

## Cross-Cultural Lessons & Implications for Marketing Soccer in the USA

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to build upon prior work about consumer motivations of sports fans. Using developed and validated scales, this paper explores different factors to gain a better understanding of soccer consumption in multiple countries. The most popular sport in Europe, inarguably, is soccer. However, in the United States, soccer is considered to be a niche sport. This study uses consumer motivation theory and sport interest inventory perspective to provide the explanation for the tepid interest in professional soccer in the USA. Furthermore, we explore these factors through a cross-national sample to gain insights. The current study identifies 10 of the 18 variables from the Sport Interest Inventory Scale (SII) that address our research questions. These are measurable variables that compare a cross-cultural sample, and explain how consumers embrace the sport of soccer. Data for this descriptive study was collected in the United States (n=237) and in Europe (n=270). Our findings indicate that there are significant differences in how consumers of different cultures consume soccer. The findings will be of interest to international marketers engaged in sport marketing.

**KeyTerms:** Sport Consumer Motives, Sport Marketing, Soccer, Sport Interest Inventory, Strategic Implications

### Introduction:

Soccer is considered the most popular sport throughout the world. In the United States, soccer is seen as one of the least popular professional level sports. The U.S. market has the best sports coverage and media platforms in the entire world. So why does the world's most popular sport lack popularity in the grandest media environment? The response to this question may provide insight for sports marketers in terms of cultural perceptions, consumer motivations, and fan commitment.

The purpose of this study is to build on prior work about consumer motivations of sports fans, and to explore factors to gain a better understanding of soccer consumption in multiple countries, using developed scales.

In this study, we collected data internationally from thirty countries (thirteen of which are located in Europe), as well as the United States. This was done in order to best compare and address our research questions regarding perceptions of soccer internationally, which may provide insight on the relatively lower popularity of soccer in the United States. Our research instrument included a series of questions for soccer fans and sports fans in general. We wanted to know consumer attitudes towards attending live sporting events, and playing and watching sports (including soccer). The survey also includes questions about sport merchandising. The data that we have collected is, in fact, significant and provides insight to our research questions.

In this study we will consider factors using one scale pertaining to sport consumption (soccer). The Sport Interest Inventory (SII) (Funk et al., 2001) provides this foundation for data collection. Applying this scale allows us to target soccer fans more effectively. This paper is organized in the following manner: we begin by examining historical accounts of soccer and its popularity, in subsequent order, we will examine past research, our methodologies, findings, and our concluding remarks.

## **Soccer: A Historical Perspective**

### ***Europe***

It is believed that the first type of soccer started in China and spread to Europe. Soccer has always been a part of European history. In medieval England, the rules for this type of soccer were nonspecific; therefore, these soccer games were rough and many young men were injured while playing it. These casualties were invariably those who might have been needed for the army- young, fit men. It is said that soccer was often banned throughout English history, because kings wanted their men to be honing fighting skills, instead of playing soccer and risking injury. Today, the epicenter of soccer is in England, and over time, soccer has indeed spread throughout Europe; kings were never able to truly prevent their peoples from playing soccer.

In Spain, British immigrants working in mining and on railroads popularized soccer. The history of soccer in Italy followed roughly the same timeline as Spain's; their first clubs emerged in the late 1800s. In Italy, the upper class British, Swiss, and Italians embraced the sport. Today, Italian upper class leaders purely administrate the game. France and Germany exhibited similar timelines as Italy and Spain; however, the popularity of soccer was rivaled by other sports, such as cycling and gymnastics. In France, Scots and English living in Paris introduced soccer, while French students founded their own squad around the same time.

Modern day soccer was also developed in England throughout the 1860's. In 1863, the Football Association (FA) was formed, and created a standard set of rules. Over time, multiple countries created their own FA chapter. In 1886, the International Football Association Board (IFAB) created an international standard set of rules. In 1904, the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) joined forces with the IFAB, and now both organizations govern modern day soccer.

### ***Current Trends***

Manchester United, an English soccer team, is known around the globe for more than just their success on the field. From a marketing perspective, Manchester United has been

recognized for their business model. For years, the “Mighty Reds” have branded themselves internationally. “Man U” pioneered organization of international tours to play friendly matches during the off-season. This was groundbreaking, particularly in markets including Asia and South Africa. This resulted in massive growth of their fan base, expanding outside England, and “broadening the team's appeal for potential sponsors”, Sue Bridgewater, professor of sports management and marketing at the University of Liverpool Management School, points out. (Gianatasio, 2015)

As mentioned earlier, European teams have been coming to the US for close to a century, in order to grow their brand in the US market. "The earlier you get introduced to a spectator sport, the more you'll engage, and the more value you'll create over time," says Howard Handler, the CMO of Major League Soccer (MLS) and a Clio Sports juror “... But as the Red Devils have devised innovative ways to build engagement beyond the walls of Old Trafford Stadium, they have strengthened their ties with existing fans and attracted new ones.” (Gianatasio, 2015). Man U uses this business model to penetrate foreign markets, generating strong brand equity for sponsorship. By having strong brand equity, Manchester United provides increased value for their partners and sponsors, which extends the credibility and revenues of all parties involved.

### ***United States***

Soccer has been a niche sport in the United States since its birth. History suggests that as early as the 1620s, Pilgrims played a form of soccer with the Native Americans. By 1921, the United States had formed its first professional soccer league. Over time, the professional soccer leagues throughout United States history have folded and reformed into the modern day Major League Soccer (MLS), formed in 1996. Surprisingly, the first soccer tour of international premiere teams coming to the US was in the year 1930. These friendly matches have been played in the United States throughout their soccer history, as well. In 1975, the so-called “world’s greatest soccer player of all time”, Edson Arantes do Nascimento, also known as Pelé, came out of retirement to play in the US for the NY Cosmos. Pelé was signed to help grow the sport in the USA.

Currently, soccer in the United States is using similar tactics as they did with Pelé to grow interest in the sport. Every summer during the off-season, the top, big-named clubs from around the world come to the United States to compete in friendly tournaments. The objective of these international tours is to build the popularity of soccer in America, and also to expand the brand of international clubs. Teams in the MLS also sign high-profile players (such as David Beckham) to play in the MLS, intending to extend their brand internationally, in order to boost revenue and increase popularity of the sport in the country.

### ***Overview***

Despite the long history of soccer in the USA given that countless children play recreational soccer, the long-term financial performance of the sport has been weak. Major League Soccer (MLS) does not trend the following of NBA and NFL.

Europe is known to have some of the world’s top leagues. Also every nation in Europe has at least one major soccer league, while others have a tier structure that divides different levels of league play: England (English Premier League), Spain (La Liga), Italy (Serie A), Germany (German Bundesliga), France (Ligue 1), Portugal (Liga Sagres), Netherlands (Eredivisie), Turkey (Turkish Premiere Division), Greece (Greek Superleague), etc. These soccer leagues have lower divisions beneath their top leagues, similar to the MLB’s farm-

system. In most European leagues, teams are promoted and relegated from the 'A' division and 'B' division leagues, depending on the standings. For example, at the end of a season, the three teams that have finished lowest in the standings are demoted to the lower league, while the top three teams of the lower league are promoted to the upper division for the next season. On average, there are 18-20 teams competing in these European professional leagues.

Consider the attendance in some of these leagues (<http://www.soccerstats.com>, 2015). In the German league (Bundesliga), the average fan attendance in 2013 was 42,803. For the English Premier League, the average attendance in 2013 was 36,300, and the Spanish league (La Liga) averaged 27,037 fans in 2013. By comparison, the MLS averaged 18,594 in 2013. On a percentage base, the MLS averaged 32% - 57% less fans than these European leagues (Kennedy, 2014).

In the United States, MLS consists of 19 clubs, with the expectation that this number will grow to 22 clubs by 2017. Below the MLS, there are semi-pro and amateur leagues: Player Development League (PDL), and the National Premiere Soccer League (NPSL). Unlike European leagues, the MLS, NPSL, and PDL do not have a relegation system, nor are associated with each other.

Top teams in the European leagues play in an intercontinental league called the Champions League. Fans travel all across Europe and pay high prices to support their teams. In the European (UEFA) Champions league, the average attendance was 44,873 fans in 2013. North America also has an international champion's league (CONCACAF Champions League). The CONCACAF consists of 41 nations/territories in the North Western Hemisphere. Each nation/territory has their own professional soccer league, where their teams can earn the opportunity to compete in CONCACAF tournaments. The average attendance of the CONCACAF league was 9,974 in 2013. A difference of 34,899 spectators compared to the European champions league.

European soccer fans are quite different compared to American soccer fans. It has not been uncommon for soccer-fanatic associated fights, murders, and riots to occur annually in Europe. Soccer "Hooliganism" dates back to the nineteenth century, with rivalries of teams from the same city or local area. Fans would attack each other, players, and referees. Today, "Hooliganism" has been greatly reduced; however, there are still some instances throughout the world. On February 8, 2015, twenty people were killed during a riot at a soccer match in Egypt. This event occurred just three years after a similar incidence, leaving 74 dead.

MLS does not face this challenge. Though soccer has been starting to grow in the United States over the past decade, it has not quite reached the level of passion that accommodates violence. There have been no reported riots or deaths that are affiliated with the MLS. The MLS fans have begun calling themselves "ultras"; the fan whose commitment lies in between a soccer mom and a hooligan. "Ultras, also known as supporter groups, are bands of diehard soccer fans who root for a particular team. They've existed in the U.S. since Major League Soccer had its first kickoff in 1996, taking inspiration from their European counterparts. They're the fans you'll find in the same section in every game chanting, singing, cheering and jeering along to the action on the field while drumming, tossing streamers and, on occasion, setting off a flare or two." (Fernandez, 2012).

The American Outlaws, established in 2007, is a group of dedicated supporters of the United States National Soccer teams. The American Outlaws was formed to rid of the lack of consistency from game to game, regarding support. "In a sea of American football, baseball, and NASCAR fans we felt we were "outlaws" of the sports world; supporting a sport that most

people didn't know much about or cared little about..." (The American Outlaws, 2015).

### Past Studies

The literature pertaining to soccer in the United States is, in all aspects, still evolving. In 2006, Sandra Collins published *National Sports and Other Myths: The Failure of US Soccer* in 'Soccer & Society' (by Routledge). Collins analyzes several cultural and economic factors, in order to argue that soccer in the United States remains problematic. Collins claims that certain key economic factors are a necessity for the success of soccer. These economic factors consist of a large fan base, superstar system, quality teams and viewership. "Without a large fan base, the MLS cannot secure the broadcasting fees necessary to escape its conservative economic model." Consequently, to build a large fan base, the MLS will need to develop quality teams. Francusco Marcos quips, "America loves a winner and will support nothing else," stressing the importance of quality. Moreover, due to causality, a superstar system will not only attract fans, it will also bring quality to teams (Collins, S. 2006).

Markovits and Steven L. Hellerman in their book, *Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism*, define sports culture as what people talk about and follow, as opposed to what they do. Specifically, Markovits and Hellerman state that they are interested in what we call "'hegemonic sports culture' which means the sports culture that dominates a country's emotional attachment rather than its callisthenic activities." Markovits and Hellerman contend that the previous failures of soccer in the United States have historical and political cultural factors that continue to maneuver in contemporary America. In the United States, there are three major spectator sports dominated by the working middle class. They consist of Baseball, Football and Basketball; all three are influenced by exceptionalism.

For Markovits and Hellerman, American sports have a very different relationship with nationalism than that of soccer in most countries around world. It is this sense of a 'self-contained nationalism acting apart from the rest of the international arena' that characterizes America's top three sports of baseball, basketball and football. The rivalries, Markovits and Hellerman argue, in America's top three sports are 'not attached to national entities as in the world of soccer, but almost exclusively to subnational ones'. [42] The national soccer teams repeatedly engage in international competitions and underscore soccer's 'deeply anchored nationalism'. American exceptionalism has fomented not only much of America's international political and economic identity, but also its sporting culture [Collins, S. 358].

Essentially, the top three sports are popular due to their subnational exceptionalism. Fanatics have grown around these sports due to the competitive representation of their cities, making them popular. Whereas the sport of soccer has attracted fans through international spectacles, continually utilizing political and nationalistic factors.

The development of soccer has endured and expanded over the years. The Sports Goods Manufacturers Association (SGMA) reported in 2011 that 13,667,000 people played (ages 6+, US population) soccer. Though this was a 1.6% decrease from 2010, however, there were still more than 100,000 people playing soccer rather than "America's favorite pastime", baseball. Since 2009, the participation of baseball players (ages 6+, US population) has decreased by a total of 6% and decreased by 4.5% from year 2010 to 2011. There has also been a declining trend of basketball participation with a steady reduction of 1.5% per year. The current number of participants playing basketball is nearly double that of soccer. As of

2011, the sport of soccer within the United States (participants ages 6+) is ranked the second most popular sport played in the United States. (SMGA, 2011)

The viewership of soccer has greatly increased with the past performance of the FIFA World Cup. According to Emily Thomas of the Huffington post, over 26.5 million Americans watched the 2014 FIFA World Cup final match, a 6.8% increase from the 2010 World Cup Final. In addition, there were 24.7 million American viewers that tuned in to watch the US vs. Portugal 2-2 draw, 6.8% less viewers than the final match. The 2014 World Cup Final is also said to be the most watched soccer game in US history. According to Dion Dassanayake of Express, in the UK, "FIFA said 909.6 million tuned in to watch one minute of that game," making this game the most watched spectacle of all time. (Dassanayake, 2015)

However, soccer continues to evolve in the United States. The 2014 FIFA World Cup exhibited the potential of soccer in the United States. Christine Birkner, Senior Staff Writer of the American Marketing Association's *Marketing News Magazine* says soccer "might be a niche sport in the U.S, but it's a powerful niche, marketing experts say, with the potential to link brands to desirable customer segments domestically and abroad." Birkner has identified ample opportunities with U.S. soccer. Both Millennials and the Hispanic are two large target demographics that have high interest in U.S. soccer, as well as being high earners. Birkner found that "American soccer fans are 4.6 times more likely to have income above \$250,000." These fans are highly devoted to their teams. "According to Repucom, a global sports marketing research and consulting firm, Avid Major League Soccer fans have 85% brand loyalty and 87% purchase consideration for sponsored products." Hypothetically, Birkner's findings provide useful insight in identifying advantageous characteristics of the U.S. market (Birkner, C. 2014).

Acceptance of sports into modern culture has been an issue of interest to researchers for several years. For instance, Sutton et. al (1997) looked at this issue through fan identification construct; they looked at correlates of social fans, focused fans, and vested fans, in terms of team characteristics. It was concluded that an increase in player accessibility to the fans facilitated quicker adoption and interest among the general public, because it retained fans and added new fans. Gladden and Mine (1999) showed that winning performances led to higher brand equity in professional sports. They also concluded that enhanced brand equity contributed to the bottom-line through merchandising opportunities. The Psychological Commitment to Team (PCT) scale posited by Mahony, Madrigal, and Howard provided a valid segmentation schema that led to pragmatic solutions for professional sports teams. The SII scale (originally developed by Sloan 1987, modified by Milne & McDonald in 1999, and further altered by Funk in 2001) led to Funk's contributions. The seminal work of Funk, Mahony, and Ridinger (2002) that offered the Sport Interest Inventory (SII) scale has since become foundational to much of the cultural adoption work in the sport marketing arena.

Funk, Ridinger, and Moorman (2003) used the SII in the WNBA adoption context and concluded that the contextual factors developed for women's professional sport were rated favorably by all respondents: players serving as role models (ROL: mean on a 7-point scale = 6.16), supporting competitive opportunities for women (SWO: mean = 6.00), and wholesome environment (WHO: mean = 5.86). Although all three factors had relatively high mean scores,

only two, ROL and SWO, contributed to the regression equation. Entertainment value and wholesome environment were not among the 10 most influential factors explaining the level of consumer support. SII factors have been previously confirmed and used to examine fans and spectators of men and women's sports; therefore, we use this scale in the international sports marketing context.

Another study (Mahony, Nakazawa, Funk, James and Gladden 2002) that guided our efforts used the same scale in the Japanese Premier League (J. League). The primary purpose of this study was to identify and examine the influence of specific motives on the behavior of J. League spectators. The relationship between team attachment and vicarious achievement ( $r = 0.90$ ) was especially intriguing in terms of our study of soccer in the USA. Based on prior work, we examine these research questions: How is soccer consumed in the USA versus in other cultures? What are the salient differences in terms of watching, participating, and supporting soccer? Further, what are the implications of such distinctions for merchandising sales?

### ***Methodology***

To empirically examine our research questions, our data collection instrument consisted of 64 items relating to psychographics, demographics, and the various SII constructs (Funk et al., 2001) discussed above. All items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale that ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Using the conceptual framework of the SII, we surveyed participants in two continents to examine differences across perceptual factors in sports consumption (soccer) between the United States and Europe. The SII scale used measured 10 constructs: interest in sport, interest in players, bonding with friends, drama, bonding with family, entertainment value, sport knowledge, vicarious achievement, interest in team, and role models.

The data for the current study was collected using an online survey in the United States. In Europe, thirteen countries were represented, with a majority of the respondents from Italy. European respondents completed surveys using paper and pencil. For our respondents in Italy, we translated our original survey into Italian to best produce comparable results and the rest of the countries responded to the English version of the survey. We achieved a sample size of 295 (USA: 88 and Europe: 207). The profile of the samples is provided in Table 1. The majority of the respondents were students (80.7%) and non-student respondents made up about 20% of the sample. Also, most respondents indicated that they live in the suburbs (47.1 %). It was noticed that respondents from the US sample, on average, have a higher household income than the non-US sample.

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Table 1:  
Scale Reliability

Constructs	Summary of Factor Series for Previous Study on WNBA	Soccer Fans (Chronbach's Alpha)	Sport Fans (Chronbach's Alpha)	Mean	Standard Deviation
Role model (ROL)	.93	.26	-.09	.37	.517
Team interest (TEM)	.88	.81	.63.63	.77	.129
Entertainment value (ENT)	.92	.14	.14	.401	.449
Excitement (EXC)	.90	Did Not Test: Single Item	Did Not Test: Single Item		
Drama (DRA)	.79	.80	-.14 (not reliable)	.581	.581
Wholesome environment (WHO)	.92	Did Not Test: Single Item	Did Not Test: Single Item		
Aesthetics (AES)	.87	Did Not Test: Single Item	Did Not Test: Single Item		
Sports Knowledge (KNW)	.85	-.14	.33	.347	.495
Customer service (MGT)	.89	Did Not Test: Single Item	Did Not Test: Single Item		
Bonding with family (FAM)	.92	.74	.74	.80	.104
Vicarious achievement (VIC)	.92	.88	.88	.89	.023
Interest in sport (BAS)	.87	.46	.64	.66	.206
Bonding with friends (BON)	.81	.81	.81	.81	.000001
Socialization (SOC)	.85	Did Not Test: Single Item	Did Not Test: Single Item		
Community support (COM)	.84	Did Not Test: Single Item	Did Not Test: Single Item		
Escape (ESC)	.92	Did Not Test: Single Item	Did Not Test: Single Item		
Interest in player (PLA)	.75	.77	.70	.74	.036

**Sample Characteristics**

The sample was considerably even between nationalities, US (46.7%) Non-US respondents (52.1%) and missing values represent (1.2%). Overall, the sample was predominantly male (62.1%). The majority of respondents have not received a Bachelor’s Degree or higher (73%). However, in our Non-US sample, the majority of respondents have only received a high school education (62.1%). Approximately 71.8% of respondents were current students and 83.2% of respondents are between the ages of 18-25. Interestingly enough, 66.2% of US respondents claim a household income of \$50,001 annually or more per year, whereas 41.6% of international respondents reported a household income of \$25,000 or less.

**Table 2: Sample Profile (n=507)**

Characteristics	USA (n=237)	Non-USA (n=264)	Missing (n=6)	Total (n=507)
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	143(60.3%)	172 (65.2%)		315(62.1%)
Female	94 (39.7%)	92 (34.8%)		186 (36.7%)
Missing*			6 (100%)	6 (1.2%)
<b>Level of education</b>				
Grade school	0 (0.0%)	6 (2.3%)		6 (1.2%)
High School/GED	18 (7.6%)	164 (62.1%)		182 (35.9%)
Some College or Trade school	118 (49.9%)	35 (13.3%)		153 (30.2%)
Associates Degree	17 (7.1%)	12 (4.5%)		29 (5.7%)
Bachelor’s Degree	68 (28.7%)	33 (12.5%)		101 (19.9%)
Graduate or Professional Degree	16 (6.7%)	14 (5.3%)		30 (5.9%)
Missing*			6 (100%)	6 (1.2%)
<b>Employment status</b>				
Student	161 (67.9%)	203 (76.9%)		364 (71.8%)
Employed Full-time	36 (15.2%)	26 (9.8%)		62 (12.2%)
Employed Part-time	36 (15.2%)	26 (9.8%)		62 (12.2%)
Unemployed	3 (1.3%)	8 (3.1%)		11 (2.2%)
Retired	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.4%)		2 (0.4%)
Missing*			6 (100%)	6 (1.2%)
<b>Geographical Designation</b>				
Suburban	176 (74.3%)	102 (38.7%)		278 (54.8%)
Urban	28 (11.8%)	103 (39.0%)		131 (25.9%)
Rural	33 (13.9%)	59 (22.3%)		92 (18.1%)
Missing*			6 (100%)	6 (1.2%)
<b>Age</b>				

18-25	204 (86.1%)	218 (82.6%)		422 (83.2%)
26-40	14 (5.9%)	31 (11.7%)		45 (8.9%)
41-60	17 (7.2%)	14 (5.3%)		31 (6.1%)
61+	2 (0.8%)	1 (0.4%)		3 (0.6%)
Missing*			6 (100%)	6 (1.2%)
<b>Household income</b>				
\$25,000 or less	10 (4.2%)	110 (41.6%)		120 (23.7%)
Between \$25,001-\$50,000	30 (12.7%)	23 (8.7%)		53 (10.5%)
Between \$50,001-\$100,000	70 (29.5%)	18 (6.8%)		88 (17.3%)
\$100,001 or more	87 (36.7%)	19 (7.3%)		106 (20.9%)
I would rather not disclose	40 (16.9%)	94 (35.6%)		134 (26.4%)
Missing*			6 (100%)	6 (1.2%)

### Findings and Conclusions

We tested the data for differences using ANOVA (Analysis of Variance), with a special focus on country-specific differences between U.S. and Non-U.S. respondents in our sample. The results related to frequency of *watching* sports, and the difference was significant. The mean value for U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 5.19$ ;  $\sigma = 1.772$ ) and Non-U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 4.02$ ;  $\sigma = 2.006$ ). The significance is at the 0.01 level ( $F=48.292$ ;  $p = 0.0001$ ). On the question about frequency of *playing* sports, again a significant difference was found. The mean value for U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 4.77$ ;  $\sigma = 1.794$ ) and Non-U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 4.26$ ;  $\sigma = 1.618$ ) was significant at the 0.01 level ( $F=11.288$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ). On the question of how often one *attended a game*, results were significant. The mean value for U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 3.22$ ;  $\sigma = 1.370$ ) and Non-U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 2.40$ ;  $\sigma = 1.354$ ) which was significant at the 0.01 level ( $F=45.772$ ;  $p = 0.0001$ ).

To further understand these frequencies, we asked our respondents if their interest in sports influences them to *attend games*, *watch games*, and *play sports*. To be consistent, we ran these variables pending nationality, U.S. vs. Non-U.S. To accurately gauge these cultural differences, we composited results we've obtained from both soccer fans and non-soccer fans (sports fans). Using ANOVA, results express that both U.S. and Non-U.S. respondents' interests in sports influence them to *attend* sporting events. The mean value for U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 4.73$ ;  $\sigma = 1.816$ ) and Non-U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 4.456$ ;  $\sigma = 1.9155$ ); However, this is not significant at the 0.01 level ( $F=2.718$ ;  $p = 0.100$ ). We then tested to see if the respondent's interest in sports influences them to *watch* games. Our findings signal that U.S. fans are significantly more influenced to *watch* games, due to their interest in sports compared to Non-U.S. respondents. The mean value for U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 5.334$ ;  $\sigma = 1.638$ ) and Non-U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 4.085$ ;  $\sigma = 2.131$ ), which was significant at the 0.01 level ( $F=53.919$ ;  $p = 0.0001$ ). Lastly, we tested if respondent's interests in sports influenced them to *play* sports. Results suggest that U.S. respondents are more influenced to *play* sports by their interest in the sport when compared to Non-U.S. respondents. The mean value for U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 5.169$ ;  $\sigma = 1.829$ ) and Non-U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 4.656$ ;  $\sigma = 1.931$ ), which was significant at the 0.01 level ( $F=9.367$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ).

We then proceeded to examine the purchase of sports merchandise, such as buying and wearing team apparel in order to *identify* with a team of choice. We ran two tests; the

first set of data we ran consisted of respondents' nationalities. Results indicated that the difference was not significant. The mean value for U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 3.48$ ;  $\sigma = 1.774$ ) and Non-U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 3.72$ ;  $\sigma = 2.260$ ), which was not significant at the any level ( $F=0.835$ ;  $p = 0.362$ ). When asked if team merchandise was bought to *show support* for the team, differences were significant. The mean value for U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 4.94$ ;  $\sigma = 1.708$ ) and Non-U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 3.50$ ;  $\sigma = 2.115$ ), which was significant at the 0.01 level ( $F=32.104$ ;  $p = 0.0001$ ). For our second data set, we tested these same factors with two different datasets; One, of respondents claiming to be soccer fans, the other dataset consisting of respondents that claim they are not soccer fans (sports fans). We composited the means for responses pertaining to respondents purchasing sports merchandise to *identify* with a team of choice. Results support that soccer fans are more apt to purchase sports merchandise to *identify* they team of preference over sports fans. However, the difference does not appear to be significant. The mean value for soccer fans ( $\bar{x} = 3.854$ ;  $\sigma = 2.045$ ) and sports fans ( $\bar{x} = 3.597$ ;  $\sigma = 2.022$ ), which was not significant at the 0.01 level ( $F=1.994$ ;  $p = 0.159$ ). Findings detect that soccer fans are more likely to purchase sport merchandise to *support* their team of preference than non-soccer fans. The mean value for soccer fans ( $\bar{x} = 4.938$ ;  $\sigma = 1.856$ ) and sports fans ( $\bar{x} = 4.243$ ;  $\sigma = 2.044$ ), which was significant at the 0.01 level ( $F=15.832$ ;  $p = 0.0001$ ).

We wanted to test how respondents view individual soccer players and sports players. To better analyze, we composited means from player composite questions that we asked (due to display logic). The first composite mean that we analyzed pertained to professional soccer players and athletes in general being *inspirational* to today's youth and adults. Using ANOVA, results indicated that U.S. respondents perceive professional athletes to be more inspirational than Non-U.S. respondents. The mean value for U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 5.033$ ;  $\sigma = 1.504$ ) and Non-U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 4.233$ ;  $\sigma = 1.829$ ), which was significant at the 0.01 level ( $F=25.331$ ;  $p = 0.0001$ ). We then used the same process to test if respondents from both countries are *overall more of a fan of individual players, rather than the whole team*. The mean value for U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 3.873$ ;  $\sigma = 1.821$ ) and Non-U.S. ( $\bar{x} = 3.644$ ;  $\sigma = 2.022$ ), which was not significant ( $F=1.776$ ;  $p = 0.183$ ).

To further test perceptions of individual athletes, we used the same player composite questions, and then performed ANOVA, depending on whether they were a soccer fan or a sports fan. Results indicated that soccer fans do not perceive professional soccer players to be as *inspirational* in comparison to how sports fans perceive professional athletes. The mean value for soccer fans ( $\bar{x} = 4.29$   $\sigma = 1.871$ ) and sports fans ( $\bar{x} = 5.49$ ;  $\sigma = 1.376$ ), which was significant at the 0.01 level ( $F=19.009$ ;  $p = 0.0001$ ). We continued to ask both soccer and sport fans if *overall they are more of a fan of individual players, rather than the whole team*. Results indicated that soccer fans consider themselves fans of the whole team rather than the individual player. On the contrary, sport fans are more likely to be a larger fan of an individual player, rather than the whole team. The mean value for soccer fans ( $\bar{x} = 3.62$   $\sigma = 1.956$ ) and sports fans ( $\bar{x} = 3.907$ ;  $\sigma = 1.894$ ), which was not significant ( $F=2.654$ ;  $p = 0.104$ ).

Our findings indicate that there is, in fact, a significant difference in how frequently respondents attend sporting events, watch sports through media platforms, and play sports across the two samples. This helps us understand the cross-cultural behaviors relating to not only soccer, but also other sports in general. Also, we have found that consumers of sports worldwide purchase "stylish merchandise." We have also found that American consumers feel less of a connection with their favorite teams as compared to consumers in other

countries. We continue to collect data and our larger research project will relate to strategies that could build and grow the brand and popularity of soccer in the United States.

To increase the popularity of soccer within the United States, a strategic, long-term marketing plan should be put in place. Americans *watch* and *attend* sports rather frequently; therefore, soccer should be positioned to follow the current 'popular' sports trends. Additionally, MLS and US Soccer would benefit by building their brand through national advertising campaigns with selective media. Furthermore, we found that Americans are more apt to *watch* and *play* a sport if they are interested in that sport.

When examining the purchase behavior of sport merchandise, such as buying and wearing team apparel, we find that U.S. respondents are not very likely to purchase sport merchandise solely to identify themselves with their team of preference. However, we found that American respondents are much more likely to purchase sport merchandise to *show support* for their team of preference. This comes as no surprise, considering the economical distribution of unlicensed apparel in the U.S. compared to countries abroad.

Interestingly enough, soccer fans, both in the United States and abroad, reported that they are more likely to purchase sport merchandise to *identify* themselves with their team of choice. Again, this comes to us as little surprise due to the level of worldly "hooliganism" relating to soccer. Though our findings suggest there is a clear difference in the purchase behavior of soccer fans purchasing merchandise to support their team of choice. This supports the AMA's findings pertaining to brand loyalty amongst soccer fans.

U.S. respondents perceive professional athletes much differently than respondents from our international sample. Also, non-soccer fans find professional athletes to be much more inspirational, compared to soccer fans. Additionally, we find that U.S. respondents, including non-soccer fans, have a tendency of being a fan of the overall team, rather than an individual player.

U.S. Soccer has great potential to grow as the MLS expands. Adding more teams to their professional league raises availability for consumers. Within the next decade or so, MLS would greatly benefit by creating a second tier league or a 'farm system'. Creating a semi-pro and amateur league is more cost effective than creating a new franchise (for already established franchises), also, this helps build the current brand. Providing more opportunities for team and player exposure will create a sense of attachment and loyalty to the brand, as well as the overall sport.

In addition to building player and team attachment, creating stylish sports merchandise is a key factor to brand success. Fans reported (greater abroad), that they purchase sport merchandise to show their support and associate them with an identity; this gives soccer teams the opportunity to build a favorable reputation and appeal to their consumers. Fans also reported that they will purchase sports merchandise if it is stylish. Designing a wide product line with respected sports brands will produce greater sales and exposure for U.S. Soccer and MLS franchises.

While conducting this research, we faced many limitations. When in Europe, we faced language barriers and had to have this survey translated to produce comparable results. In addition, as with any translation, not everything translates to the same literal extent. Also while in Europe, we faced problems with technology and found that to conduct this research more effectively was to rely on old-fashioned methods, using paper and pen.

In the future, we plan to continue to analyze our data collected in various ways to produce optimal implementations. Also, we aim to track global and American trends of soccer. Further data collection will occur to produce a larger sample size of individual nations.

After analysis of our constructs, we would be able to create detailed implications and determine the most efficient/feasible options.

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