The Factors of Awareness and Fan Identification of Soccer Fans

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Abstract
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The Factors of Awareness and Fan Identification of Soccer Fans

Joseph McAvoy

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Abstract

Professional soccer is a growing sport in America. The sport of soccer itself is still a growing sport among Americans. How people in America begin to identify themselves as soccer is not yet identified. I want to identify the factors of awareness and fan identification of soccer fans. I plan on surveying people through social media to see how they became soccer fans. I believe that through this research I will help identify the factors that lead people to become interested in soccer. This will help America create more soccer fans.
Factors of Awareness and Fan Identification of Soccer Fans

FIFA estimated that 26.29 billion individual viewers watched a World Cup match either at home and/or away from home. Soccer is a sport that reaches out across the globe, and besides the frequent high rated games such as USA vs. England in the 2010 World Cup with 12.9 million viewers, the sport doesn’t get much attention compared to other sports played in America (Novak & Billings, 2012). With the MLS Designated Player Rule coming into play, more people in America are beginning to come around, as shown with the impact that David Beckham had when he came to America. The media attention is also growing with the sport of soccer, with NBC, Fox, and ESPN currently all have contracts to play different soccer leagues on American television. The first five weeks of the 2013-2014 English Premier League (EPL) season that aired on NBC, over 9 million viewers tuned into watch the games, averaging around 391,000 viewers per game (Herr, 2013). In 2009, the largest viewing the Fox Soccer had with an EPL game was 296,000 which shows the growth in numbers (Reynolds, 2009). Between players playing under the Designated Player Rule such as David Beckham and the increase in media attention, the sport is growing.

Literature Review

Being a Fan

In Steven & Rosenberger’s (2012) research, they studied fan loyalty, which is highly connected with fan identification. They conducted a survey to test the relationship between sports fan identification, their involvement in sport and loyalty towards sport. Die-hard fans believe that being a ‘fan’ is an important part of who they are and are willing to make changes in their lifestyle to accommodate devotion to their team. Loyalty influences the commitment to repurchase the brand (Steven & Rosenberger III, 2012). When people have loyalty to a team, the
cost to the team to find new fans decreases because the current fans can influence others. Fan identification includes fan loyalty, brand equity, game viewing and attendance, purchasing team merchandise, willingness to travel to attend games, team-performance satisfaction, satisfaction with attending the sporting event and future intentions to attend games (Steven & Rosenberger III, 2012). Fan identification increases one’s knowledge to stay informed for recreational or pleasure purposes. The greater contact with and exposure to a group increases a person’s willingness to identify as a member of that group. People want to fit in with others and in order to do that they need to increase knowledge with the common trait of the group. The involved consumers are likely to share information they know about their sport or team through word-of-mouth, and will seek to learn for information to share with others (Steven & Rosenberger III, 2012). In their research, they found that there is a strong relationship between fan identification and fan loyalty (Nassis, Theodorakis, Vlachopoulos, & Afthinos, 2007; Steven & Rosenberger III, 2012). Fan identification and loyalty also relate on how much fans can make their sport team a large part of their life. People make their weddings or funerals team related, such as wearing sport jerseys to them and covering the body with a team-related blanket (Cottingham, 2012).

In Shih-Hao, Ching-Yi, & Chung-Chieh’s (2012) research, they found that identification and trust are two variables that are in sport fan loyalty. They stated that:

“individuals are inclined to identify with an organization that holds attributes similar to their own self-concept and to commit themselves to actions that support the organization. Therefore, identification plays an important role in influencing fans’ willingness to patronize sport events and products” (p. 178).

Team identification is a major predictor of sport consumption behavior (Robinson, Trail, & Kwon, 2004). As well as team identification, people’s favorite player plays a role in their
behavior. The attachment to a favorite player can influence their fan and spectator behavior (Park, Mahony, & Kim, 2011). Fan behavior is influenced by individual, social, and psychological factors while spectator behavior is influenced by team, player, and sport attachment (Daniel, Makoto, Daniel, Jeffrey, & James, n.d; Park, Mahony, & Kim, 2011;).

Mather (2011), observed people in New York City on what soccer jersey people were walking done the streets in. During the four hours he watched, he noted that only 1/40 jerseys were a professional soccer team in America and 19/40 jerseys were from two major European leagues: La Liga and Premier League. Of the remaining 20 jerseys, 9 were European national team jerseys, 7 were other national team jerseys, and 4 were from other European leagues (Italy, Germany, Scotland, and Holland). This observation is useful to point out that Americans are more publically supportive of European soccer teams than American soccer teams, with 32/40 jerseys being from European teams. Mather also noted that all of the 40 jerseys were worn by men, indicating that there are more male soccer fans that exhibit their fandom by wearing jerseys than female. This can help organizations in America know what to market to potential fans.

**The Beckham Effect**

In 2007, the MLS and L.A. Galaxy made a major move to increase interest in soccer by signing English superstar David Beckham for a deal that it worth around $250 million for five years (Lawson, Sheehan & Stephenson, 2008). Vincent, Hill and Lee (2009) noted that David Beckham made his debut for Manchester United of the English Premier League in 1995. During his spell at Manchester he became the captain of England. He participated in the World Cup for England in 1998, 2002, and 2006. After the world cup, Beckham was selected as the 33rd greatest Briton of all time by the BBC. In 2003 he moved to Real Madrid of La Liga in Spain. In 2006, Beckham resigned as England’s captain, while also being dropped from the team. He
also could not keep his starting spot for Real Madrid which lead to Beckham losing his commercial appeal, losing several endorsement contracts (Vincent, Hill & Lee, 2009). Looking at Beckham’s history, it shows that he has constantly been in the media for both good and bad reasons; that he is an important icon.

Straus (2011) believed there is a debate to whether Beckham has made a real impact in America since his big money move. Straus noted that when Beckham came to the MLS, the league only had 13 teams; in 2012, there are 20 teams competing in the MLS. He argued there is no proof to directly relate Beckham’s appearance in MLS and the growth of seven teams in five years. However, Don Garber, the MLS commissioner was quoted saying “David Beckham is a global sports icon who will transcend the sport of soccer in America” (Vincent, Hill & Lee, 2009, p. 173). Tim Leiweke, the CEO and president of Anschultz Entertainment Group, which owns the Galaxy, said that Beckham has already “paid for himself” within his first three months of signing (p. 178). He also noted that the Galaxy sold out their luxury suites, had 11,000 season ticket holders, helped gain a $20 million shirt sponsorship with Herbalife, and increased merchandise sales by 700% for Galaxy and 300% for the league in his first year (Vincent, Hill & Lee, 2009). These statistics show that the attention has increased; more people are going to games and buying merchandise. Beckham had a positive effect on sales before the season had even started.

After playing with Manchester United and Real Madrid which are “two of the most recognizable professional teams in the world.” (p. 174) Beckham was a name that people knew, and if they didn’t, they began to (Vincent, Hill & Lee, 2009). In a study done by Lawson, Sheehan & Stephenson (2008), they looked at how he affected ticket sales and if Beckham was a good investment by looking at the 2007 ticket sales. Beckham increased ticket sales not only for
the Galaxy, but for the league as well. The average ticket sales for all MLS games were 16,758, the average ticket sales for when he was on the roster was 29,694, while the average ticket sales for when he actually played was 37,659. Beckham was the first player to play under the MLS’s Designated Player Rule, which allows each team to sign one player outside the salary cap and the MLS will pay $400,000 of the salary. Galaxy pays $9.6 million out of the $50 million a year he makes, while sponsorships and merchandise sales consist of the other $40 million. Beckham’s ticket sales would allow each team to have a player under this rule, with the MLS gaining enough money through road games to pay for each of those players. David Beckham makes the L.A. Galaxy nearly $20 million additional revenue per year for the team (Lawson, Sheehan & Stephenson, 2008). The MLS and the L.A. Galaxy have made a positive investment financially bring Beckham to America.

Media

Fox has taken great strived to increase awareness of soccer in America. Fox Sports Media Group created Fox Soccer Channel (FSC) to dedicate an American channel solely to soccer. FSC is the primary channel for coverage of the English Premier League (EPL) and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Champions League. It also shows MLS, Italy’s Serie A, women’s professional soccer, the English FA CUP, FIFA Club World Cup, the CONCACAF Champions League, and more (Fox Soccer, 2011). It reaches more than 38 million households in America, compared to only 18 million in 2005 (Fox Soccer, 2011). David Nathanson, the General Manager of FSC said that FSC is “the nation’s leading soccer media brand” (Stanley & Kerwin, 2005, p. 49). Fox Deportes, also part of the Fox Sports Media Group, reaches more than 18 million homes nationwide, and is the leader in Spanish-language sports media. It also offers 1,300 original hours of soccer competition annually out of 2,000
event hours which is the most of any network that targets U.S. Latino sports fans (Fox Soccer, 2011; Reynolds, 2012).

In 2009, Fox outbid ESPN for the rights to cover the UEFA Champions league. Starting in 2009, the Champions League has been shown on FSC, Fox Sports Net (FSN), Fox Sports Español, and FX. ESPN covered the tournament since 1994 (Reynolds, 2009). ESPN had also covered the past three World Cups, starting with Germany’s 2006 World Cup (Wagman, 2005). The most recent World Cup in South Africa in 2010 had two heavyweight teams in the final, featuring Spain and the Netherlands. A record 24 million people viewed the 2010 final in America, which nine million of them saw it on the Spanish-language broadcast (Koyen, 2012). Fox Soccer is also taking World Cup matches from ESPN after the 2014 World Cup in Brazil that ESPN covers. FIFA and Fox agreed a $425 million deal that gives Fox the rights to World Cup matches from 2015-2022 (Koyen, 2012).

In 2008, FSC became rated by Nielson with its coverage of the English Premier League (EPL). Reynolds (2009) reported information based on the Nielson ratings results. The ratings were able to show the increase of viewers that FSC is experienced. From October 2008 to October 2009, daily viewership rose 125%. The EPL is FSC’s top priority. Its ratings doubled in October 2009, averaging 142,000 for live and first-run matches. Serie A matches increased 48% and MLS matches increased 89% during that same period. The 10pm showing for Fox Soccer Live rose 142%, Sky Sports News rose 350% at its 7pm slot while the noon time slot jumped 600%. From the studied time period, 9 of the top 10 viewed matches on FSC were England-based matches, with 8 of them featuring Manchester United of Chelsea FC. The one exception of the top 10 was the highest viewed match, which was the Gold Cup Final of USA vs. Mexico that had 369,000 viewers (Reynolds, 2009).
Two of basketball’s biggest names publicly show their interest in soccer. Kobe Bryant is a known FC Barcelona fan, as he more than once traveled to play their basketball team and support their soccer team (Borg, 2011). LeBron James recently became a minority stakeholder in one of England’s most historic clubs in Liverpool FC. James is in the top 10 of athletes followed on Twitter with over 6.6 million followers, having the potential to spread the word about soccer on social media. He tweeted that he was at the Liverpool vs. Manchester United game, as well as a picture of his custom number 6 Liverpool jersey with “LeBron” on the back (International Business, 2010). Tom Werner, chairman of Liverpool, commented, “We believe this will be a powerful collaboration between Fenway Sports Management and LRMR and LeBron. There are very few athletes who can match his global reach, appeal, and iconic status” (Tony, 2011, p. 71). James can bring the attention of soccer to America with his tweets and interaction with Liverpool.

In this research, fan loyalty, David Beckham, and the increase in media attention to the sport of soccer is looked at. While none of these factors are proven to be directly related, they can still affect one another.

**Methodology**

**Research Tradition**

I used the interpretivist research tradition. The definition of interpretive research I use is “Interpretive studies assume that people create and associate their own subjective and intersubjective meanings as they interact with the world around them. Interpretive researchers thus attempt to understand phenomena through accessing the meanings participants assign to them” (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). I looked to understanding the factors of awareness and fan identification of soccer fans, rather than only discovering what they are. My research used
feelings and emotions to explain people’s behavior towards the sport from specifically 2006 to now. I found some statistical data but will be interpreting the data more than just looking at the numbers I produce. The question I am presenting will better understand, rather than compare to other sports or fans.

**Conceptual Framework**

America is slowly beginning to come around to the beautiful game of soccer. Novak and Billings (2012) said “soccer is the most widely played sport, only the Olympics rivals the football World Cup as the most dominant, important, worldwide sporting event” (p. 35). By football, Novak and Billings meant soccer for the purpose of this paper. There has been increased investment in the sport that shows that Americans do know it exist; that there is more to sport than the “big three” of football, baseball, and basketball (Saporito, 2011). In fact, Major League Soccer (MLS) has around the same attendance figures as the National Basketball League in 2006 (Collins, 2006). The goal of this research is to show what influences the increase of awareness of soccer in America.

One factor that needs to be looked at in this research is loyalty. Fan loyalty is an important factor to consider while looking at fan identification because it influences the actions fans make toward sport. Loyalty towards a sport or a player can be a deciding factor on following a sport or just associating yourself with it. Loyalty is defined as “a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same brand set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviors” (p. 222, Stevens & Rosenberger III, 2012). Another part of this research will include the Beckham effect, which is
the effect Beckham had on the awareness and identification of soccer fans in America being such a big player to come to the MLS, which is America’s main soccer league.

**Theoretical Research**

This paper is written to answer the question: What factors relate to increased awareness and fan identification as a soccer fan? This information I want to gather from this research will be important because gaining American interest in professional soccer is an on-going process. Stevens & Rosenberger III (2012) found in their study that “fan identification, following sport, and involvement positively influence fan loyalty, while following sport was found to positively influence fan identification” and “general media consumption for leisure purposes has been associated with watching or attending matches in a symbiotic fashion” (pg. 227-228). I want to continue that research to see if David Beckham and media have increased identification of soccer fans. Compared to other major league sports in America the MLS is a relatively young league, only being in existence for 16 years (Wahl, 2012). To continue the growth of this sport, the factors that help gain interest from people in America in soccer is important to gather.

**Design**

The type of research I put together is exploratory research. I put together information to conduct a research question that is not commonly looked at. I used primary and qualitative data. I used cross-sectional data collection. The participants I used are mainly young adults. The main viewers of FSC are young adults, with 78% of viewers between the ages of 18-44 (Petruzzi, 2010). This is the generation that played youth soccer and is involved in the growth of soccer. This group has money to become more of a fan, and is meeting many new people during this time of their lives to learn about the game and become more aware.

**Procedure**
The data I collected tried to find out how much of a fan they were and have become and what factors influenced. My goal was to have 100 responses. I asked questions relating to MLS, Beckham, the EPL, and media. I asked people to answer a survey. I used social media to gain information. I asked people on my own Facebook and Twitter pages, but also different soccer-related pages such as Soccerblogs.net, and blogs on Fox Soccer’s webpage and Yahoo’s soccer page. The link was provided for users to take, and I asked if groups can share my survey to their followers. I piloted the survey first to three people to determine if it is appropriate. Later when I went into media, I refered to television, but also social media such as Twitter or Facebook. The television networks I described I am using for their sport time slots which could vary from the morning to primetime television. The specific networks I asked are Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN), National Broadcasting Company (NBC), FOX Broadcasting Company, and CBS Broadcasting Inc.

Analysis

Any survey with less than 75% of completion was not counted towards my results. I compared the answers given to me to answer my research and evaluate the answers to help better understand them.

Results

The data set contained responses from 27 individuals who were surveyed November of 2013, however only the results from 23 of them were analyzed. 8 of the kept responses were female, 14 were male, and 1 chose to not answer. 91% of respondents were between the ages of 18-24.

Although 100% of respondents knew that David Beckham played for L.A. Galaxy, 88% of them said that David Beckham coming to the MLS “probably” or “definitely” did not make
them more of a soccer fan (table 1). 90% of respondents said they did not follow soccer more since the arrival of David Beckham. In a question that did not specify Beckham, more than half of the respondents said they are not bigger soccer fans than they were six years ago. When asked an open ended question of the role David Beckham has played in the viewing habits of soccer of the respondents, only two of the answers argued that David Beckham has impacted America’s involvement saying “I think he is/was great for the MLS. People like Beckham and have done well in widening viewership in the US” and “hasn't changed my habits whatsoever, but that fact he moved to MLS has created a lager viewing audience in the states.”

Only 10% of respondents said they have not watched a soccer match on television in the past six years from the MLS, EPL, Serie A, La Liga, United Soccer League, or Major Indoor Soccer. The MLS and EPL have the most television coverage in the United States, with NBC showing EPL and MLS games on their networks, and ESPN also showing MLS games, while there is no major network that shows La Liga, USL, and MISL. When asked how many hours a week the respondents have watched soccer in the past calendar year, almost half of the respondents, 43%, have watched soccer at least three hours a week in the last calendar year (graph 1). Similarly 43% of respondents said that the increase of TV coverage have made them more of a soccer fan.

86% of females have not attended a soccer game in person, while only 38% of males haven’t seen a game live. 100% of males have seen an EPL game on television compared to 0% of females. 79% of males knew that NBC has the 2013-2014 EPL contract, while 0% of females knew (table 4).
43% of respondents play the video game FIFA weekly. All of those respondents were able to connect the L.A. Galaxy logo with soccer, as well as all knowing David Beckham, Wayne Rooney, Mario Balotelli, Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Ronaldinho. They also have all seen an EPL match on TV compared to an overall 70% if all respondents are included as well as 89% seeing an MLS game on TV compared to an overall 78%. 90% knew that NBC currently airs EPL games, compared to an overall 52%.

Limitations in my results are the amount of people that participated in the survey. A larger group of respondents, as well as more age groups represented, would give better answers. Recommendations for future research would be to find more respondents. Another recommendation is that a survey might not be the best way to obtain the needed information to accurately answer the question, so perhaps interviewing people would be better.
Do you think David Beckham coming to the MLS has made you more of a soccer fan? * Do you think the increase TV coverage of soccer has made you more of a soccer fan? Crosstabulation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you think David Beckham coming to the MLS has made you more of a soccer fan?</th>
<th>Do you think the increase TV coverage of soccer has made you more of a soccer fan?</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>Do you think David Beckham coming to the MLS has made you more of a soccer fan?</td>
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<td>Definitely yes</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Graph 1.

On average, how many hours a week have you watched soccer in the last calendar year?
Table 2.
Do you think you have followed more soccer since the arrival of David Beckham in 2007? *

Do you consider yourself more of a soccer fan now than you were six years ago?

Crosstabulation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you think you have followed more soccer since the arrival of David Beckham in 2007?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you consider yourself more of a soccer fan now than you were six years ago?</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>23</td>
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</table>
Table 3.

What is your gender? * Did you know that NBC currently airs EPL games on NBC and NBCSN? Crosstabulation

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<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

My data did not support my hypothesis of David Beckham increasing the awareness of soccer in America. Although 100% of respondents knew who David Beckham was, the majority of respondents, 85% of them said David Beckham did not make them more of a soccer fan. However Beckham is the most notable player out of the big players I named, with only 83% of respondents knowing what team Thierry Henry plays for, and less people, only 64%, knowing that the American born player Clint Dempsey plays on Seattle. 83% of the respondents that said they have followed soccer more in the past six years, also said that David Beckham has not made them more of a soccer fan.

My data supports my hypothesis that media is a factor. In my prior research, Saporito (2011) said there was more than the “big three” of football, baseball, and basketball. 26% of the respondents said that they follow soccer over any other sport, with only football (61%) having a higher percentage of sports that people follow the most. 70% of respondents claim they have watched at least 1 hour of soccer on TV in the past calendar year and 52% of respondents were aware that NBC currently air the EPL games this current season. Also, 43% said that with increased media of soccer, it made them more of a soccer fan.

It is interesting to note than my data does support an outside source, the video game FIFA, to be a factor of increased awareness. All respondents that said they play the video game FIFA at least weekly knew what team Beckham, Henry, and Donavon play for. They also all have seen an EPL match and 89% have seen a MLS game on TV. This shows that there is a connection between FIFA and increased knowledge.
In conclusion, with Fox and NBC creating sport channels that show soccer, people are becoming more aware of soccer. However my data is not supportive of David Beckham having an impact of the awareness of soccer in America. Although previous research prove that economically it has been beneficial since Beckham has arrived, my data does not prove that there is an increase of awareness. Through my data I found that FIFA players are more aware of soccer than non FIFA players.
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