The victory in the 2011 Women's World Cup (WWC) by Japan marked an historic moment in Japanese women's sport history. Since the WWC victory, the average number of spectators at Nadeshiko League (the Japanese women's professional soccer league) matches has increased from 789 to 4213 as of 30 October 2011 (Japan Women's Football League, 2011). The single-match attendance record has been broken three times since the Japanese National Team won the WWC (Chubachi, 2011). A league record crowd of 24,546 attended an Albirex Niigata Ladies match against Inac Kobe Leonessa. An indication of the significant economic impact of winning the WWC, Mitsui Sumitomo Insurance Co. Ltd and Toyota Motor Corp. signed an agreement to become Nadeshiko League official sponsors from 2011 through March 2013.

This is not the first time winning a major international women's soccer event has positively impacted women's sport in the victorious country. In 1999, the U.S. hosted and won the WWC, laying the groundwork for the establishment of the Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA) and later, Women's Professional Soccer (WPS). However, the WUSA ultimately failed, (Canales, 2009; McDonogh, 2011) and the WPS is currently struggling (Killion, 2011). The Nadeshiko League now finds itself situated similarly to leagues in the U.S. after a WWC victory. What lessons could Nadeshiko League administrators learn from the WUSA and WPS to help ensure their league maintains its momentum from Japan winning the WWC? The purpose of this study is to (a) compare the status of women's professional soccer leagues in Japan and the U.S. after their respective national teams won the WWC, (b) understand why leagues in the U.S. struggled and failed, (c) suggest marketing strategies Nadeshiko League administrators could use to help their league continue to be successful, and (d) present a cross-cultural examination of women's professional sport.

The Japanese women's national team was first formed in 1981 and has made notable progress in the last few years, consistently improving its world ranking status from 13th in 2006 to 4th in 2011. Japan's first-ever nationwide soccer tournament for women was held in 1979, ten years before the women's league (initially known as the L-League) was launched. This is now a two-division league with 21 teams. The Nadeshiko League (9 Teams) is Division I and the Challenge League is Division II (12 teams) (JFA Nadeshiko Media Guide, 2011).

The U.S. women's national team played its first game in 1985. Since then the team won two Women's World Cups and three Olympic Women's Gold Medals (U.S. Soccer, 2011). The U.S. team is currently ranked first in the world by the FIFA Women's World Rankings (FIFA, 2011). The success of the 1999 WWC launched the development of the first-ever premier women's professional soccer league in the U.S., the Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA) (Jowdy & McDonald, 2003). However, the league was unable to sustain itself, discontinuing operations in 2003 (WUSA, 2003). One suggested reason this decision was that the league operation and administrative expenses were not monitored or adjusted in a timely fashion. (Southall, Nagel, & LeGrande, 2005). Additionally, McDonogh (2011) noted five major factors that contributed to the WUSA's demise: (a) an inadequate initial business model, (b) a social and cultural context that was unwilling to embrace and support women's professional sport teams, (c) ineffective upper-level leadership resulting in a lack of trust of the players and team-level leaders, (d) lack of a clear identity and branding message, and (e) a sense of inevitable failure from before the first kick-off. In the years after the WUSA folded, a new professional soccer opportunity arose in the U.S. – Women's Professional Soccer (WPS). Hoping to learn from the WUSA, the WPS business model was designed more realistically. WPS average attendance increased from 2,714 to 5,126 after the US National Team’s second place finish in the 2011 WWC. The Western New York Flash saw a league-record crowd of 15,404 fans for a match against magicJack (Kassouf, 2011).
Two very different countries now share the common factors of winning the WWC and having women’s professional soccer leagues in action. In attempting to compare women’s soccer in both countries so as to see how the Nadeshiko League can continue to be successful, it is important to look at a variety of descriptive factors, including the number of registered soccer players, the governance structure for soccer in each country, and efforts to increase grassroots participation by girls and women. Beyond that, it is important to examine strategic frameworks from the sport marketing literature which Nadeshiko League administrators may employ to help their league avoid the failures and ameliorate the challenges experienced by the WUSA and WPS.

One such framework is the Sports Interest Inventory (SII), developed by Funk, Mahony, and Ridinger (2002) to assess potential motives for spectators attending the 1999 WWC (Funk et al., 2001) and 1999 U. S. Nike Cup (Funk, el al., 2002). This framework suggests that sport marketers use the following strategies to successfully promote women’s sports: (a) enhancing community level efforts to build awareness and support for local teams, (b) focusing promotional efforts on current fans of a particular team, (c) maximizing product extensions that contribute to overall excitement events, (d) designing cause-related marketing efforts to target individuals interested in women’s issues in general, (e) creating player-designed promotional efforts around players’ status as role models, (f) focusing on maintaining affordable ticket prices, and (g) providing a wholesome, family oriented environment (Funk et al. 2001). This paper will also add the use of social media as a strategy (Filo, 2011) into the existing SII model. Given the backdrop of the descriptive information about women’s soccer in Japan, this presentation will explain how WUSA and WPS used these strategies to varying degrees of success. Next, these same strategies will be utilized to analyze the ability of the Nadeshiko League to continue to be successful. Finally, this paper provides an interesting examination of women’s professional sport in a cross-cultural context, by examining leagues in Japan and the U.S. This discussion can lay the groundwork for future studies in this area.