



Major League Soccer and its U.S. Fan Base

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to understand fans' perception of the MLS. Particularly, this study investigates both the avid fan's perception of the MLS as well as the same perception in a potentially larger audience. This study aims at (1) segmenting the findings into three groups, (2) understanding the characteristics of these groups from the sport marketing prospective and (3) comparing the three groups to see whether there are any similarities and differences. **Research design, data, and methodology:** Using motivational factors alongside the 4P's of marketing, these three segments were analyzed and their similarities and differences were compared. An online survey was created and distributed through different MLS databases. **Results:** Prior to the distribution, a few hypotheses were made regarding the motivational factors of fans; specifically, that the quality of play has led to a lack of interest in the league and that the presence of star athletes has the potential to bring in more fans for the league. The quality of play and star athletes are important and thus a bigger emphasis needs to be placed on the designated player rule. At the same time, more television coverage as well as more exhibition games with international teams can generate more buzz for the league and garner more fans. **Conclusions:** This study explored motivational factors which support fanship of Major League Soccer. Further implications were discussed.

Keywords: Major League Soccer, MLS, Fan base, DP rule, Soccer

JEL Classification Code: I10, I12, I18

1. Introduction

According to Major League Soccer (MLS) marketing personnel, there are 65 million people in the U.S. connected to the sport of soccer and about 40 million of those people are soccer fans. Unfortunately, however, the vast majority of these soccer fans follow European or South American soccer and not the MLS. Only about 3-4 million out of the 40 million soccer fans in the U.S. are MLS fans. Although this statistic may seem disappointing, it also indicates that there is a huge potential for growth. It is always essential to understand the target market's needs and wants in order to create effective marketing strategies and be successful. There are reasons why these core soccer fans follow European or South American soccer leagues and not the MLS. The MLS needs to understand what these soccer fans expect from the league in order for them to become MLS fans.

Major League Soccer has recognized through its research that there is great of potential in converting immigrants that come from countries where soccer is extremely popular into MLS fans. Don Garber, former league commissioner, made the following supporting comment: "Our positioning for MLS is the league for a new America. Today, our county is made up of people from every other county in the world, and most of them are coming from soccer-loving countries. It creates a great opportunity for us to develop a fan base that's not necessarily the traditional American sports fan that the other leagues are competing for." (Farrell, 2007).

The purpose of this study is to understand both the avid fan's perception of the MLS as well as the same perception in a potentially larger audience (including casual fans and non-fans). This study aims at (1) segmenting the findings into three groups (Avid fan/ Casual fan/ Non-fan), (2) understanding the characteristics (based on motivational factors and 4Ps) of these groups from the sport marketing prospective and (3) comparing the three groups to see whether there are any similarities and differences. Sports marketing practitioners in MLS

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can use the market segments created in this study to understand the demands of their current fan base as well as the new target fan base.

2.Literature Review

2.1. MLS and its Growth and Development

As Major League Soccer continues to expand, more literature is being provided concerning its early history and growth stages. Currently, there is a fair amount of literature that shows the initial expectations for the natural development of the league, the problems encountered along the process of development, and the attempts of the league to find remedies for these problems (Cocco, 2018; Cocco & Spencer, 2019; Jewell, 2014; Strutner, Parrish, & Nauright, 2014).

At the early stage, the literature shows that setting wrong expectations could lead to a long-term problem (Strutner et al., 2014). Part of the reason for the establishment of Major League Soccer was the continuation of the overall growth of sports in the United States. Aware of the fact that since its establishment, the MLS set a clear objective: to create a product that fits the standard of the other exciting professional leagues (Watanabe, 2019). The MLS's attempt to be the next big American professional sports league is evident. As a continuation of the idea, the league has opened doors to 53 different countries for the MLS draws (Bradbury, 2020). This high number indicates a high level of realism. By trying to take advantage of world talent the league is realistic in what could be considered more of a short-term remedy (Bradbury, 2021). The research also indicates that building soccer stadiums is a priority in the healthy development of the league. When MLS kicked off in 1996, most teams played in cavernous NFL stadiums (Strutner et al., 2014). Currently, most of the teams play in their own soccer-specific stadiums (DeSchrive, Rascher, & Shapiro, 2016).

Some scholars argue that the problem with American soccer starts with the name itself—What the world calls 'football,' far and away the globe's most popular sport, has led a marginal existence as soccer in the United States, where football denotes a different game that has remained an integral part of American sports culture since the late 19th century (Markovits & Hellerman, 2003). If we go back to the history of American soccer, we can see that the name football was used for a few decades (Markovits & Hellerman, 2003). The decision of the then American League to change the name so that the two products—American football and soccer—could be differentiated caused a level of further confusion.

2.2. Targeting Market Segment

Various works were analyzed in order to understand who the prospective fans really are. Markovits and Hellerman (2003) separate prospective soccer fans in three distinguished categories: soccer players who pursue the game on the field but have no interest to follow it beyond their active involvement, soccer aficionados whose main identification with the game rests precisely in following but not playing it, and a newly developed segment that neither plays much soccer nor follows the sport but follows the sport at events like the World Cup. Finding common demographic patterns could give us some idea of who the prospective fan is. The literature also indicates recent positive demographic changes that might help in the future development of soccer in the United States (i.e., Strutner et al., 2014).

There are new immigration patterns, the strong presence of suburbs as a big part of the American life, the globalization of a cosmopolitan culture that has rapidly diminished established boundaries and introduced new habits of consumption previously unknown to Americans, the completely changed topography of communication, the internalization of all major American sports, as well as the changing role of women in American society (Bradbury, 2020; Strutner et al., 2014). In order for MLS to efficiently target its demographic common current trends in the demographic patterns need to be followed (Jensen, 2012; Jensen, Bowman, Wang, & Larson, 2012). MLS cannot ignore these trends because the marketing strategies of the league need to be coordinated with these dynamics. For example, the increased involvement of women in sports could be a signal for MLS that they should think of tailoring their marketing messages towards women as well (Coche, 2014). The league should look at all these changes as lucrative opportunities for capturing and developing of new MLS fan wave. With that said, MLS has proven once again that they possess high awareness of the potential possibilities for growth.

In addition to defining their demographic, teams have been targeting specific market groups. For example, the Dallas Burn was a pioneer in developing specific sports marketing strategies that target only Hispanics. In "Action in the community" the author reveals the Burn's unique marketing approach (Parker, 1999). After years of one-on-one interaction with fans, the Burn have discovered some important marketing characteristics. Firstly, the ticket price and promotions are very important. Hispanic fans are not only sensitive to ticket prices but also have expectations for promotions such as free admissions for family members. Secondly, depending on the current performance of the team, decisions about buying tickets are usually made on the day of the game. The

marketing group of the Burn discovered that 90,000 Salvadorans lived in Dallas. This number indicated the huge market potential in targeting Salvadorans. After finding the core characteristics of the Burn's Hispanic fan, the marketing group implemented new marketing strategies which were highly successful.

2.3. Media Exposure

The literature indicates serious problems with the MLS that need to be addressed if the league is to prosper. The primary reason is the little exposure soccer attains in the media. In a former study, the author clearly addresses television in general as a main impediment for MLS growth: "Soccer hardly seems cutting edge here in America, where most popular nationwide sports reap the majority of their incomes through television-based promotions and related consumer viewership as well as the ongoing searches for additional financial revenue that results from high ratings and in the process has been a pioneer in scraping the bottom of the barrel for incremental ad revenues." (Tanoos, 2008).

The other factor that keeps the media away from soccer is the lack of natural pauses in the game—in order to be broadcasted, commercials need a certain amount of natural stops during a game. Brown (2005) did a study on how the media and the fans reacted on the Champions World Series. The objective of the study was two-fold: (1) To discover if the American media paid enough attention to the series to effectively promote it, and (2) to establish if the Champion World Series affected MLS attendance. The study showed that the interest in soccer could be illustrated by TV ratings – in 2003 MLS Cup games had 0.6 ratings, while 2003 World Series games showed 13.9, 2003 NBA Finals had 6.5 and the Super Bowl had a 41.3 rating. The statistics of the study show that the greater the media attention is the higher the interest in the sports event. Brown (2005) also states that while newspaper coverage of these events is adequate (if not exactly extensive), the Champions World series has yet to have a major impact on MLS attendance.

Because of the globalization of media coverage of the sports-market, the literature also discusses the actual competition that MLS face with the world's other soccer leagues (Brown, 2005). Soccer fans today can easily ignore the limited media coverage of MLS and choose to follow the world's best teams, which are readily available on TV and now online. Because of the easy access, the challenge to attract these fans and make them MLS fans is even harder. Lastly, being in the running to host the World Cup could be the ingredient that will encourage a higher level of play as players compete to make the national team. The youth may naturally bridge the existing gap and isolate the opportunities within the sport of soccer. From the fan's perspective, quality soccer can only help attract additional fans to the MLS.

2.4. The Importance of the Existence of World-class Players in MLS

The other significant problem facing the MLS is the scarcity of world-class players in the league (Coates, Frick, & Jewell, 2016). In the article "Vend it like Beckham: David Beckham's effect on MLS ticket sales," Lawson, Sheehan, & Stephenson (2008) point out the importance of having a world class player in MLS. The lack of good players has significantly affected the growth of the league. Having world class players in the league is one of the main factors that can increase attendance at MLS games (Jewell, 2017). Unfortunately, the literature shows a strong tendency for the best American players to move abroad for better opportunities—players moving to Europe to bigger leagues. The other issue that automatically follows is the question of the credibility of the league. Because the MLS has a problem of sustaining its good players, it has a serious internal competition issue. As more and more fans come to the stadium, the revenue for the league and its teams will continue to increase and provide them with stronger business opportunities.

2.5. Motivational Factors Affecting Spectator Attendance

The question of what factors affect sports fans to attend games is an important issue for the MLS because the revenue related to game attendance are an important income source for professional sports (Bradbury, 2020; DeSchrive et al., 2016). If factors affecting spectator attendance are clarified, sports marketers from the league will be able to more efficiently build marketing strategies for their target market. Previous studies have examined many of the internal and external factors affecting spectators' attendance. These factors could be classified according to the following five perspectives: (a) sports game attractiveness factors such as league standing, record-breaking, team's on-field performance, and star players (Rivers & Deschrive, 2002), (b) environmental factors such as stadium facilities, convenience of schedule, weather (Greenwell, Fink, & Pastore, 2002), (c) emotional or internal factors such as team identification and motivational factors (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002), (d) economic factors such as ticket price (Rishe & Mondello, 2004), and (e) demographics such as gender, ethnic background, and marital status (Fink et al., 2002).

Prior research about the relationship between motivation and fan attendance, however, has been limited in the field of sports marketing. Most of the reports have focused on factors external to the spectator such as the

actual facility. Only a few researchers have regarded the impact of emotional or internal factors (team identification, motivational factors) on professional soccer game attendance.

3. Method

3.1. Motivational Scales

This study focuses on the analysis of statistical data gained from a survey. As examined in the literature review, there has been limited research in the field of spectator motivation for the MLS. For this reason, further developments and refinements of the existing motivation scales will be needed to adequately cover the avid fans', casual fans', and non-fans' motives. As a baseline, motivation factors which have consistently shown importance in previous studies were selected (based on the 4Ps of marketing—product, price, place, and promotion). These motivational factors were adjusted with the support of a former marketing manager at the MLS.

3.2. Survey Distribution and Collection

Once the survey questions were finalized, the actual survey was created utilizing Survey Monkey. A second version of the survey was also created; however, this version was in Spanish. This gave survey respondents the option of answering the questions in English or in Spanish and thus allowed for a larger response rate due to the large population of Hispanic soccer fans in the United States. The two surveys were then distributed through Survey Monkey to two MLS fan databases and the results were collected.

3.3. Data Analysis

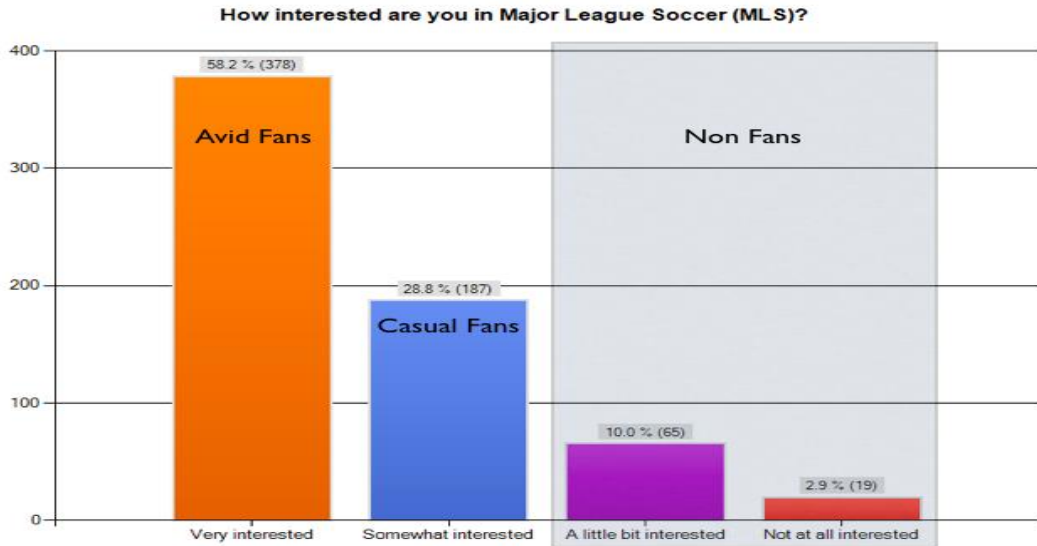
For this study, the survey was distributed through the MLS database and was sent out to 15,000 people. Among the total number of distributions, 655 surveys were returned which marked 4.4% return rate. The survey was comprised of questions focused on motivational factors affecting fandom of the MLS. The survey was created based on the motivational factors developed by several scholars in the past. Twenty-one items were used to determine the factors that motivated fandom of the MLS. These factors were categorized into the dimensions of 4Ps of marketing—place, price, promotion, and product. Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of one (not important) to five (very important), the degree of their personal perception towards motivational factors.

Table 1: Motivational Factors categorized into 4Ps

4Ps	Factors
Place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Convenient facility (e.g., easy access to restrooms & concessions) - Stadium pride - Proper starting time - Accessibility to the stadium (e.g., easy transportation to and from stadium) - Public amenities (e.g., play zones, half time shows)
Product	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Quality of luxury amenities - Quality and style of play - Presence of star athlete - History and tradition of the team - Presence of high-profile coach - Current success of the team
Price	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Price of tickets - Price of merchandises - Price of parking - Price of club seats and luxury suites - Price of food and beverages
Promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - TV broadcasting - Public relations aspects (e.g., press conference, newspaper articles) - Advertising promotions (e.g., magazine ads, newspaper ads, TV ads) - On-site promotions (e.g., giveaways, contests) - Special events (e.g., All-star games, international exhibition games)

In order to analyze the soccer fan base in the US, the fan base was divided into three categories: Avid Fans, Casual Fans, and Non Fans. The respondents were categorized based on the survey responses of the essential question “How interested are you in the MLS?” As illustrated in the graph below, respondents who are very interested, somewhat interested, a little bit interested, and not at all interested in the MLS were categorized into the “avid fan”, “casual fan”, and “non fan” respectively. In order to analyze each segment, the author decided to cross-tabulate each survey question with all three categories in order to compare their motivational factors regarding their status as an MLS fan.

Figure 1:Fan Categorization



4.Results

4.1 4Ps: Place

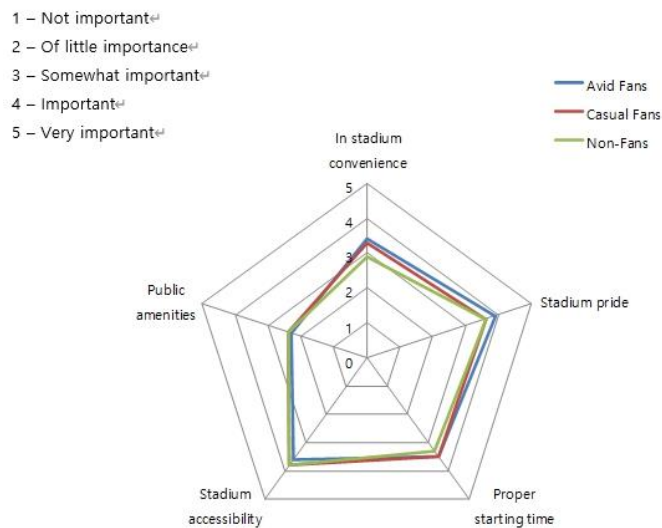


Figure 2:Response on “Place”

The above radar chart illustrates the average ratings of each fans’ responses for the five “Place” related questions. On the whole, the majority of the place-related motivational factors were deemed to be either “important” or “somewhat important”, one exception being the public amenities around the stadium which

deemed to be relatively low of importance among all three fan groups. It is clearly seen that the perceptions for place-related factors are relatively similar for all three fan groups. However, for the non-fans, place-related factors are seen to be relatively less important than the other two fan groups.

In-stadium convenience seems to carry importance for avid and casual fans but not tonon-fans. The MLS teams play in either recently built soccer specific stadiums that have implemented amenities for fan convenience or larger football stadiums which also focus on the experience of the fan. However, through our survey, it was found that in order to appeal to non-fans, in-stadium convenience should not be the focus of their communication.

Stadium pride is important to all segments. The non-fan is once again the biggest advocate of this attribute. From the perspective of the MLS, they are headed in the right direction with all these new state-of-the-art soccer specific stadiums. With the appropriate size venue, the experience only gets better and the fans more pleased about the stadium pride. Building new stadiums can be enough to lure non-fans to the sport as they do cherish stadium pride as an element of entertainment.

Proper starting time is mostly important for the non-fans. Knowing when games are being played can certainly help increase the fan base. As games are being played, players are exuding themselves, and very low ratings are being aggregated. The non-fans are not coming across the MLS games while zapping at primetime to even have the chance to move up the fandom echelon.

Easy accessibility to the stadium is important to all three divisions of fans. As a matter of fact, this is true across all sports. As more soccer-specific stadiums are being built, one of the key components being considered is the relative ease of access getting into and out of the stadium from nearby roads and highways. The closer the stadium is to major roads and highways, as well as the availability of transportation to and from the stadium, is crucial for fans to attend games.

The entertainment around the games is something neither segment really valued. All segments scored highest when ranking this priority as ‘of little importance’. This was a hypothesis that went against the model being practiced in leagues of lesser importance. It is often understood that the entertainment element is often one of the main reasons families still go to games of properties that are not at the top of the echelon. Minor League baseball teams, such as the Staten Island Yankees, are heavily invested in this element of their fans’ experiences.

4.2. 4Ps: Product

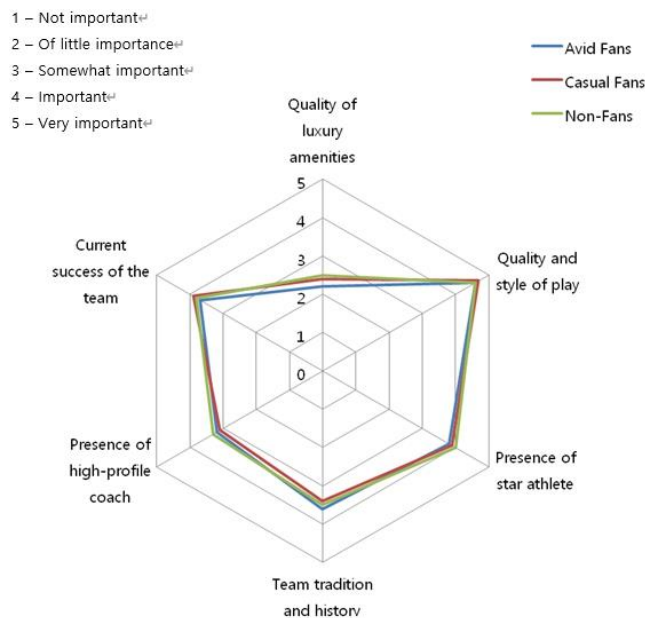


Figure 3: Response on “Product”

Above radar chart illustrates the average ratings of each fans’ responses for the five “Product” related questions. On the whole, the majority of the product-related motivational factors were deemed to be either “important” or “somewhat important” (as anticipated prior to this research, quality and style of play was deemed very important for all three groups). It is clearly seen that the perceptions for product-related factors are relatively similar for all three fan groups.

The importance of the quality of luxury amenities garners similar results to that of the price of such amenities. Luxury amenities need not be the focus to attract more fans to the sport. From the corporate side, this is important. A challenge in this study is to get all attendees to fill up the survey. The fans sitting in the luxury suites may not be inclined to fill up a survey sent to them. Based on our demographic results 115 surveys out of the 650 were filled by individuals making more than \$150K. One can assume that if this question was presented to group of wealthy businessmen, we may find the sample results looking quite different.

Supporting our hypotheses, quality of play was of utmost importance throughout all segments surveyed. All segments' opinions were heavily invested in the thought that the quality is not just important but very important. This is an element of the growth plan of the MLS in which they are heavily invested. With features like the designated player rule described previously as well as MLS camps for kids the MLS are doing what they can. The designated rule liberates the salary cap rule and allows a great player to come for a substantial salary. Salaries otherwise are very limited and therefore do not encourage young American athletes to pick soccer as a profession. From the perspective of camps, raising talent is imperative however keeping talent has proven to be difficult as there is a lot of money to be made possible. Quality of play is a big challenge that the MLS are fully aware of and trying to garner as much as possible.

Following the same theme as the quality of play, the presence of a star athlete is important; however, it is not as important for the avid and casual fan as it is to the non-fan. A non-fan needs more of a reason to attend an MLS game than the avid or casual fan. The latter put more value in the quality of a team game than the attraction of a big star. This is certainly a territory that the MLS has worked on. The designated player rule is again referenced here as this is what allows star players from other more lucrative leagues to come and play in the MLS. Beckham certainly helped bring non-fans to MLS games. Arguably more than just a star athlete, he is an example of a perfectly executed strategy as he expanded the following of the MLS in Los Angeles.

With the MLS not being an old league that has accumulated decades of fans, this aspect is difficult for the MLS to focus as a motivational factor in attracting more fans. It is however important to the surveyed sample. As expected, it is most interesting to notice that the non-fans have placed heavier emphasis on the importance of tradition and team history.

As non-fans deemed it important to have a high-profile coach, it did not seem to impact the casual or the avid fans as much. The way the players play as a team has a direct reflection on the coach and therefore it further justifies the non-fans' stance on the matter. The existing fans would rather prioritize other facets of the game than the coach.

Current success is important among all segments. It is especially important for non-fans. A successful team is a key success factor in attracting more fans. It also appears to be essential to maintain casual fans. Avid fans deem the success of the team as important but are most likely less affected by the outcome of the game than by the beauty of the sporting experience surrounding their favorite sport.

4.3. 4Ps: Price

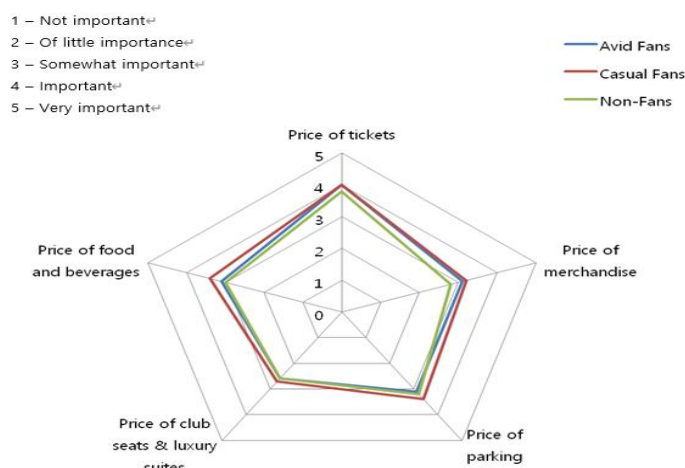


Figure 4: Response on "Price"

Above radar chart illustrates the average ratings of each fans' responses for the five "Price" related questions. On the whole, the majority of the price-related motivational factors were deemed to be either "important" or

“somewhat important”. It is clearly seen that the perceptions for price-related factors are relatively similar for all three fan groups. However, it was also found that the price-related factors were more important to casual fans than the other two fan groups.

Ticket price seemed to be very important for non-fans but less important for but still deemed important for avid and casual fans. Evidently, a lower ticket price is what would bring a non-fan to an MLS game over the substitute. For the other two segments, ticket price is important but a fan is usually less impacted by price than a non-fan. Nevertheless, especially in the case of casual fans, the price point to physically go to games is still an essential piece of the purchase decision.

Merchandise prices seemed to gather little importance to either segment as most marked this question as somewhat important. The bell curve appears in each of the segment population. The MLS looks as merchandise as a way to fabricate fans. A cool shirt with a famous player will only gain importance once the league gains in popularity. In the case of Beckham, jersey sales did very well, but as a whole, the league needs more stars and a higher quality of play before the fans can consider merchandise sales as important.

Parking prices were of little concern. One can assume that the parking situation to stadiums that are not usually overcrowded with fans is not a problem that affects the fan experience.

Surprising to analyze, luxury amenities garners very little intrigue by the fans. With these results one may conclude that the fan base is not willing to pay a premium price for a league that does not gather enough prestige. Luxury boxes are usually occupied by the corporate world. Either the corporate world did not get filtered into the sample or this is in fact a misconception and fans are not keen on luxury amenities.

The price of food and beverages is not an attribute that the MLS need to adjust. It seems to only be somewhat important. This assumes that what the MLS is providing the fans is satisfactory and does not need to be improved. It is important to note that it is not a way to attract non-fans as a majority responded that it was of little importance.

4.4. 4Ps: Promotion

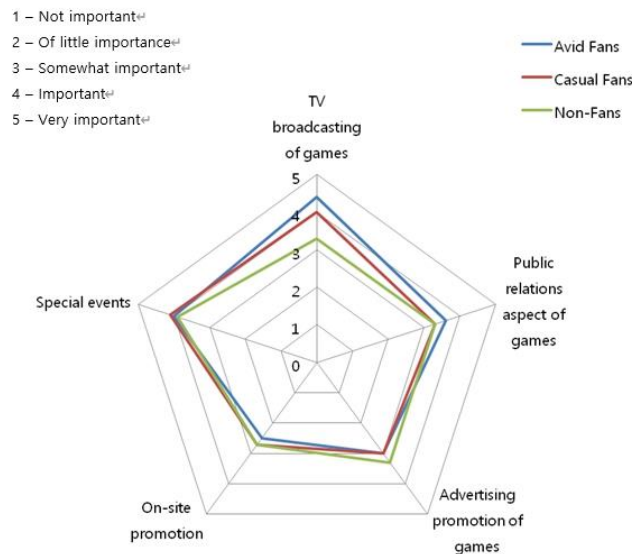


Figure 5: Response on “Promotion”

Above radar chart illustrates the average ratings of each fans’ responses for the five “Promotion” related questions. On the whole, the majority of the promotion-related motivational factors were deemed to be either “important” or “somewhat important”. It is clearly seen that the perceptions for promotion-related factors are relatively similar for all three fan groups. However, as it can be seen in the chart above, three fan groups demonstrated very different perceptions on TV broadcasting of games.

TV broadcasting of games is important for the fandom of the MLS. Both the avid and casual fans see great value in TV broadcasting with results of 86.9% and 72.6% respectively. The non-fan gives this motivational factor less relevance. It can be argued that their perspective is so due to the fact that they are not fans and therefore do not factor in the value of TV presence. Therefore, the author deemed the importance of TV broadcasting slightly skewed for the non-fans.

Having mentions of the league on TV and in newspapers is important to all three segments. Fans want to see that their league is getting as much coverage as other sports leagues and non-fans are not going to root for a league that many other people don't pay attention to.

For avid fans, the promotion aspect is somewhat important but because they are fans, they know when the games are. Casual fans seem to feel similarly; however non-fans place significant importance on such promotion. In order to get the non-fans, the MLS needs to raise further awareness. Out of the non-fans, a portion of them would most likely be interested in following the MLS had they known it was playing. Advertising is essential and is currently lagging behind the level of promotion of the four major sports.

On-site promotions seem to be an element of the sports industry that does not impact the entire sample population. It is often heard that that facet of the experience has become cumbersome and fans are tired of too much on-site promotion. This result presents a challenge to our expectations but still however needs to be assessed appropriately. The MLS does not need to focus on this to attract more fans to the sport.

Significant interest in special events was expressed through all three segments. Increased opportunities to watch the best MLS players compete amongst each other or having a more successful MLS team compete against popular international clubs are two ways that can clearly help the MLS. Playing against international players is already happening but maybe more frequency would be welcome. As for the All-star game, a game in question among the 4 major sports would be a gratifying adjustment for the MLS, its current fans and other soccer fans who do not consider themselves MLS fans.

5. Discussion

As the data analysis gets further analyzed several outcomes are clear. As former studies stated, the quality of the game was an essential. The author also saw that there was a major drop in the sports popularity once athletes start thinking about how lucrative their future can be. Lastly, the impact of star athletes deemed important to encourage more fans to the game. However, they were certainly some interesting findings as the study dug deeper into the analysis that could lead to less predictable recommendations for the MLS. In order to clearly highlight these additional findings, they will be categorically presented in order of priority using the 4Ps of marketing.

5.1. Product

Product is very important to the fans (Brownlee & Lorgnier, 2017; Strutner et al., 2014). It is in essence the main reason anyone would watch or consider watching the MLS. As already mentioned, quality of play as well as the presence of a star athlete are the main areas that do pertain heavily as a focus for the MLS. In parallel to the quality of play, team performance is also important to all segments. The findings also illustrate that it is even more important for the non-fans the MLS are trying to target. The stardom aspect of the game seems to be important especially to the non-fan. As the designated player rule is in effect the MLS are actively tackling this challenge. Getting the better players from better leagues is essential according to this study.

Unique to the MLS, the author found that public (play zones, half-time shows) and luxury amenities have been deemed unimportant to the sample studied. A lot of money is poured into these amenities as they provide revenue streams for the MLS however according to this study, it is not a motivational factor for MLS fans and this should be considered moving forward. This finding is somewhat different to the findings of former studies in other sports where luxury amenities do affect attendance at sporting events (Mayer, Taniyev, & McPadden, 2023). History and tradition are an additional aspect that fans cherish and is an area that the MLS have been working towards. Furthermore, a high-profile coach, on the other hand, appears to be of utmost importance for non-fans but not necessarily an attraction for the avid or casual fans. Based on this finding, if MLS wants to target those non-fans segment, it would be an appealing idea to bring in high-profile coaches from a more developed leagues such as European league.

5.2. Promotion

Promotion prevails as an important marketing tool to provide ways to bring the game in the eyes of all US soccer fans. With different perspectives among fan categories, the one aspect of promotion that was heavily weighted among all groups was the media angle of promotion. All fans wished that they had more access to information in the media. The MLS should utilize their various online platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube) to provide fans with more profound information.

Moreover, the public relations aspect of the game appears not to be a main priority for the MLS and as a result very little is being done in comparison to the other leagues and its impact is prevailing on the number of avid fans present. TV broadcasting of games is important for the avid fans and the casual fans as they were eager

to watch the games being played. The more presence the MLS has in the media, be it news articles or live broadcasts, the game will only grow if potential fans are more exposed to it (Strutner et al., 2014). Media involvement in soccer needs to vastly improve if they want to attract the distracted soccer fan into becoming an MLS fan. The non-fans sampled have formed their opinions about the league without really having experienced it. These assumptions are mostly triggered by word of mouth. Their ideas stem off the perception of the sport in the US and not necessarily how the game is really.

Another appealing offering to all segments was the attraction that comes with special events such as a friendly against another premier international club or an All-Star game. Seeing all the best players on one field can only help promote the quality of the game provided good quality soccer is played. On the other hand, on-site giveaways were deemed unnecessary. As mentioned previously when discussing luxury amenities, this element of the game is funded by brands who are focused on promoting themselves to the target audience. This is not a cost to the league and therefore is not something very relevant to this study.

5.3. Place

The importance of place for the three fan groups resulted in interesting takeaways. The emphasis on in-stadium convenience was not something the non-fans valued. This should not be a focus when trying to reach out to the non-fans but should be if targeting the avid and casual fans. Stadium pride on the other hand was important to all segments and is heavily attributed as an aspect of place that would appeal strongly to the non-fans studied. As for proper start times, this was another factor that was heavily supported by non-fans. Standardizing start times can certainly help attract the non-fans. Accessibility to the stadiums is the final product attribute analyzed and is important for all three fan bases. Location is critical for sports teams and the MLS are no exception. Strategically situating the facilities can only help boost the fan base of the MLS.

5.4. Price

Pricing was not as important a factor to consider when focusing on strengthening the bond of any of the segmented sample population. The most prevalent price attribute was the ticket price. Non-fans believed that price was essential while avid and casual fans were more elastic. Priced fairly low compared to substitute activities, the MLS is in good position to manage fans' expectations. As for the remaining price outcomes, results deemed that concessions, merchandise, parking and luxury amenities were of little importance. It is worth noting that the price of luxury amenities is not important to this sample as they are not attracted to the luxury amenity product highlighted previously.

6. Conclusion

As the literature review developed, the author believed in certain hypotheses. As illustrated in the data analysis section and further highlighted in the findings section, there are distinct initiatives the MLS can take to better the perception of the league and bring more fans to the stadium. As expected, the quality and style of play of the game is the most important factor affecting fandom of the MLS. The designated player rule has arguably been a success and due to the emphasis on quality, the MLS should consider getting more of these players. Currently not every team can afford such a player but if the league helps subsidize at least one player per team it would substantially benefit the MLS. Capping it at two "international" players per team is recommended and is seen in other developing leagues all over the world.

At the same time, more television coverage is necessary. The way to reach fans is through television, and the MLS may need to look into television deals with local and regional sports networks, instead of solely through ESPN. Teams can take a more tailored approach to marketing themselves, as opposed to having the entire league market itself on one monopolizing channel. Certain MLS teams, such as DC United, host exhibition games with international teams during the year. These games draw huge crowds and, as seen by the survey results, are immensely popular among casual fans as well as non-fans. By possibly doubling the amounts of games against exciting foreign teams, the MLS can only increase its popularity and fandom.

Another recommendation would be to insure that the price of tickets does not increase too dramatically with all the new stadiums being developed. One of the key fandom motivators is that the game has remained affordable to the fan, unlike other more established leagues. On a tactical level, marketing it as an affordable substitute that could lend to expanding the fan base. Such a promotional route can appeal more to families and build higher aspirations for growing talent as they get further exposed to the game. As time is essential to make such initiatives a reality, the author hopes that the MLS prioritize their next steps in a manner that can gradually attract more and more soccer fans. If the level of game improves alongside the CRM initiatives highlighted, the

author expects continuous growth for a property that exerts a tremendous amount of strategic energy despite its youth.

Although the author provides meaningful insight through the study, there are some limitations that provide ideas for future studies. One of the key limitations of the research is the fact that the survey was distributed through an MLS database. Many of the respondents were already MLS fans, thus causing many more affirmative responses to the second question, pertaining to interest in the MLS. At the same time, the survey was restricted to an online population. Only people who are available online can reasonably be expected to participate in such a survey. The online population differs in very significant ways than the non-online population; although many more people are using the Internet now than 10 and 15 years ago, the online population can still be generally classified as younger, hipper, and less traditional than the non-online population.

Another key limitation of the research is the lack of an incentive for completing the survey. Online survey respondents require a higher level of motivation to answer surveys; if there is no incentive, there is typically a lower response rate. This was evident in our research – only 4.3 % of those who received the survey actually completed it. In addition, it can be assumed from the demographic information provided that the individuals making more than \$150K were not heavily investigated. Some of the findings may in fact limit the scope as for example, luxury amenities, in terms of price and product were not placed at the bottom of the priority list. The results would most likely change if more wealthy individuals completed the survey.

Based on these limitations and as common with all research, there are always potential areas for future research. On a macro level, one of the most important areas for further research is examining how other not-so-major leagues in the United States are attempting to grow their fan bases. For example, one league in particular to pay attention to is the WNBA. As the WNBA continues to struggle to survive, it is using many different marketing tactics to reach new fans, especially basketball fans that are not fans of the WNBA. In addition, analyzing the motivational factors that encourage the media to invest in the MLS would be a useful study in order to see how best to leverage media relationships.

Another beneficial macro study would be to analyze the effectiveness of the MLS efforts in the last 5 years. It is evident that the MLS has been very active and has gained popularity. Understanding what worked best could be very interesting in order what to focus on in the future. On a more micro level, focusing in on attributes like the designated player rule could add a lot of value. We always think of David Beckham and his performance as a ‘designated player’ however little consideration is placed on the other players under the same contractual rule.

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