

Prior sport participation and spectator sport consumption: The case of soccer

Jonathan Casper, North Carolina State University

W. Chadwick Menefee, North Carolina State University

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Abstract 206**

Over the past 30 years, soccer has gone from an obscure international game to become one of the most popular recreational sport among youth in the United States (Isidore, 2002; SGMA, 2006). Despite hosting a World Cup and developing a professional soccer league, soccer spectatorship remains lower than other major sports in the United States. The increase in female athletes, growth in Latin American immigration, and a trend in cosmopolitan culture have all contributed to some growth in the popularity of soccer (Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, 2006); however, soccer in the U.S. remains participatory entertainment, most popular among individuals who are completely oblivious to its history and pay little attention to the sport at the professional level (Kuper, 2002; Markovits & Hellerman, 2003). Researchers have previously identified strong socioeconomic and media differences in the relationship between sport participants and sport spectators (Burnett, Menon, & Smart, 1993). For example, Milne, Sutton & McDonald (1996) found an 81% overlap between pro basketball spectators and basketball participation, but only a 43% overlap for participation among college basketball spectators. In other countries, recreational players actively follow the professional leagues. Burnett, Menon & Smart (1993) also posit that Americans have too many sport choices, so the question is whether soccer will be able to become a top television draw or if it will remain marginalized by other professional sports with stronger histories in the United States.

The current study investigates social influences related to soccer consumption (soccer interest, viewership, and soccer goods) by comparing respondents that played soccer as an adolescent and those that did not. Consumer behavior literature focuses on six social structural variables that are important in consumption over a lifespan: fathers, mothers, siblings, children, media, and school influence (Moore, Wilkie & Lutz, 2002, Moschis, 1987). The purpose of this study was to identify the most important social influences for soccer fans, and compare the influences based on prior soccer participation.

Data were collected at three United Soccer League (USL) regular-season home games (N = 194). Because this study focused on adults, data was limited to participants over the age of 18 (N = 148). The sample included 71% males, the average age was 31 years old, and participants were primarily Caucasian (91%). The survey instrument included six demographic items and two items asking about current and prior soccer participation. Consumption questions were categorical while socialization items were based on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

A total of 70 participants indicated that they had played soccer as an adolescent while 78 stated they did not. Results found that respondents that played soccer viewed significantly more ($p < .05$) soccer events on television, while no differences were found based on soccer interest and soccer-specific sporting goods purchased during the past year. Comparisons of the influence of social variables on television viewership, soccer interest, and soccer merchandise consumption found that those that had played soccer indicated significantly higher influences from all of the social variables (mother, father, friends, siblings, media, and internet) than those that did not play soccer as an adolescent. Those that did not play indicated that their children's influence was significantly higher for each consumption item.

The results show how a social influence, children, can affect adults' sport consumption through "resocialization" (Mochis, 1987). The finding reflects Family Systems Theory (e.g. Carter & McGoldrick, 1989), which suggests that a change in one member can alter the consumption of products for others. In this case, adults that had no previous experience with soccer became consumers through their children and reported a similar level of interest in the sport and spent the same amount of money on associated goods as soccer participants. For respondents that had played soccer as an adolescent, the additional social influences were statistically more salient. The relative importance of children may have some influence, but not as significant as the comparative group.

Resocialization could be very valuable to marketers because the sport selection of children has a significant effect on the sport spectatorship and sporting good consumption of their parents. These results reveal that youth participation is a key determinant in the behavior of adult soccer consumers, both for participants and non-participants. The popularity of soccer continues to increase among children in the U.S., so the findings may lead to improvements in customer orientation, thereby increasing returns for soccer franchises, merchandisers, and sponsors. Further comparisons of the groups and explanation of significant findings from other socialization agents will be discussed in relation to marketing strategies for soccer.