive Vice President for Business Tim Brosnan, the inclusion of teams from fledgling baseball nations such as China, South Africa, and Italy (with MLB All-Star catcher Mike Piazza on its roster) in the tournament were direct efforts to initiate and cultivate interesting fledgling markets; Brosnan also promised exponentially increased short-term activity in China, as well as the consideration of exhibition and even regular-season games in Europe soon (Fatsis, 2006). Brosnan’s promises were kept in short order as MLB staged two March 2008 exhibition games in Beijing and began its 2008 regular season with a series in Japan, as discussed in the Conclusions section of this article (MLB.com, 2007; Wade, 2008b).

Aside from these big-picture efforts to communicate brand identity, specific immediate steps were also taken to drive the MLB/WBC message. In the weeks prior to the WBC, MLB media partner ESPN intensified its promotional efforts concerning the tournament. The network launched an aggressive multimedia campaign to create excitement about the tournament, devoted daily coverage to the WBC on its “Baseball Tonight” program, and assigned its lead baseball broadcast team of Jon Miller and Joe Morgan to the semifinal and final games (Fisher, 2006b).

Tracking Global Brand Identity

The third step proposed by Gillespie et al. (2007) is the establishment of a method for tracking the success of the global identity of the brand and monitoring customers’ opinions. Fortunately for MLB, a multitude of both traditional and cutting-edge options are at its disposal.

By traditional measures of television ratings

and ticket sales, which were reported to be the primary focus of some MLB executives (Fisher, 2006b), the WBC was considered successful. TV ratings proved vital in gauging fan interest during the WBC; the Japan-Korea semifinal game garnered a 36 share in Japan and was watched on nearly half the TV sets in South Korea (Bloom, 2006). Overall TV ratings across the globe were deemed “solid” by The Wall Street Journal, boosted particularly by Asian and Latin American ratings and even American ratings on ESPN, which attracted an average of 1.4 million viewers, despite airing less than half of the WBC games on ESPN and ESPN2 (Fatsis, 2006, ¶ 4). Ticket sales figures, another standard measure of event success, totaled just over 92% of pre-tournament expectations but were still considered successful, as sellouts were the norm in every tournament venue except the Asian bracket, which was played in Japan’s Tokyo Dome and drew less than the expected 80% building capacity (Bloom, 2006). Another noteworthy factor concerning ticket sales was the robust secondary ticket market that developed at the early-round Orlando and final/semifinal San Diego, California, sites (Fisher, 2006b).

With fluctuating media traffic patterns created by new media, traditional forms of tracking customers (e.g., TV ratings, ticket sales, etc.) could soon be all but obsolete in tracking a brand’s global identity and monitoring customers’ opinions, even in live event-centered businesses and sport properties like MLB. Even modern media such as Internet websites and mobile-phone websites are rapidly becoming outdated forms of digital customer interaction as online virtual communities emerge. In these virtual communities, users no longer simply view, post, and/or interact with content (as with typical websites or MySpace pages), or simply become the receiving end of a unidirectional message as they passively view live or stored streaming video content (as with MLB’s MLB.

TV). Instead, new technology is changing the notion that an entertainment experience only exists within the confines of a facility (Brooks, 2006).

One example of such next-generation cyber-activity is the all-inclusive virtual online community Second Life in which individuals assume self-created three-dimensional virtual identities, navigate through a myriad of 3D virtual communities and locations (e.g., nightclubs and performance centers), and make purchases using an online currency ("Linden") available for purchase with credit or debit cards (Brooks, 2006). However, the primary draw of Second Life is the social interaction with other users, which can be done simultaneously with event interaction, too. MLB's initial experiment with this format came in the summer of 2006 as it broadcasted its annual Home Run Derby (held at Pittsburgh's PNC Park) in a virtual Second Life baseball park. According to MLB interactive media officials and project designers, the foray was a natural fit as MLB, which already boasts strong online game-cast consumption at its MLB.com website, seeks to expand the ballgame experience outside of the ballpark in conjunction with its existing online presence (Brooks, 2006).

Such a mode of consumerism would give MLB critical advantages in tracking its global brand identity. First, the thoroughness of the virtual experience, which will likely far outpace the current levels of interactivity to which consumers can ascribe, will likely provide MLB with more accurate, detailed consumer behavior metrics. Second, such an experience could take the MLB event-based experience to global dimensions via an acceptable standard of virtual reality with which global consumers are already comfortable. Third, such an experience would be available worldwide, allowing both novice and connoisseur fans alike to not only consume MLB-produced content, but to potentially interact with each other while doing

so, providing a more effective environment in which to nurture emerging fans.

Determining the Movement of Branding Decisions

The fourth and final step proposed by Gillespie et al. (2007) in developing and administering a global brand strategy is to determine the direction of the movement of branding decisions, which may be either of two directions: the top-down approach, in which a global management team determines the global brand strategy from which country-specific branding strategies are derived; or the bottom-up approach, in which country strategies emerge from shared experiences and best practices across common elements among subsidiaries.

Though global movement on the MLB brand is clearly a top-shelf priority of its upper-level management team, regarding this fourth step (especially in light of the WBC), MLB is apparently building unique, individualized, country-specific strategies that reflect a bottom-up approach in branding decisions. MLB international marketing and development personnel indicate that strategies and dynamics of selling the game must be customized not by continent and region but by country, a branding strategy at least 15 years old (King, 2006). Though common ground exists across regions (e.g., highly popular product coupled with weak economics in Latin America; popular product and solid economics coupled with drastic time zone differences in Eastern Asia; and Europe's fledgling state of the game coupled with the need for grassroots movements), general geographic plans are not enough. Archey cites the diametric Eastern Asia opposites of Japan and Korea, which he said share very little except geographic proximity (King, 2006).

Managed differences from country to country span both on-field and off-field elements. For example, in China, much of MLB's efforts center on player development to produce a Chinese major leaguer on the order of the

NBA's Yao Ming in order to capture the interest of the massive Chinese market (King, 2006). Such efforts appear to be close to fruition with the New York Yankees' signing of two Chinese players, one of whom played in the WBC, on June 18, 2007, followed closely by the Seattle Mariners' signing of two other Chinese players on June 20, 2007, both of whom played in the WBC ("Mariners follow," 2007; "Yankees sign," 2007).

On-field player development efforts quickly led to off-field development efforts. Just eight days after signing the two Chinese players, the Yankees became the first MLB club to sign a sponsorship with a Chinese company when the Yili Group, China's leading dairy enterprise, inked a deal to receive advertising exposure at Yankee Stadium and in the official Yankees program magazine ("Yankees first," 2007). Groundwork on this Asian front, however, had been in place since MLB opened its Tokyo office in 2005. Since then, its number of multiyear Asian sponsorships increased from 20% before the office's opening to 60% in 2006 due to direct efforts to educate Asian sponsors about the inherent value in multiyear sponsorships as opposed to single-year, advertising based sponsorships (King, 2006). These initiatives likely led to a 2008 deal in which Japan's Nippon Life Insurance Company formed a marketing relationship with the Chicago Cubs and their Japanese outfielder Kosuke Fukudome that included in-stadium signage, tickets, special events, and media backdrop signage for Fukudome interviews ("Coast-to-Coast," 2008).

Furthermore, on the off-field Latin American front, MLB has eliminated a unilateral Spanish broadcast feed to all its Latin American countries and allowed broadcast teams from each nation to dub in their own announcers, resulting in a more easily understood and widely accepted broadcast (King, 2006).

Consumer Evaluations of Global Brands

In their essay on how to rethink global branding, Holt, Quelch, and Taylor (2004) examine a 1983 article by Levitt, which declared that, at that time, a global market for uniform products and services had emerged, and that companies should exploit such economics of simplicity and expand by selling standardized products worldwide, which would ensure cost savings and consistent communication. Holt et al. (2004) argue that instead, consumers in most countries could not relate well to the subsequent generic products and communications spawned by companies' least-common-denominator strategies. Furthermore, based on a study of brand preferences and perceptions of consumers across the globe, Holt et al. (2004) offer a theoretical construct of important dimensions of global brands and categorized global consumer segments into four groups; both of these conclusions can clearly be illustrated by a detailed examination of MLB's efforts with the WBC.

Dimensions

After a qualitative study of consumers in 41 countries to identify key characteristics which consumers associate with global brands and a quantitative study of 1,800 people in 12 nations to measure the relative importance of those dimensions when consumers buy products, Holt et al.'s (2004) analysis revealed three characteristics which consumers associate with global brands and utilize to evaluate them when making purchase decisions: quality signal, global myth, and social responsibility.

Quality Signal

Regarding the first dimension, Holt et al. (2004) concluded that international consumers are impressed by brands' quality, excitement, innovation, and global reach. Aside from product/guarantee superiority, respondents indicated that their excitement was driven

by the development of new products and breakthrough technologies, as well as their inherent perception of global-ness. MLB's launch of an international tournament dually qualifies as a new/breakthrough initiative and a direct effort to drive international perception of the sport of baseball as a global one. Coupled with its foray into cutting-edge technological frontiers described in the previous section, MLB's launch of the WBC appears to firmly indicate a wholly reformulated strategy of the game's highest professional-level property to move the tradition-laden, pastoral sport often billed as the American pastime from one built almost exclusively around American values to one that is keenly interested in becoming a global game (King, 2006; Schirato, 2007). Tim Brosnan, MLB's executive vice president for business, explicitly stated just days prior to the tournament that MLB "can't make a business out of tradition" (Fisher, 2006a, ¶ 5) while noted sport economist Andrew Zimbalist commented that the WBC's revenue-sharing formula, new-media business, and cooperation with the Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA) labor union indicated "the beginning of a new mentality" of MLB franchise owners from a culture of division and selfishness to one of risk-taking, partnership, and collective sacrifice in an effort to globalize the game (Fatsis, 2006, ¶ 8; Fisher, 2006b).

Global Myth

The second dimension of global brands is the capability to create a shared global identity that gives consumers a perceived cosmopolitan lifestyle, known as global myth, in which they share an imagined global identity with like-minded people, feel a sense of belonging to something bigger, and ascribe to desired qualities (Holt et al., 2004). A careful analysis of the 2006 WBC team/country profiles compiled by King (2006) reveals that MLB utilized global myth regarding the WBC to nations outside the U.S. with two distinct combinations of two

variables: emphasis on competition and sources of sponsorships.

Discounting countries with both well-established presence and well-established/growing economies (based on their gross domestic product totals and rankings) in which MLB already has a strong foothold (Australia, Canada, Japan, Mexico, Korea, and U.S.), the remainder of the WBC field consisted mostly of teams whose nations mostly had the combination of either a well-established baseball presence with a weak economy (Chinese Taipei, Dominican Republic, Panama, and Venezuela), or a weak baseball presence with a well-established/growing economy (Italy, China, and the Netherlands). In developing baseball countries with established/growing economies yet less competitive teams, MLB perpetuated the global myth with sponsorships from global brands, e.g., Anheuser-Busch, MasterCard, and PepsiCo, that involved heavy worldwide sales pitches, particularly in Asia and Latin America, and a lessened emphasis on competitive elements (Fisher, 2005, 2006b; Lefton, 2006). On the other hand, in established baseball countries with weak economies, MLB placed heavy emphasis on the global competition elements of the WBC and the combination of baseball and the flag to promote the global myth while allowing local brands (e.g., Empresas Polar brewery of Venezuela, Presidente Beer of the Dominican Republic), to take advantage of simultaneous nationalistic phenomena and initiate, activate, and leverage sponsorships (Fisher, 2006b; King, 2006).

Three exceptional instances to the global myth existed: Cuba, a nation in which baseball is at the cultural core but whose economy is extremely weak and whose Communist-controlled government heavily sanctions/is heavily sanctioned by governments worldwide, thereby making sponsorships a virtual impossibility (despite access to U.S. television);

Puerto Rico, which is a baseball hotbed and, as a U.S. territory, was ripe for and heavily targeted for promotional activation by MLB sponsors Gillette, MasterCard, and Pepsi during the WBC; and South Africa, a nation with both a relatively weak economy and a weak baseball presence (King, 2006).

Social Responsibility

The third dimension associated with a global brand as identified by Holt et al. (2004) is its perceived level of social responsibility. Holt et al. (2004) indicate that consumers perceive global companies to wield considerable social influence and should directly address problems linked to their industries. In conjunction with the WBC, MLB did both.

From the profits generated by the tournament, the WBC donated \$1.2 million to Habitat for Humanity International (HHI) to aid victims of the hurricanes that struck the Gulf Coast region of the U.S. in 2005 and support the building of 16 homes (MLB.com, 2006). Previous MLB efforts tied to HHI included 21 additional homes built in 2006 and the provision of over \$10 million in media exposure for HHI (MLB.com, 2006).

In another instance involving the WBC, MLB wielded its influence to address the problem of Cuban participation in its tournament. While Cuban players are not banned from playing for MLB teams, the franchises must not be involved in defection efforts, which are illegal (Frankel, 2005); this dilemma has created past outcries concerning the civil rights of Cuban players, whose country is heavily sanctioned by the U.S. Department of State. The state department initially barred the participation of the Cuban team in the WBC, but MLB successfully negotiated a reversal of that policy in time for the Cuban team to participate (Fatsis, 2006).

Future efforts in this area will likely prove critical for the expansion of MLB's global presence, particularly since it is an American

brand (Holt et al., 2004). Socially responsible initiatives in later years must provide clear benefits for other (if not all) nations involved in the tournament or other countries/regions in need; otherwise, consumers may see the approaches as opportunistic and self-interested (Holt et al., 2004). Also, MLB must seek to partner with socially responsible corporate sponsors, which can be uniquely perceived according to person, country, and region. For instance, numerous breweries were involved in WBC sponsorships at the global and national levels, and Nike was the official team uniform and equipment supplier of semifinalist Korea (Fisher, 2005, 2006b; King, 2006).

Customer Segments

Holt et al.'s (2004) study also coined four major segments of consumers based upon how they relate to and evaluate global brands: global citizens, global dreamers, antiglobals, and global agnostics.

Global Citizens

This segment of consumers, which was composed of about 55% of Holt et al.'s (2004) respondents, is concerned about firms' behavior regarding social issues and relies on companies' global successes as a signal of quality and innovation. Relatively few of these consumers are found in the U.S. and United Kingdom, while relatively high numbers are found in Brazil, China, and Indonesia (Holt et al., 2004).

MLB has taken a primary first step in positioning itself as a globally successful brand simply by staging the WBC as a platform for the best players to compete on behalf of their countries in a World Cup-style tournament that produced global exposure for the game and MLB (Fisher, 2005; Lefton, 2006). One way in which MLB can appeal to global citizens via the WBC is to continue to actively pursue and promote its involvement with socially responsible initiatives, such as its involvement with Habitat for Humanity International as

described in the previous section. MLB has also formed a multi-year sponsorship agreement with KPMG, a Swiss global cooperative network that provides audit, tax, and advisory services in 148 countries, to become an official MLB sponsor and presenting sponsor of Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities (RBI), a youth outreach program designed to increase participation in baseball and softball, encourage academic achievement, develop self-esteem, and teach teamwork to urban youths ("About KPMG," 2007; "KPMG," 2007). Under the agreement, KPMG will work with MLB to enhance and expand RBI through partnership fees, an annual contribution of \$1,000,000, volunteer hours, and its corporate citizenship program ("KPMG," 2007).

Global Dreamers

The second category, which constituted 23% of Holt et al.'s (2004) respondents, consists of consumers who see global brands as a source of quality products, readily accept the myths authored by brands, are less discerning about and more ardent in their admiration of transnational companies, and are not nearly as concerned with corporate response to social issues.

With the WBC, MLB has authored a highly attractive connectivity device for this group of consumers as it promotes the tournament as a vibrant, forceful, irresistible combination of baseball and national flags (King, 2006). In countries in which baseball is as much culture as it is sport, the passion generated by international baseball competition and the marketing buzz and hype it generated in its inaugural tournament, not to mention what its second and subsequent tournaments may potentially generate through the affinity of nationalism, MLB has created a timely, well-targeted platform from which it can easily and effectively reach global dreamers (Bloom, 2006; Fatsis, 2006; King, 2006; Lefton, 2006).

Antiglobals

This segment of consumers, which number about 13% of respondents in Holt et al.'s (2004) study, try to avoid transnational companies' products because they are skeptical that such companies can deliver higher quality goods to them. Their numbers are relatively high in the United Kingdom and China, and relatively low in Egypt and South Africa (Holt et al., 2004).

Concerning MLB and the sport of baseball, this type of consumer may not necessarily be focused upon the quality level of goods; instead, their antiglobal mindset may be more directed at the quality of baseball as a sport and its (lack of) relevance and appeal to them. Additionally, they may be less inclined to sample the game, either as a participant or spectator. Such an approach may be more prevalent in countries with a weak baseball presence. Therefore, MLB must carefully design its promotional efforts to emphasize elements other than ones that are highly (even inherently) culturally relevant in other nations. For example, in countries such as China, Italy, and South Africa in which baseball is barely on the sporting radar, MLB emphasized the highly valued element of international competition associated with the WBC (Fatsis, 2006). Grassroots playing efforts (Fatsis, 2006; King, 2006) are also essential to successfully sway this group of consumers.

Global Agnostics

The fourth category, which comprised 8% of Holt et al.'s (2004) respondents, consists of consumers who do not regard brands' global natures as meriting special consideration and do not make purchases based on brands' global attributes. These consumers are found in relatively greater numbers in the U.S. and South Africa and lesser in China, Japan, Indonesia, and Turkey (Holt et al., 2004).

While pure correlations to global agnostics as described by Holt et al. (2004) may not

be found in accounts of the WBC, agnostic attitudes about the tournament abounded, specifically within the U.S. among some MLB powers and baseball journalists. Skepticism about potential injuries to multimillion-dollar players, the Spring Training timing of the tournament, and a lack of national interest dissipated over the 17 days that the games were played but flamed high before and during its initial stages (Bloom, 2006; Fatsis, 2006). Even the baseball-crazed country of Japan decided to enter the tournament only at the last minute (Fisher, 2006b).

Journalistically, the most optimistic pre-Classic outlook on the WBC came from Boston Globe sports editor Joe Sullivan, who said the newspaper was “sort of guarded in our commitment” because of the uncertainty over the WBC’s exact nature but was prepared to “ramp up” its coverage if needed (Fisher, 2006a, ¶12).

Other journalistic perspectives were much more pessimistic. Dan Graziano, a columnist for the Newark, New Jersey, *Star-Ledger* newspaper, said the WBC was no goodwill exhibition like the Olympic Games but rather a money-making scheme conceived by Selig (Fisher, 2006a). On February 28, 2006, sports radio talk show host Mike Francesca grilled Tim Brosnan, MLB’s executive vice president for business, for 20 minutes on New York City’s dominant WFAN-AM radio station. Francesca began by labeling the Classic “a foolish enterprise” and asking Brosnan, “You want [fans] to invest in a game that can end in a tie?” (games in the first two rounds of the WBC deadlocked after 14 innings were to count as a tie, though none lasted that long) (Fisher, 2006b, ¶3). Francesca asserted that the WBC would never be top-flight competition given its rules modifications, including pitch-count limits, and closed the interview by saying Brosnan “lives in Never Never Land” (Fisher 2006a, ¶4).

Later that same day, New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner, who cast the lone abstaining vote among MLB owners regarding the establishment of the WBC, called the tournament “bull----” and complained that MLB players would not be insured while competing, an assertion denied by Archey’s claim that MLB and MLBPA had purchased supplemental insurance on WBC players (Fisher, 2006a, ¶6, 2006b).

MLB’s Consideration of Cultural Production

In 2006, Venkatesh and Meamber proposed a theory postulating marketing as the context and framework for the functioning of cultural production as related to the marketing of aesthetics, specifically within the arts. When examined conjunctively of Holt et al.’s (2004) global brand consumer segments, their theory clearly has strong implication for MLB in its efforts to market itself globally.

Cultural Production

Lash and Urry (2002) define cultural production as the process by which cultural products (goods, services, artifacts, visual/experiential objects, and art forms) are created, transformed, and diffused in the constitution of consumer culture. Besides the creation of physical products, symbols and meanings are also created by consumers, who purchase goods as much for meaning as functionality (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006). As described by Schirato (2007), sport in general (and baseball in particular) could easily be considered a cultural industry that produces a cultural product, i.e., ones with artistic/aesthetic appeal and meanings (Kozinets, 2001, 2002; McCracken, 1988).

One central premise to cultural production is that culture is constructed and negotiated by cultural actors, including: producers, who design, develop, and implement cultural products; intermediaries, individuals or

organizations concerned with communication and distribution; and consumers, who transform cultural products into objects of meaning. These constructs are the product of the interaction of symbolic and sensory experience modes and the related meaning systems in which cultural actors are engaged (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006).

Marketing Approaches to Cultural Production

From 31 sources in literature, Venkatesh and Meamber (2006) assimilated four distinct approaches to marketing and consumption of cultural production: the managerial orientation, in which marketing principles are applied to cultural product consumption; consumption orientation, which includes experiential, symbolic, and hedonic components; everyday life orientation, in which arts/aesthetic consumption occurs in everyday life situations; and cultural product orientation, in which cultural products provide insights into consumer culture. The progression of these perspectives is oriented in the premise that an aesthetic experience (i.e., the sport of baseball in the context of this paper) is based on sensory elements but is also highly symbolic, thus leading to a different consumer response when compared to more mundane objects (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006).

Managerial Orientation

With Kotler's (1972) generic concept of marketing came a managerial approach of marketing mix variables to cultural production, including studies of motivators (Bamosy & Semenik, 1981), family life cycle (Belk, 1986), co-patronage (Belk & Andreasen, 1980), trust and commitment (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999), and image (Askegaard, 1999). In sum, this perspective views marketing as an important agent of cultural production. While viewed as a significant direction for the cultural production industry, several authors (Hirschman, 1983; Joy & Sherry, 2003, 2003b; McCracken, 1990) underscore various limitations of this

perspective, including patrons as culture-bearers, cultural objects as artifacts, and the sociocultural event nature of consumer/object interactivity.

Consumption Orientation

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) argue that experiential-type products cannot simply rely on manipulation of marketing mix variables because problem-solving approaches fueled by product marketing theory alone cannot account for the need to engage in cultural production for pleasure, which activates multi-sensory, fantasy, and emotional aspects of consumer experiences during consumption of arts/aesthetics. As individuals engage in these consumptive behaviors, they collect past meanings, negotiate future meanings, and assemble present meanings from cultural constructs such as family, religion, gender, age, and tradition. Essentially, this perspective considers the unique aspects of the marketing of production and consumption of cultural products (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006).

Everyday-Life Orientation

The third perspective builds upon the second but contends that postmodernity and democratization have facilitated cultural product consumption into ordinary, everyday experiences, i.e., life now imitates art and is now more fleeting, experiential, and image-based than before (Lipovetsky, 1983, 1994). Concisely, this perspective considers marketing to be a framework for cultural production (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006).

Cultural Product Orientation

The fourth perspective contends that the substance of cultural products (e.g., film plots, artworks, literary texts, advertising, etc.) provides insights into various aspects of consumption and consumer culture (e.g., materialism, nostalgia, and cultural myths) (Holbrook, 2004; Holbrook & Grayson, 1986). This perspective links aesthetic processes and consumption practices as vehicles for individual

and cultural identity construction, essentially reversing the perspective of managerial orientation by utilizing insights from the content of cultural products to understand marketing and consumer behavior (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006).

Applications to MLB's Global Efforts

When combined with Holt et al.'s (2004) global consumer segmentation, knowledge of Venkatesh and Meamber's (2006) four perspectives on marketing and cultural production could allow MLB to better direct its WBC efforts in more precise, effective, efficient ways. Discounting the unlikely-to-be-converted global agnostics, MLB can effectively form appeals to the remaining three global consumer segments.

Appeals to global citizens, who are highly cognizant of a brand's global success and its social responsibility, could be made through cultural product marketing, whereby consumers' cultural orientation influences their marketing orientation. Global dreamers, who readily accept global myths and admire transnational companies because they desire a sense of belonging to a larger construct, could be reached through everyday life-oriented marketing, since these consumers likely consume cultural production on a daily basis and are very experience-driven and image-obsessed. The skeptical category of antiglobals, who may find MLB and the sport of baseball irrelevant to themselves, may be steered in the direction of baseball through consumption-oriented marketing efforts. However, these efforts must involve elements of considerable scope, long-term orientation, multiple initiatives with various focuses, and keen working knowledge of ethnic cultures.

In this mode, MLB must be particularly conscious of several basic cultural production principles as it formulates marketing strategies for some global audiences. First, consumers purchase goods as much for

meaning as functionality and perceptively transform symbols into meaning (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979). Second, the culture in which individuals are engaged creates meaning for everyday products, dictates the ways in which meanings move through society to consumers, and determines the priorities attached to experiences and products by consumers (McCracken, 1986; Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006). Third, cultural products that provide symbolic meanings consistent with cultural priorities are more likely to be accepted than ones that do not (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006).

The combined anti-global/consumption-orientation approach may prove particularly vital for MLB when undertaking initiatives involving China, where baseball was introduced in 1863, was visited by Major League stars such as Babe Ruth and Casey Stengel on exhibition tours, and was played extensively until the country's Cultural Revolution under Chairman Mao Zedong effectively sought to erase anything considered Western from 1966-1976 (Henson, 2008a; Wade, 2008a). Therefore, despite a six-team government-supported China Baseball League that began its sixth season in 2008, approximately 100,000 youths involved in the sport throughout the country, two MLB-sponsored youth academies, three new venues built for the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, and a team entered in the inaugural WBC, baseball still suffers from large amounts of indifference and apathy from the Chinese public, which largely does not see the sport as relevant to them (Henson, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; MacLeod, 2008; Wade, 2008a). Nevertheless, the country's familiarity with and passion for the NBA cause MLB officials to feel optimistic that, when combined with its 2008 exhibition series between the Los Angeles Dodgers and San Diego Padres in Beijing, the presence of baseball in the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, China's participation in the inaugural WBC,

and its likely participation in the 2009 WBC, it can open a door for itself in a country with 1.3 billion citizens (Bloom, 2008a; Henson, 2008b), particularly through utilization of one of its primary strengths: its extensive media operations, the importance of which was underscored by Venkatesh and Meamber's (2006) theories on cultural production.

Principles Related to Global Media

In describing transnational media corporations, Gershon (2005) states that their principal commodity is information and entertainment. Gershon (2005) further states that these corporations have become salient features of the modern global economic landscape and actively promote the use of media and telecommunications software and hardware technology (e.g., broadcast and cable television, Internet, music and film, direct broadcast satellite, video games, recorded programming) on a worldwide basis. This assertion should not be surprising, given the symbiotic relationship between sport and media, in which a sport is distinguished by media that cover it, and in which media attract consumers and advertisers by promoting its prestige and power (Moretti, 2005).

Increasingly, however, more brands have become at least part-time media companies by virtue of their marketing strategies, following the lead of sport properties, which are often given credit for pioneering this phenomenon of not only producing content, but creating communities and producing online tools (Outing, 2007). This application follows the theoretical premise of Venkatesh and Meamber (2006), who stated that the communication subsystem of the cultural production system "involves creating and directing marketing communications to cultural gatekeepers (such as the media, a formal gatekeeper, and opinion leaders, who are informal gatekeepers) and

finally to consumers" (p. 18).

With Major League Baseball Advanced Media (MLBAM), the company created to operate its digital assets, MLB is well positioned strategically to control and distribute its product on a global basis. Created in 2000 with a \$2.7 million investment from each of MLB's 30 clubs, MLBAM has helped define successful digital media propagation not only for MLB but other major sport properties with whom it contracts, including Major League Soccer, Association of Volleyball Professionals, World Championship Sports Network (Olympic and lifestyle sports), IceNetwork.com, Tiger Woods' official mobile site, and CBS's March Madness On Demand (Fisher & Mickle, 2008). MLBAM produced revenues of at least \$380 million in 2007, up more than 60% from \$236 in 2005, and has streamed over 12,000 live events since its inception in 2000, more than any other Web site in the world ("MLB's advanced," 2007).

Since the proliferation of global media for the development of new media-based fans in new international markets now receives considerable emphasis from most major sport properties, MLB's advanced media arm gives it a strong tool with which to promote, distribute, and reinforce WBC efforts and thereby grow its brand globally (Fullerton, 2007). However, as with most market-driven organizations' attempts to effectively match media to audiences as described by Cravens and Percy (2006), it must effectively mold its approach to providing media on a unique, locally appropriate basis with Shani and Sandler's (1996) Sports Event Pyramid, Gillespie et al.'s (2007) branding strategy, and Holt et al.'s (2004) global customer segments to truly cast the WBC as a global event (Shani & Sandler, 1996) and MLB as an international brand (Gillespie et al., 2007). Since uniqueness is less a function of structural alternatives and more connected to the wide range of operational and market variables than influence distribution channel

strategy, generalization about distribution practices throughout the world becomes impossible (Cravens, 2006). Designing channels to reach international customers may require adaptability, and even advanced Internet-era technology may not always provide solutions (Cravens, 2006).

Conclusions

Despite the current strengths of MLB and the success of the 2006 World Baseball Classic, much remains at stake for Major League Baseball as it perpetuates its efforts to build its brand globally. Though MLB has achieved several noteworthy breakthroughs, several international obstacles of considerable scope remain to be conquered.

Noteworthy Breakthroughs

MLB has finalized plans for its second staging of the WBC, scheduled to be played during March 2009 in Tokyo, Japan; San Juan, Puerto Rico; Toronto, Canada; and Mexico City, Mexico (cites for second-round, semifinals, and championship games are to be determined as of this writing) and featuring the same 16-team field as the inaugural 2006 WBC (Bloom, 2008a, 2008b). A few competitive structural and rule changes have been introduced, including a double-elimination format during the first two rounds of play and bracket crossover semifinal games, done to intensify the competitive excitement of the tournament, according to MLB officials (Bloom, 2008a, 2008b). Perhaps the most notable future alteration of the tournament includes its proposed field expansion to 24 teams for 2013 that would include qualifying rounds as prefaces to primary competition and thereby potentially grow and enhance worldwide interest in the game (Bloom, 2008a). After the waves of pre-tournament criticism and apathy the WBC received, even MLB officials were quite surprised at the intensity of play and interest

the initial Classic received and consider the mere presence of a second Classic a landmark achievement (Bloom, 2008a).

Another success story spawned at least indirectly by the WBC yet unconnected to MLB is the Israel Baseball League (IBL), a six-team professional baseball league that began play June 24, 2007, and featured 120 players from nine countries including the U.S., Canada, Australia, Japan, Israel, and the Dominican Republic. Larry Baras, a Boston-based businessman, created the IBL and appointed Dan Duquette, a former general manager of the Boston Red Sox, to be its director of player development ("Israel launches," 2007). The six teams completed a 45-game season and fielded 20 of its 120 players from Israel and, before beginning its 2008 season, announced that eight of its 2007 players had either been signed by or invited to tryouts with professional teams around the world ("Pro baseball," 2007; IBL, 2008).

In response to why he formed the IBL, Baras said that he wanted to get Israelis, not just American immigrants, interested in the game for the same reasons Americans do: "To be with family, to enjoy the sound of the bat, to see the ballet actions of the players" ("Pro baseball," 2007, ¶ 13). More profoundly, however, Baras said that persisting for fans in a country in which soccer is king and basketball is a distant second cousin was not the only motive for forming the league. He also stated that the league hoped to develop enough local talent to field an Israeli team in future WBC competitions ("Pro baseball," 2007).

Remaining International Obstacles

Many of the obstacles for the IBL within Israel will be common and/or similar to ones for MLB as it continues its push within certain countries and regions of the world; China is one such example. Conditions in China appear to be somewhat iconic for most countries on MLB's radar, not to mention the importance

of exposing the nation of 1.3 billion people to baseball.

Particular focus has been cast upon bolstering the Chinese national baseball team. In 2003, MLB signed a development contract with the Chinese Baseball Association (CBA) and offers several youth development programs in major Chinese cities (Henson, 2008c). However, with baseball dropped from the 2012 Olympic Games and no guarantee of its restoration to the sports rosters of future Games, almost no Chinese government support for its development past the 2008 Olympics is guaranteed, necessitating stronger supporting relationships with baseball entities such as MLB (Henson, 2008a; MacLeod, 2008).

Additionally, MLB must continue to find ways to develop the game beyond the national team level (MacLeod, 2008). While baseball clubs are enjoying popularity at Chinese universities, baseball is considered an elite sport in China because of the specialized, expensive, hard-to-find equipment and fields (Henson, 2008b; Wade, 2008). Thus far, MLB's programs have been restricted to major Chinese cities and presently have virtually none of the rural penetration throughout the vast territories of China that exists in the U.S. and Latin American countries (Henson, 2008a). Because baseball is not broadcast on Chinese television, MLB fans there must follow the sport online, where MLB fortunately enjoys a strong presence (Henson, 2008b).

In addition to revitalizing the culture of baseball in China, despite its efforts to boost the WBC, MLB must seek an effective partnership with the International Baseball Federation (IBAF), the global governing body of baseball whose universal presence exceeds that of MLB. With the end of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games came serious doubt about the sport of baseball's continued future presence as an Olympic sport, despite the fact that competitive baseball is played in

half the International Olympic Committee member countries (Genzale, 2008), and the game has more international participants and fans than almost any other Olympic sport. Numerous sources (Astelford, 2008; Blair, 2008; Fisher, 2008a; "MLB's Return," 2008) documented MLB's less-than-cooperative relationship with the IBAF in providing top-tier player talent for 2008 Olympic competition, as well as considering the possibility of a brief Olympic-year shutdown if Chicago or Tokyo were awarded the 2016 Olympic Games. Accordingly, minor league and college baseball players dotted the rosters of most national teams in Beijing, generating little global interest in tournament competition deemed second-rate (Genzale, 2008). Such a lackluster competition is blamed for baseball's removal from the next Olympic Games in 2010, which directly endangers sources of funding for national baseball associations around the world and may indirectly endanger participation in many baseball-playing countries around the world (Blair, 2008).

MLB's disregard for the present state of international baseball as governed by the IBAF is intense and has a history (Blair, 2008). Under the leadership of Aldo Notari, who served as IBAF's president from 1993-2006 and detested the intrusion of commercialism and entertainment into the game, the federation wilted into a bureaucracy with rampant malfeasance, secrecy, and disorganization that stunted the global growth of the game and has forced MLB to undo extensive damage done by the longtime impeding presence of such an inefficient, ineffective organization (Genzale, 2007). However, under the current leadership of long-time international sports executive Harvey Schiller, the IBAF has reelected its board of directors and refocused its mission to develop an open organization, develop baseball around the world (particularly in Europe and Asia), and somehow return the sport to the

Olympics after the 2010 London Olympic Games (Astleford, 2008; Genzale, 2007).

A Springboard to the Future

This annular discussion of the WBC must also conclude with the initial theoretical framework with which it began. MLB's promotional efforts for the WBC must become rooted in a thorough understanding of Shani and Sandler's (1996) Sports Event Pyramid and the characteristics of events that occupy each tier so that the WBC can ascend over time to a level appropriate for maximizing the tournament's potential. Understanding how to extend the sport's width in developing markets (e.g., China and European nations) will become paramount, while extending its depth will be the overriding factor in others (Pan American nations, Japan, Korea, and even in the U.S.). The sport of baseball occupies somewhat of a middling position on both spectra. For example, the sport does not enjoy the same global reach as soccer or basketball, but it does possess greater reach than sports such as American football and probably is on relatively equal worldwide footing with sports such as hockey and golf. Event-wise, with its encore in 2009, the WBC will probably attain legitimate consideration for international event status as defined by Shani and Sandler (1996), placing it on equal footing with events they used as examples, such as the UEFA Cup, Wimbledon, and the Tour de France. What must be duly noted, however, is the annual staging of such events, compared with the planned quadrennial staging of the WBC after 2009. Fortunately for MLB, examples provided by Shani and Sandler (1996) of events on the top-shelf global tier of sporting events are all quadrennials (e.g., the Olympic games, FIFA World Cup).

The WBC also gives MLB an opportunity to further distinguish itself globally among its major American sport property peers. Though its championship is labeled as the World Series, that label is somewhat of a misnomer with

the possible caveat that one MLB franchise is located in Canada; in fact, Shani and Sandler (1996) classify it as a national event, listed on the third of the five tiers on their Sports Events Pyramid (see Figure 1). Accordingly, this championship event is quite less than likely to garner high levels of worldwide attention. Similarly, although the National Basketball Association's (NBA) NBA Finals championship series boasts the crowning of a world champion from among U.S. (and one Canadian) team, and although the league and sport's global widths and depths are relatively strong, the lack of a true world champion likely impedes its capacity as a global branding promotional strategy. In the case of still another domestic MLB peer, the National Football League (NFL), which is widely regarded as the leading American sport property, stages the most highly rated annual, single-game championship event in the U.S. called the Super Bowl, which, by virtue of its status as an American demi-holiday, receives a moderate amount of worldwide acclaim despite its lack of width outside North America. Nevertheless, it, too, lacks the complete list of ingredients listed by Shani and Sandler (1996) to generate a high level of interest among a significant portion of the population (enormous resource requisite, extended staging period).

In addition to the finalized domestic and international media rights deals for the 2009 WBC tournament that were estimated to be worth \$40 million-\$50 million, MLB and MLBPA organized a series of aggressive promotional events for the 2009 WBC at its four North American WBC sites (Los Angeles, Miami, San Diego, Toronto) as the 2008 MLB season concluded (Fisher, 2008b; Fisher & Ourand, 2008; "World Baseball," 2008). Coupled with its previously discussed apparent disinterest in Olympic baseball investments, these factors clearly signal that MLB has begun to realize the potential of the WBC as

a promotional strategy for its global branding efforts.

In an article previewing the sponsorship potential of the 2006 Olympic Winter Games, Woodward (2005) posits that the perceived value of the Olympic Games is a multibillion dollar investment that is leveraged by governments, corporations, and broadcasters continues to rise. In summary, this premise underscores the importance of MLB's efforts to establish itself as a viable international brand and cultivate markets around the world. To effectively do so, establishing the presence of the WBC as global sport event becomes imperative to MLB's future success.

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A SYSTEMS-BASED THINKING & LEARNING JOURNAL

Taking the Ballgame Out to the World: An Analysis of the World Baseball Classic as a Global Branding Promotional Strategy for Major League Baseball

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Research problem

This paper analyzes the 2006 World Baseball Classic (WBC) as a promotional strategy by Major League Baseball to further its global branding pursuits. According to Paul Archey, MLB's senior vice president of international business operations, the purpose of the WBC was to "build a platform where the best players in the game could play on behalf of their countries and get baseball better global exposure."

Several theoretical frameworks involving global management and marketing practices are utilized to analyze the WBC, with certain analyses considering the interaction of multiple frameworks, including sport event scope (Shani & Sandler, 1996), a four-step global brand strategy (Gillespie, Jeannet, & Hennessey, 2007), consumer evaluations of global brands, global consumer segments (Holt, Quelch, & Taylor, 2004), cultural production (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006), and principles related to global media (Gershon, 2005).

This article would likely be useful to sport marketers, particularly those seeking to expand a property on an international/global scale, or by brand managers seeking to partner with a global sport property. Event managers with the same purposes may also find the article helpful.

Issues

Precise definitions for the term globalization vary considerably and include descriptive elements encompassing the integration of markets for goods, services, capital, technology, information, historical and political shifts, social and cultural processes, human mobility, and organizations. Regardless of their precise definitions, consensus exists among later expert writings on globalization, indicating that the phenomenon cannot be accurately characterized by singular definitions of the term and that these processes are each evolving concurrently, are frequently overlapping, and are often reinforcing one another, thereby creating a simultaneously problematic and promising environment.

Like most American sport properties, MLB is no stranger to far-reaching global business initiatives in recent decades. Modern sport crosses international boundaries with increasing regularity due to the influx of worldwide talent, global television audiences, and greater access to licensed merchandise. Accordingly, globalization has become a top priority of all major U.S. sports properties as they seek growth outside American borders both to showcase their sports to international audience and to increase consumption of their own particular product(s). Other primary causes for the increased emphasis on globalization by American sport properties are the maturation of American sports markets and the relatively unsaturated nature of overseas sports markets, as well as technological advances and availability, which increase international accessibility.

Event Scope

Precise use of the terms global and international becomes paramount when determining the exact context of an event. Shani and Sandler (1996) offer a five-tiered classification system called “The Sports Event Pyramid” (see Figure 1) based on two criteria: width, or the geographic reach of the event; and depth, or the level of interest in the event, which may be great or low. Accordingly, the top tier of events includes ones with worldwide width coupled with great depth, which are classified as global events, e.g., the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup. Second-tier events are classified as international events; these events may have: national width and great depth, e.g., the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Cup in soccer; or global width with low depth, e.g., the Wimbledon tennis tournament and the Tour de France bicycle race.

Brand Scope

Gillespie et al. (2007), contend that a global brand implements a marketing strategy that is standardized across all national markets yet adapts key elements of the marketing mix (e.g., product features, distribution, and promotion) to local tastes, while an international brand follows a general global strategy but does not maintain a strictly standardized marketing strategy or marketing mix across all national markets.

When considering Shani and Sandler’s (1996) Sports Event Pyramid and Gillespie et al.’s (2007) branding distinction together, MLB must contextualize the WBC as a global event with worldwide width and great depth, but because of the varying impact of the sport of baseball around the world, MLB must market itself as an international brand. Specific reasons why MLB must market itself with differentiated marketing strategies and marketing mixes are detailed in the following discussion about the WBC global branding strategy, consumer evaluations of global brands, and MLB’s consideration of cultural production.

Summary

Four Steps In Global Branding

Gillespie et al. (2007) advocate four steps in developing and administering a global brand: identifying consumer needs, communicating brand identity, tracking global brand identity, and determining the movement of branding decisions. These four steps can clearly be seen when examining MLB’s construct of the WBC.

In the initial step, a firm must identify recurring customer needs worldwide and determine how its brand can bring both functional and emotional benefits to these customers. Emotional benefits of the inaugural WBC were well documented by media accounts of the unbridled nationalism by fans attending WBC games. Such passion was also a critical measure of success for WBC sponsors, who in some cases had directly pinned the success of their marketing campaigns to the transference of the passion generated by the implosion of nationalism and the sport of baseball directly to their brands.

The second step proposed by Gillespie et al. (2007) is the establishment of a process to communicate the brand’s identity to consumers, channels, and the firm’s own employees. Concerning the WBC, MLB did this on both big-picture and small-picture levels. From a gestalt perspective, MLB officials and other experts clearly indicated that the purpose of the WBC was to build a bridge to audiences outside the United States, along with other exhibition initiatives, including an exhibition series in China and Opening Day games in Japan. Aside from these big-picture efforts to communicate brand identity, specific immediate steps were also taken to drive the MLB/WBC message, including collaboration with powerful media partners like ESPN.

The third step proposed by Gillespie et al. (2007) is the establishment of a method for tracking the success of the global identity of the brand and monitoring customers’ opinions. Fortunately for MLB, a multitude of both traditional and cutting-edge options are at its disposal, including traditional measures of television ratings and ticket sales, which were reported to be the primary focus of some MLB executives, and media traffic patterns created by new media.

The fourth and final step proposed by Gillespie et al. (2007) in developing and administering a global brand strategy is to determine the direction of the movement of branding decisions, which may be either of two directions: the top-down approach, in which a global management team determines the global brand strategy from which country-specific branding strategies are derived; or the bottom-up approach, in which country strategies emerge from shared experiences and best practices across common elements among subsidiaries. Though global

movement on the MLB brand is clearly a top-shelf priority of its upper-level management team, regarding this fourth step, MLB is apparently building unique, individualized, country-specific strategies that reflect a bottom-up approach in branding decisions. MLB international marketing and development personnel indicate that strategies and dynamics of selling the game must be customized not by continent and region but by country, a branding strategy at least 15 years old (King, 2006).

Consumer Evaluations of Global Brands

Based on a study of brand preferences and perceptions of consumers across the globe, Holt et al. (2004) offered a theoretical construct of three important dimensions of global brands (quality signal, global myth, and social responsibility) and categorized global consumer segments into four groups (global citizens, global dreamers, antiglobals, and global agnostics), both of which can clearly be illustrated by an examination of MLB's efforts with the WBC.

Regarding the first dimension of quality signal, Holt et al. (2004) concluded that international consumers are impressed by brands' quality, excitement, innovation, and global reach. MLB's launch of an international tournament dually qualifies as a new/breakthrough initiative and a direct effort to drive international perception of the sport of baseball as a global one.

The second dimension of global brands is a brand's capability to create a shared global identity that gives consumers a perceived cosmopolitan lifestyle, known as global myth, in which they share an imagined global identity with like-minded people, feel a sense of belonging to something bigger, and ascribe to desired qualities. A careful analysis of the 2006 WBC team/country profiles compiled by King (2006) reveals that MLB utilized global myth regarding the WBC to nations outside the U.S. with two distinct combinations of two variables: emphasis on competition and sources of sponsorships.

The third dimension associated with a global brand is its perceived level of social responsibility. Holt et al. (2004) indicate that consumers perceive global companies to wield considerable social influence and should directly address problems linked to their industries. In conjunction with the WBC, MLB did both. From the profits generated by the tournament, the WBC donated \$1.2 million to Habitat for Humanity International (HHI) to aid victims of the hurricanes that struck the Gulf Coast region of the U.S. in 2005 and support the building of 16 homes. In another instance involving the WBC, MLB wielded its influence to address the problem of Cuban participation in its tournament. The U.S. State Department initially barred the Cuban team's participation in the WBC, but MLB successfully negotiated a reversal of that policy in time for the Cuban team to participate.

Customer Segments

Holt et al.'s (2004) study also coined four major segments of consumers based upon how they relate to and evaluate global brands: global citizens, global dreamers, antiglobals, and global agnostics.

Global Citizens, which composed about 55% of Holt et al.'s (2004) respondents, are concerned about firms' behavior regarding social issues and rely on companies' global successes as a signal of quality and innovation. Relatively few of these consumers are found in the U.S. and United Kingdom, while relatively high numbers are found in Brazil, China, and Indonesia. MLB has taken a primary first step in positioning itself as a globally successful brand simply by staging the WBC as a platform for the best players to compete on behalf of their countries.

Global Dreamers, which constituted 23% of Holt et al.'s (2004) respondents, are consumers who see global brands as a source of quality products, readily accept the myths authored by brands, are less discerning about and more ardent in their admiration of transnational companies, and are not nearly as concerned with corporate response to social issues. With the WBC, MLB has authored a highly attractive connectivity device for this group of consumers as it promotes the tournament as a vibrant, forceful, irresistible combination of baseball and national flags.

Antiglobals, which number about 13% of respondents in Holt et al.'s (2004) study, try to avoid transnational companies' products because they are skeptical that such companies can deliver higher quality goods to them. Their numbers are relatively high in the United Kingdom and China, and relatively low in Egypt and South Africa (Holt et al. 2004). Concerning MLB and the sport of baseball, this type of consumer may not necessarily be focused upon the quality level of goods; instead, their antiglobal mindsets may be more directed at the quality of baseball as a sport and its (lack of) relevance and appeal to them. Additionally, they may be less inclined to sample the game,

either as a participant or spectator. Such an approach may be more prevalent in countries with a weak baseball presence. Therefore, MLB must carefully design its promotional efforts to emphasize elements other than ones that are highly (even inherently) culturally relevant in other nations.

Global Agnostics, which comprised of 8% of Holt et al.'s (2004) respondents, are consumers who do not regard brands' global nature as meriting special consideration and do not make purchases based on brands' global attributes. These consumers are found in relatively greater numbers in the U.S. and South Africa and lesser in China, Japan, Indonesia, and Turkey (Holt et al. 2004).

MLB's Consideration of Cultural Production

Venkatesh and Meamber (2006) proposed that marketing is the context and framework for cultural production as related to the marketing of aesthetics, specifically within the arts. When examined together with Holt et al.'s (2004) global brand consumer segments, their theory clearly has strong implication for MLB in its efforts to market itself globally.

From 31 sources in literature, Venkatesh and Meamber (2006) assimilated four distinct approaches to marketing and consumption of cultural production: the managerial orientation, in which marketing principles are applied to cultural product consumption; consumption orientation, which includes experiential, symbolic, and hedonic components; everyday life orientation, in which arts/aesthetic consumption occurs in everyday life situations; and cultural product orientation, in which cultural products provide insights into consumer culture. The progression of these perspectives is oriented in the premise that an aesthetic experience (i.e., the sport of baseball in the context of this paper) is based on sensory elements but is also highly symbolic, thus leading to a different consumer response when compared to more mundane objects (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006).

When combined with Holt et al.'s (2004) global consumer segmentation, knowledge of Venkatesh and Meamber's (2006) four perspectives on marketing and cultural production could allow MLB to better direct its WBC efforts in more precise, effective, efficient ways. Discounting the unlikely-to-be-converted global agnostics, MLB can effectively form appeals to the remaining three global consumer segments.

Principles Related to Global Media

In describing transnational media corporations, Gershon (2005) states that their principal commodity is information and entertainment. Gershon (2005) further states that these corporations have become salient features of the modern global economic landscape and actively promote the use of media and telecommunications software and hardware technology (e.g., broadcast and cable television, Internet, music and film, direct broadcast satellite, video games, recorded programming) on a worldwide basis. Increasingly, however, more brands have become at least part-time media companies by virtue of their marketing strategies, following the lead of sport properties, which are often given credit for pioneering this phenomenon of not only producing content, but creating communities and producing online tools.

With Major League Baseball Advanced Media (MLBAM), the company created to operate its digital assets, MLB is well positioned strategically to control and distribute its product on a global basis. Created in 2000 with a \$2.7 million investment from each of MLB's 30 clubs, MLBAM has helped define successful digital media propagation not only for MLB but other major sport properties with whom it contracts. MLBAM produced revenues of at least \$380 million in 2007, up more than 60% from \$236 in 2005, and has streamed over 12,000 live events since its inception in 2000, more than any other Web site in the world.

Discussions/Implications

Despite the current strengths of MLB and the success of the 2006 World Baseball Classic, much remains at stake for Major League Baseball as it perpetuates its efforts to build its brand globally. Though MLB has achieved several noteworthy breakthroughs, several international obstacles of considerable scope remain to be conquered.

Noteworthy Breakthroughs

MLB has finalized plans for its second staging of the WBC, scheduled for March 2009 in Tokyo, Japan; San Juan, Puerto Rico; Toronto, Canada; Mexico City, Mexico (sites for second-round, semifinals, and championship games are to be determined as of this writing) and featuring the same 16-team field as the inaugural 2006 WBC. Perhaps the most notable future alteration of the tournament includes its proposed field expansion to 24 teams for 2013

that would include qualifying rounds as prefaces to primary competition and thereby potentially grow and enhance worldwide interest in the game.

Another success story spawned at least indirectly by the WBC yet unconnected to MLB is the Israel Baseball League (IBL), a six-team professional baseball league that began play June 24, 2007, and featured 120 players from nine countries including the U.S., Canada, Australia, Japan, Israel, and the Dominican Republic. The six teams completed a 45-game season and fielded 20 of its 120 players from Israel and, before beginning its 2008 season, announced that eight of its 2007 players had either been signed by or invited to tryouts with professional teams around the world.

Remaining International Obstacles

Many of the obstacles for the IBL within Israel will be common and/or similar to ones for MLB as it continues its push within certain countries and regions of the world; China is one such example. Conditions in China appear to be somewhat iconic for most countries on MLB's radar, not to mention the importance of exposing the nation of 1.3 billion people to baseball.

Particular focus has been cast upon bolstering the Chinese national baseball team. In 2003, MLB signed a development contract with the Chinese Baseball Association (CBA) and offers several youth development programs in major Chinese cities. However, with baseball dropped from the 2012 Olympic Games and no guaranteed of its restoration to the sports rosters of future Games, almost no Chinese government support for its development past the 2008 Olympics is guaranteed, necessitating stronger supporting relationships with baseball entities such as MLB. Additionally, MLB must continue to find ways to develop the game beyond the national team level. In addition to revitalizing the culture of baseball in China, despite its efforts to boost the WBC, MLB must seek an effective partnership with the International Baseball Federation (IBAF), the global governing body of baseball whose universal presence exceeds that of MLB, despite a historically icy relationship between them.

A Springboard to the Future

This discussion of the WBC must conclude with the initial theoretical framework with which it began. MLB's promotional efforts for the WBC must become rooted in a thorough understanding of Shani and Sandler's (1996) Sports Event Pyramid and the characteristics of events that occupy each tier so that the WBC can ascend over time to a level appropriate for maximizing the tournament's potential. Understanding how to extend the sport's width in developing markets (e.g., China and European nations) will become paramount, while extending its depth will be the overriding factor in others (Pan American nations, Japan, Korea, and even in the U.S.).

The WBC also gives MLB an opportunity to further distinguish itself globally among its major American sport property peers. Though its championship is labeled as the World Series, that label is somewhat of a misnomer with the possible caveat that one MLB franchise is located in Canada; in fact, Shani and Sandler (1996) classify it as a national event, listed on the third of the five tiers on their Sports Events Pyramid. Accordingly, this championship event is quite less than likely to garner high levels of worldwide attention.

In addition to the finalized domestic and international media rights deals for the 2009 WBC tournament that were estimated to be worth \$40 million-\$50 million, MLB and MLBPA organized a series of aggressive promotional events for the 2009 WBC at its four North American WBC sites as the 2008 MLB season concluded. Coupled with its previously discussed apparent disinterest in Olympic baseball investments, these factors clearly signal that MLB has begun to realize the potential of the WBC as a promotional strategy for its global branding efforts.

In summary, this article underscores the importance of MLB's efforts to establish itself as a viable international brand and cultivate markets around the world. To effectively do so, establishing the presence of the WBC as global sport event becomes imperative to MLB's future success.