In its first 15 years of existence, Major League Soccer (MLS) has progressed from a 10-team league in its inaugural year of 1996 to a 16-team league in the 2010 season. In addition to an increasing number of clubs, another sign of MLS's growth has been the construction of soccer-specific stadiums. Since the 1999 opening of Columbus Crew Stadium in Columbus, Ohio, eight additional soccer facilities have been built, and in 2010, 10 of the 16 MLS clubs played in soccer-specific stadiums. MLS officials have, in fact, long emphasized the importance of building soccer specific-stadiums. Exemplifying the league's focus on this strategy, Commissioner Don Garber commented in his 2007 State of the League address that getting all teams playing in soccer-only stadiums was essential for the future of MLS. In a 2010 interview, meanwhile, Garber touted the opening of soccer-specific stadiums as one of the most important developments during the league's first 15 years.

From research in numerous sport contexts, it appears that one of the major benefits to be derived from the construction of a new stadium is a “novelty effect” leading to increased attendance. Such a novelty effect has been found to exist in such contexts as Major League Baseball (Coates and Humphreys, 2005; Howard and Crompton, 2003), minor league baseball (Roy, 2008), the National Football League (Howard and Crompton, 2003), the National Basketball Association (Coates and Humphreys, 2005; Howard and Crompton, 2003), the National Hockey League (Howard and Crompton, 2003), and German professional soccer (Feddersen, Maennig, & Borcherding, 2006). However, while previous research has identified a positive relationship between new stadium construction and attendance in many professional sport leagues, such an investigation has not been carried out in the context of MLS. Because of this gap in the literature, in addition to the long-standing emphasis placed on the construction of soccer-specific stadiums by MLS officials, the purpose of the current study was to investigate the impact of newly-constructed soccer-specific stadiums on attendance in MLS.

In the current study, staff members of each MLS club were contacted to obtain official attendance data for all years in each team's history. The relationship between soccer-specific stadiums and attendance was then assessed through two statistical tests. First, a repeated measures t-test was used to compare each team’s average attendance during its final season in a multi-purpose venue with that during its initial season in a soccer-specific stadium. Second, a Mann–Whitney U test was used to compare the average attendance of teams playing in multi-purpose venues with that of teams playing in soccer-specific stadiums.

The current study identified seven teams that had moved from a multi-purpose venue to a soccer-specific stadium during MLS’s 15-year history. On average, the attendance of these teams increased by 20.6 percent during their first seasons in soccer-specific stadiums. The results of a repeated-measures t-test, meanwhile, indicated an attendance increase that approached significance, but was not significant at the .05 level (p = 0.063). Further, the results of a Mann–Whitney U test indicated there was not a significant difference between the average attendance rankings of teams playing in multi-purpose venues and those playing in soccer-specific stadiums in any year from 2006 to 2010.

Given that the raw data indicated that six of seven teams experienced attendance increases during their first seasons in a new stadium, the current findings suggest that the novelty effect appears to have existed to some extent in MLS. However, caution in interpreting this result is merited due to the fact that a repeated-measures t-test indicated the difference in attendance before and after moving into a new stadium was not significant at the .05 level. Although it appears the novelty effect in MLS has not been as strong as that identified in MLB (Coates & Humphreys, 2003) and minor league baseball (Roy, 2008), difficulty exists in comparing the results of the current study to those in other sports due to such factors as ticket demand and stadium capacity. For example, Coates and Humphreys (2005) found relatively little impact of a new facility on attendance for NFL teams, which they reasoned may be due to the high
frequency of sold-out games during the NFL season. This may explain why the novelty effect appears to have been strongest in contexts such as MLB (Coates & Humphreys, 2005) and minor league baseball (Roy, 2008), where sell-outs are much less frequent. In turn, due to the fact sell-outs have occurred relatively infrequently for MLS teams playing in multi-purpose venues, one might have expected the novelty effect to be relatively strong in MLS. However, it is also important to consider the fact that the newly-constructed soccer-specific stadiums in MLS are generally smaller than the multi-purpose venues they replace. To the extent that a new stadium can accommodate fewer spectators than the demand for tickets that exists, stadium size may constrain attendance. However, sell-outs also have occurred relatively infrequently for most MLS clubs after moving into soccer-specific stadiums; thus, stadium size did not appear to play a significant role for most teams included in the current study. For example, the Chicago Fire, the one team that did not experience an attendance increase during its first season in a soccer-specific stadium, saw attendance decline from 17,238 per match in their last year at Soldier Field to 14,111 per match in their first season at Toyota Park, which was well below the new venue’s capacity of 20,000. Indeed, Chicago is indicative of the majority of MLS clubs, which have had excess seating capacity at both their old and new stadiums.

Also providing reason to take caution in thinking about the effectiveness of soccer-specific stadiums as a means to attract spectators is the fact that a Mann–Whitney U test indicated there was not a significant difference between the average attendance rankings of teams playing in multi-purpose venues and those playing in soccer-specific stadiums. While some teams playing in soccer-specific stadiums, such as Toronto FC, have frequently sold out their regular-season home matches, many other clubs in soccer-specific stadiums have not attracted such strong spectator followings. On the other hand, the Seattle Sounders, who share a venue with the NFL’s Seattle Seahawks, have led the league in attendance during each of their first two seasons.

In conclusion, the current study raises some important questions about the possibilities of soccer-specific stadiums for creating substantial long-term increases in MLS teams’ fan bases. Although moving from multi-purpose venues to soccer-specific stadiums has resulted in modest attendance gains for most teams, statistical evaluation did not reveal a significant attendance increase in teams’ first seasons in soccer-specific stadiums nor did it identify a difference between the attendance rankings of teams playing in soccer-specific stadiums and those playing in multi-purpose venues. Overall, while this study provides some insight regarding the effectiveness of building soccer-specific stadiums as a means of increasing its fan base, it is important to keep in mind that MLS is a relatively young league that certainly must consider an array of issues as it moves forward.