Segmenting Recreational Soccer Participants Using Selected Demographic Segmentation Bases

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Market segmentation, a process to segment potential consumers (market) based on consumer characteristics (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2000), is an essential element of marketing (Sehth, 1967; Smith, 1956; Tynan & Drayton, 1987; Yankelovich, 1964). In fact, market segmentation is a widely recognized and useful practice utilized in many industries (Davidow, 1989; Greenberg & McDonald, 1989). Thus, segmenting potential consumers into subgroups enables marketers to develop more specialized and effective marketing plans. To date, there has been a plethora of sport marketing research segmenting current spectators on a variety of personal demographic, psychographic, and behavioral factors. The sport spectator pie can only be segmented and sliced so finely while still keeping pragmatic value. Given the current economic conditions, sport properties are being forced to reevaluate their sport marketing strategies in an effort to increase their fan base. Sport participants represent a market segment, ripe with potential spectators which have been relatively untouched with respect to sport marketing research.

Looking specifically at soccer within the United States, professional soccer leagues such as Major League Soccer (MLS), National Indoor Soccer League (NISL), and the Professional Arena Soccer League (PASL) need to target different segments of the 16 million American soccer players (Levitan, 2008) if they hope to broaden their fan base. While the popularity of MLS, for example, has steadily increased over their 13 year tenure with an average attendance of 15,600 for the 2009 season (Major League Soccer, 2009), the reality is that MLS is seen as a second-tier sport league in the US (Collins, 2006; Wilson, 2007). Intuitively, one would assume that current soccer spectators are the target consumer group of MLS. Accordingly, a number of studies focusing on soccer spectators have been conducted (e.g., Bernache et al., 2007; Cohen & Avrahami, 2005; Hans et al., 2005; Kerr et al., 2005; Richardson & O’Dwyer, 2003; Won & Kitayama, 2007) and provided a variety of useful marketing implications. What has not been a focus of soccer consumer studies is the examination of the other subgroup—soccer participants, creating a significant gap in the literature. Participants may differ from current spectators and should be viewed as a group who can be, and should be, seen as potential consumers of professional soccer in America in an attempt to increase their consumer base.

Focusing on soccer participants as potential consumers of MLS, the NISL, and the PASL, several demographic segmentation bases were examined. More specifically, the present study attempted to see whether there were group differences in psychological commitment to watching soccer games. Commitment is a psychological state representing the desire to continue consuming a product (Scanlan et al., 1993)—watching soccer games in this particular study. This outcome variable has been used widely in consumer research and its importance has become obvious as heavy users do not necessarily equate to truly loyal consumers unless they are psychologically committed to the product (Day, 1969). Since psychological commitment does not necessarily reflect actual consumer behavior, the present study also looked at group differences in frequency of watching professional soccer games. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to examine who, based on selected demographic segmentation bases, is more committed to watching professional soccer games and who actually watches games more frequently.

Study participants were members of a local soccer club that offers a variety of recreational soccer programs year around. The questionnaires were distributed to 750 players and a total of 319 players responded with usable surveys, indicating a response rate of 42.5%. Four segmentation bases (independent variables) were examined: gender (female, n=67; male, n=248), age (below 30, n=148; over 30, n=159), household income (less than $40,000, n=89; $40,000-$79,999, n=89; $80,000 and above, n=113), and highest level played (recreational, n=82; high school, n=128; college or higher, n=107). Psychological commitment to watching professional soccer games was measured with items used in the Sport Commitment Model (Scanlan et al., 1993). We also investigated frequency to watch soccer games, on a 5-point Likert scale (5 being ‘very often’ and 1 being ‘never’), to measure respondents’ actual behavior. To examine gender and age group differences, t tests were performed, and ANOVAs were conducted to compare three groups of the other two variables (i.e., household income and highest level played).
The study found significant differences in commitment between gender (p < .001)—male soccer players showed significantly higher commitment level to watching professional soccer games than female soccer players. Results also indicated significant differences in commitment among three groups of the soccer experience variable (p < .001). Post hoc analysis using Tukey HSD found soccer participants with highest level experience (college or above) had significantly higher commitment level to watch professional soccer games than the other two groups (i.e., high school, recreational). On these two variables, significant differences were also found in watching frequency—males and players with highest level experience watch professional soccer games significantly more often than females and players with lower level experience, respectively. This is a possible indication of a positive relationship between psychological commitment and actual behavior—the higher the commitment one has to watch games, the more frequently one actually watches, which is consistent with previous studies (Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004; Kim et al., 1997; Mahony et al., 2004). No significant differences were found in either commitment or watching frequency based on age or household income.

Findings of the study provide practical implications for marketers in professional soccer leagues within the United States. The key aspect of this study, separating it from the majority of soccer spectator research, was the study sample—utilizing soccer participants as potential consumers of professional soccer leagues. When attempting to market to participants, it is essential to select appropriate target groups. The present study revealed that males and players with playing experience at the college level or above were more committed to watching games. Thus, when looking to expand their fan base, professional soccer franchises would be well served to first target the most competitive male soccer leagues within their geographic territory. These leagues, opposed to less competitive co-ed or female leagues will provide the most highly committed and likely group of individuals to attend or watch professional soccer matches. Accordingly, these professional soccer leagues and teams should develop marketing strategies in attempting to satisfy needs of these segments in concentrated effort to grow their fan base. Future research should examine whether commitment to watching soccer games is team specific, league specific or non-denominational in nature. Future research should also determine if there is a difference in the commitment level to spectating indoor soccer from the more traditional outdoor soccer.