THESIS/DISSERTATION APPROVED BY

July 17, 2019
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IMPACT OF SPECIAL EVENTS AND FAN-PLAYER BONDING ON IDENTIFIED FAN CONSUMPTION – A STUDY OF PROFESSIONAL SOCCER IN THE UNITED STATES

By

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of the Creighton University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration, in the Department of Heider College of Business

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Omaha, NE

July 12, 2019

ABSTRACT

Professional soccer in the United States continues to grow in popularity. This provides opportunities for professional soccer teams to expand revenues through enhanced fan consumption of goods and services of which teams derive direct financial benefit. The primary purpose of this study is to examine how fan attendance at team special events and player appearances (subsequently referenced as fan-player bonding) impacts fan consumption. The results indicate that both special events and fan-player bonding independently have a positive impact on merchandise sales and media viewership, but do not impact game attendance. The moderating impact of special event attendance and fan-player bonding is also not supported. The results of this study provide insights that can help fan consumption grow within the professional U.S. soccer industry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To those people whom have supported me through this marvelous and arduous journey, I dedicate these lines. When I embarked in this seemingly overly-ambitious adventure, I had no idea I would be tested in so many different ways. First, my most sincere appreciation to my dissertation committee, Dr. Kathleen Sheehan, Dr. Kristie Briggs, and Dr. Jim Zboja. Your guidance, leadership and patience through this process have been hugely beneficial for me. Thank you for taking time to mentor me and also sharing your vast knowledge and experience. I am forever grateful.

I also want to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Anne York, and my historic cohort, my partners in this journey. I learned from you in ways you can't imagine. Thank you for elevating the bar, it has been a privilege to travel this road with you. From this group, I especially want to thank Dr. Don Lux. Thank you, Don, for your patience and your relentless uplifting.

Special thanks to Dr. Kristie Briggs, who inspired, motivated, and at times reinvigorated me in ways I sorely needed in order to get through some stretches. Thank you also to B.; this achievement would have been impossible without your insight and support.

Most importantly, I cannot begin to express my thanks to my family. Thank you, Mia, Lina, Javi and Virginia, for providing me with daily inspiration, for putting up with my stress, my unavailable nights and those memories I missed while pursuing this. Thank you for allowing me to fulfill yet another dream. Without your support and your unconditional love, this would not mean a thing.

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, the sports industry is valued at over $1.3 trillion annually (Plunkett Research, 2017). In the U.S. alone, the sports industry is a top 10 business sector (DeSarbo & Madrigal, 2012) estimated to be worth more than $73.5 billion (Forbes, 2018). Given the current sports landscape, metropolitan areas are often investing hundreds of millions of dollars to secure facilities for their sports franchises, with hopes to earn revenues that far exceed these costs. Still, sports properties show a mixed bag of business results, with some professional teams struggling for attendance while others enjoy consistent sell-outs and massive television contracts.

The primary purpose of this study is to examine how fan attendance at team special events and player appearances (subsequently referenced as fan-player bonding) impacts fan consumption of U.S. professional soccer. I am especially interested in exploring if fan-player bonding moderates the impact of special events on fan consumption. Fan consumption is measured in three distinct ways: through merchandising revenues, game attendance, and television subscriptions to Major League Soccer (MLS) Direct. This study follows the suggestion of Sutton, Mc Donald, Milne and Cimperman (1997) to more fully understand that impact of fan-player bonding and team identification in professional soccer.

In order to provide context to the study, background information on the history of soccer and a discussion of the current state of soccer in the U.S. is first provided before presenting a more formal review of related literature.

BACKGROUND

Soccer is the most popular sport internationally. It has a great tradition of success primarily in Europe and Latin America, where its importance in the lives of individuals across the continents has produced ritualized atmospheres among supporters and fostered the emergence of subcultures centered in national identity (Giulianotti, 2005). In Europe, football (known in the U.S. as soccer) is the most popular sport and also the sport attracting the largest investments. In 2018, the overall size of the European football market was $28 billion (Delloite, 2018).

The sport of soccer has been present as a semi-organized and collegiate sport in the United States since the 1820s (US Soccer, 2014). Though the first professional soccer league in the US was established in 1921, many professional football (soccer) leagues have been founded and subsequently folded, until the arrival of MLS in 1996 (US Soccer, 2014). MLS was formed as a mandatory condition established by the world's organizing and ruling body, FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association), as the United States had to have a functioning professional league in order to receive the rights to host the 1994 FIFA World Cup.

The first ever MLS game was in 1996, with the league kicking off its inaugural season with 10 teams in 10 different markets. Through the first 15 years of play, MLS experimented with various marketing approaches in order to gain attention from the North American sports market. Colorful uniforms, gimmicky rule changes, promotional campaigns, and highlighting of marquee players, were among the strategies utilized. MLS tried desperately to avoid what had happened to many leagues which have surfaced and quickly perished. In many instances, the novelty factor ended, and the leagues and

teams had the urgency to develop more sophisticated marketing strategies in order to maintain consumer interest and to prevent a decline in attendance (Mahony, Nakazawa, Funk, James & Gladden, 2002).

Upon enduring the nascent years, during the 20th anniversary year of MLS (2015), there were some impressive statistics that showed just how far professional soccer had come in a short period of time. Average attendance was up, merchandising was blooming, and TV viewership, although modest, continued to trend positively (Statista, 2018). Around that time, soccer was (and still is) the biggest sport in the U.S. by participation (Sportcal, 2017). Millennials and post-millennials composed 67% of fans (Forbes, 2018); MLS averaged over 24,294 fans per game league-wide, surpassing much older and well-established leagues such as basketball's NBA, or hockey's NHL. Currently, MLS sits as the seventh most attended soccer league in the world (Sportcal, 2017). A recent Gallup poll shows soccer ranks second in popularity only to American football among the coveted 18-34 age demographic. Average attendance in MLS is over 24,000 fans, third behind NFL and Major League Baseball (Haden, 2018). MLS has seen growth from 10 teams in 1996 to 24 teams today, with four more expected to enter league play by 2024, a testament to the sport's good business model and its expanding footprint in the United States and Canada. Finally, a good sign of increased fan interest in MLS is reflected through social media; MLS-related social media activity grew 43% from 2014 to 2017 (Opendorse, 2018).

MLS and soccer in general need to be careful with their accelerated growth and the potentially fragile state of the league. Perhaps the J-League, Japan's top professional soccer league, provides a good example of what to avoid. The J-League started in 1993

and fans came to games in droves during the early years to experience something new. But the novelty factor soon wore out and attendance, merchandise and viewership quickly fizzled out (Mahony et al., 2002). This is the dilemma and marketing quagmire that faces MLS at the moment: finding a way to transition from a young league with moderate balance and fiscal stability, into a level of maturity which allows for wider recognition, consumption, higher revenues and sustainability for decades to come.

Given the recent massive growth in profits and the immense potential of the sport in the United States (with a new and ever-growing generation of fans), top marketing companies in the U.S. continue to explore ways to gather and analyze data, using data analytics to understand the American soccer fan better. For example, through discussions with marketing managers, some of the questions marketers are asking about the soccer fan include: what is the lifetime value of a soccer fan? What is the best way to predict consumption from the American soccer fan? What is the proper segmentation for these fans? What are the pronounced purchasing patterns and behaviors? Where is the biggest opportunity as far as fan consumption? How important it is for fans to know the athletes, or at least "feel" like they know the athletes? To answer these questions, sports organizations are increasingly designing and implementing relationship marketing, through highly targeted practices, including through mainstream media and social media. The more clubs and marketers learn about their customer (i.e. the fan), the more targeted and personalized the message and the connection can be (Funk, James, 2006).

Historically, sports properties have solely depended on on-field success to generate revenues (Gunnion, 2015). When the team puts a winning product on the field, business is good; yet when the team does not see success on the field, overall enthusiasm,

press coverage, and fan consumption drops. These outcomes result in a decrease in team popularity, revenue losses and even a damage to the team brand. Millions of dollars in revenue are generated or lost annually as a result of fan attendance, television contracts, and team merchandise sales (Barrett, 1995; Boroughs, 1995).

Today, the objective in professional sports has also evolved from merely retaining a spectator base by way of captivating fans through winning, to cultivating a personal and highly targeted relationship with the fan that is robust and stable regardless of team performance (Matsuoka, et al., 2003). The Cleveland Browns, Boston Red Sox, and Chicago Cubs are examples of teams that went decades without winning titles, yet were able to develop robust fan dedication that produced impressive attendance and merchandise sales consistently ranked among their leagues' best. Similarly, the Philadelphia 76ers have been profitable despite poor performance on the court, because of the passion of the team's followers (Ozanian, 2013). Most importantly for the purposes of this study, Sporting Kansas City of MLS, went from a team that almost moved markets (because of lack of interest, low attendance and low revenues), to a club consistently experiences high ticket demand and sold-out stadiums even when the team's field performance is not maximized. Despite Sporting Kansas City being one of the smaller markets in MLS, merchandise sales are in the top-half across the league (Forbes, 2018).

I believe the commercial success of Sporting Kansas City is a result of fan's enhanced team identification facilitated by fan attendance at special team events and fan-player bonding opportunities. The next section more formally considers marketing literature as it relates to team identification and consumption, as well as a review of

literature on the foundational constructs of this study—specifically, team identification, fan consumption, special events, and fan-player bonding.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Customer Relationship Marketing

Team identification stems from a perceived relationship with the team. Similar to many other industries today, in order to be successful, sports properties have the pressure of getting to know their customers to the best of their ability. Customer relationship marketing (CRM) has been a staple of business in general for as long as people have been trading goods and services, with practitioners and academics in the field of marketing repeatedly highlighting the importance of establishing communication, building, developing and maintaining relationships in order to not only acquire, but also preserve a robust customer base.

Zablah, Bellenger and Johnston (2004) define CRM as an ongoing process that involves the development and leveraging of market intelligence for the purpose of building and maintaining a profit-maximizing portfolio of customer relationships. In sports, organizations that successfully implement relationship marketing programs and are able to develop long-term relationships with its fans, consistently increase the likelihood of customer retention (Gray-Wert-Gray, 2011). Professional sports today are an ideal example of relationship marketing strategy at work, and its focus on maximizing customer lifetime value (Bolton, 1998; Kim, Trail, Woo, & Zhang; 2011; Shani, & Chalasani, 1992; Achen, 2014). Bee and Kahle (2006) stated that "all sports marketing transactions, in fact, involve some type of relationship marketing." A high percentage of

customers feel emotionally attached to and are fans of the team, which supports long-term relationship development. In essence, emotional attachment resembles team identification in that there is a personal commitment and emotional involvement consumers have with a sport organization.

When a customer identifies closely with an organization, a sense of connectedness ensues and he or she begins to define him or herself in terms of the organization. Sport then, taps into high levels of emotional attachment and identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). As Zboja and Hartline (2010) describe it, marketing practitioners and academics alike appreciate the importance of relationship building in establishing and maintaining a solid customer base. They stress that relationship marketing has become ubiquitous because of the benefits that organizations realize from its practice. Previously, the focus was once simply on customer acquisition until organizations learned that it costs on average 5 to 10 times more to find a new customer as it does to sell to an existing one (e.g., Vavra, 2001). Meanwhile, Reichheld and Sasser (1990) highlighted that a 5% reduction in customer defections can boost profits anywhere from 25% to 85%. Because most companies reap 80% of their profits from 20% of their customer base (Ness, Shrobeck, Letendre, & Douglas, 2001), it is vital that firms be able to understand the value of existing customer relationships so that customer retention strategies can be used most effectively.

Given the higher costs of acquiring new customers (fans) in relation to the potential benefit in long-term revenue, the focus for marketers therefore has become to retain and cultivate those fans already existing within their databases. This being the case, CRM is closely aligned with database marketing and other forms of highly-

segmented and highly-targeted marketing initiatives. CRM has begun to be widely adopted by sports clubs, for whom the most important customers are its supporters, as they provide direct income through ticket purchases and supporter gear purchases, as well as indirect income through sponsorship and television contracts. Although supporters are different from traditional customers (non-sport fans) in that they are characterized by a strong sense of loyalty to their favorite club (Furuholt & Skutle, 2007), sport clubs must still in many ways behave like traditional companies.

CRM implementation allows organizations to track contacts and transactions with customers, which in theory, allows employees to interact with customers effectively despite large numbers (Mitussis, O'Malley, & Patterson, 2006). In sports, this is framed as the team interaction with fans. Furuholt and Skutle (2007) used questionnaires to obtain CRM usage insights from some of the top soccer clubs in Europe. They found that the main advantages found by most had to do with improved customer information, efficiency, improved customer relationship, as well as the ability to tailor-make offers for various customer segments. As stated by Gronroos (1996), while database marketing is often used as a synonym for relationship marketing, in reality, relationship marketing is much more than data gathering or data mining. For the purposes of this paper, given that data was obtained through technologically implemented CRM systems and other technologies, I focus purely on the relational nature of marketing, as teams make available their most precious assets: the brand as a whole and the athletes themselves.

Team Identification

The concept of team identification is a foundational construct of this study. Team identification has been studied thoroughly by various fields, primarily psychology, sociology, sports science, and management, as it borders these fields in a variety of ways. Considering the nature of the sports business, specifically within general management and marketing fields, team identification is a prominent factor that undoubtedly has the potential of positively or negatively affecting the bottom line (Matsuoka, Chelladurai, & Harada, 2003; Wakefield & Sloan, 1995). Social identification researchers pose that levels of identification with an organization depend on satisfaction with the organization, the organization's reputation, frequency of contact, as well as the visibility of the affiliation (Bhattacharya, Rao & Glynn, 1995). Specific to sports, team identification is grounded in social identity theory (Van Leeuwen, Quick & Daniel, 2002), which may be best described as the psychological theory of group membership, group processes and intergroup relations (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel 1978;). Ashford and Mael (1989) define identification as the perception of oneness with or belonging to a particular human group, such as specific organization or profession. The identification area of research examines the perceptions, behaviors and level of connectedness felt by sports fans toward their respective athletic teams (Rocca & Vogl-Bauer, 1999). Similar, Cheney and Tompkins (1987) pose that organizational identification, similar to the relationship between fans and teams, is a symbolic and psychological association with significant outcomes for both organizations and their members. Specific to sports, team identification is defined as a person's attachment to a sports team (Gray & Wert-Gray, 2012). Fullerton and Merz (2008) proposed that team identification should be considered in two dimensions, labelling these as emotional involvement (or the psychological

attachment) and personal commitment (representing a fan's tendency to engage in various consumption behaviors, such as spending time or money). Research on sports fans have demonstrated a positive relationship between fan identification and self-esteem (Phua, 2010).

Previous literature has shown team identification to be a strong predictor of sports fan consumption behavior in the form of attendance to games (Wakefield & Sloan, 1995; Matsuoka et al., 2003; Fisher and Wakefield, 1998; Murrell and Dietz, 1992; Laverie and Arnett, 2000). Gray & Wert-Gray (2012) linked team identification with consumption in four different ways: physical attendance, media-based attendance, responsiveness to merchandise (merchandise sales), and word-of-mouth communication. Team identification, just as brand loyalty, elicits a strong emotional connection with a sports team and has a strong positive impact on the purchasing behavior of individuals (Oman, Pepur & Arneric, 2016). In this study I will focus on consumption as three of the behaviors previously studied under its umbrella: physical attendance, media-based viewership and merchandising.

McDonald and Milne (1999) define team identification as the personal commitment and emotional involvement a person has with a sports organization. Theodorakis et al. (2012) described team identification as the "degree to which a fan believe that the team is an extension of his or herself." It is also referred to as the extent to which a fan feels a psychological connection to a team and/or player and is a central component of one's overall social identity (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). Wann et al. refer to team identification as potentially one of the main drivers of consumption of sports. Indeed, Matsuoka, et al. (2003), Wakefield and Sloan, (1995)

suggest that one of the most important aspects of team identification, especially as it relates to marketers, is that team identification can influence consumption and purchase decisions. Fans who identify strongly with a particular team are more likely to watch games in person or through media, pay more for tickets, spend more on team merchandise, and stay loyal to the team during periods of poor performance (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998).

Wann and Branscombe (1993) have suggested that the differences in team identification levels (low, medium, high) explained the phenomena of die-hard and fair-weather fans. Fair weather fans only associate with the team when it is performing well, while die-hard fans show allegiance regardless of performance. Fair weather fans are the cause of attendance fluctuations that occur as the result of winning or losing seasons. Murrel and Dietz (1992) have reported similar findings in that as identification with a team increases, so does the level of support exhibited by the individual.

Sutton et. al (1997) described low, medium and high identification as *social fans, focused fans* and *vested fans*, respectively. Social fans have a relatively passive long-term relationship with the sport; they are low on emotion, involvement, but a relationship exists. These fans may be identified purely by the entertainment value of the product. They follow the entertainment, not necessarily the team. Additionally, the outcome of the sporting event is not as important as the quality of the entertainment opportunity. Social fans may attend games because of a tailgate party, a postgame concert, or the enjoyment of the social interaction. In contrast, focused fans have an association with a sport or team that is based upon some attributes or elements found to be attractive. Although these fans may make significant personal investments in the team, the behavior

is directly correlated to team performance and therefore may be short term. Focused fans may find promotional opportunities such as buying season tickets in order to secure All-Star tickets. Lastly, the vested fans are the strongest, most loyal and longest-term relationship a fan can have with a sport or a team. This relationship typically involves a heavy investment and commitment either in terms of time or money (or both). Their loyalty to their team is like their loyalty to their community; it is unwavering and long-term.

Sutton et al. (1997) also identified two managerial benefits from increased team identification: decreased price sensitivity and decreased performance-outcome sensitivity. These benefits would drive revenue to the team and a predictability to the business side of the organization. Despite price increases yearly, sports fans continue to consume, a trend largely based on those highly committed to the team and its products. Decreased performance-outcome sensitivity involves the concept that as the level of identification and involvement increases, the less likely the fan's behaviors will be impacted by team performance (Sutton, et. al., 1997). This idea is also shared by Schafer (1969) and Fink et al. (2002), where the authors state that if a fan's only motive is to build self-esteem through the association with a successful other, he/she will be tempted to disassociate themselves when the team is unsuccessful.

Previous research has also shown that team identification can be reflected and manifested through various responses in fans. Higher levels of team identification in fans tend to report higher levels of sport fan aggression (Rocca & Vogl-Bauer, 1999; Wann, Carlson & Shrader, 1999). Team identification is highly correlated with fans' attempts to manipulate their association with a team, also known as BIRGing (basking-in-reflected-

glory) (Trail, Anderson & Lee, 2006) and consumption decisions (Matsuoka et al., 2005). For the purposes of this study, I refer to team identification only as the fan's psychological attachment to a team (Theodorakis, 2012), or in other words, the extent to which a fan feels a psychological connection to the team and is a central component of the person's overall social identity (Wann, Melnick, Russel & Pease, 2001).

In exploring interrelationships among overall sport team identification, specific aspects of team identification and behavioral intentions, Theodorakis, et al. (2012) used the antecedents approach to find that both overall identification and the specific dimensions of identification predicted behavioral loyalty and the dimensions predicted overall identification. That is, various factors, along with team identification, increase behavioral loyalty from fans.

Wann and Branscombe (1993) also found that identification influenced several other sport spectator consumption variables. Highly identified individuals reported attending more home games than less identified individuals. Highly identified fans also reported a greater likelihood of attending away games. They reported that they would spend more money to obtain regular season, playoff and championship tickets, while also reporting that these fans would be willing to spend greater amounts of time waiting in line for tickets than those less highly identified.

Team identification has also been explored when including other variables which are more market-driven. Through various pieces of literature produced by Wann et al. (2001) among other researchers, variables such as geographic location (Uemukai, Takenouchi, Okuda, Matsumoto, & Yamanaka, 1995), perceived similarity with the team (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998), team historical success (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Gwinner

& Swanson, 2003; Sutton, et al., 1997) and individual player performance (Wann, Koch, Knoth, Fox, Aljubaily & Lantz, 2006) have been analyzed. As expected, geographical proximity has a positive relationship with identification, fans are identified at higher levels with winning teams, and historically successful performers draw a higher level of identification by fans.

Wann et al. (2001) identified from previous studies eight factors motivating sports fans to be spectators: self-esteem, entertainment, group affiliation, family, aesthetics, eustress, escape, and economics. The authors developed the Sport Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS) to measure these eight motivations. Trail, et al. (2003) provided preliminary findings regarding the influence of motivations on fan identification. In a separate study, Wann et al. (2006) then focused a great deal of their writing to team identification and emphasized developing ways of measurement for the concept. After the Sport Fan Motivation Scale, Wann helped develop the SSIS scale, or Sport Spectator Identification Scale (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). The SSIS scale (a short fan survey) has become widely used by many other researchers who have been involved with the collection and interpretation of primary data (Theodorakis, et al 2012). Wann also pointed out that sports viewers may be different than sports fans. Viewers may not necessarily be sports fans, although they could be categorized into one specific level of identification (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001).

Gray and Wert-Gray (2012) borrowed from MacDonald and Milne (1997) when they looked at four consumption behaviors related to the bond between the organization and its fans. First, MacDonald and Milne (1997) and Gray and Wert-Gray focused on usage, which included in-person attendance, media-based attendance (television, online

content, etc.), merchandise purchases, as well as word-of-mouth communication. These authors included their concepts as they relate to the fans' relationship to the team as it pertains to the study of team identification, only with an emphasis on satisfaction with team performance (Gray & Wert-Gray 2012).

The authors stated their belief that by strengthening the relationship between the organization and the fan, there is an increase in the likelihood of customer retention, aside from fan consumption. In order to examine customer retention and repurchase behaviors in sports, Gray and Wert-Gray (2012) collected data from 40 teams in seven different sports, both amateur and professional. Gray and Wert-Gray explored loyalty (team identification), satisfaction, retention and their relationships. They found a positive relationship between satisfaction and team identification (psychological constructs), and consumption (behavioral). The authors suggested that it could prove beneficial to perform similar studies with a few adjustments: (1) seeking other ways to foster team identification, (2) additional factors impacting retention, and (3) behavioral patterns exhibited by fans.

Fan Consumption

Raney (2006) posits that the uses and gratifications approach explained the reason *why* fans consumed sports in general. Various researchers have pointed out that within the business of sports, there has been a shift from customer acquisition mentality to more of a customer relation and customer retention emphasis (Fullerton & Merz, 2008; Vavra, 2001; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). Contrary to previous approaches, those who purchase tickets to a game or event are not the only important constituents; because sports are

consumed in a variety of ways, modern sports demand that marketers also work to increase viewership and listenership on a variety of broadcast media. This media includes TV, premium cable, satellite networks and as of late, streamed media, with an emphasis on mobile technology (Fullerton & Merz, 2008). The collective understanding of this concept has allowed many marketers to more effectively seek ways of capitalizing on the long-term value that each of their own customers represents. As such, in order to begin to understand the lifetime value of a customer (amongst other things), researchers and managers must understand what overall consumption is, as well as what the direct relationships may be between customer relationships and fan consumption. Consequently, within this study I focus the research question on fan consumption as a dependent variable.

Previous research (Mahony et al., 2002; Trail et al., 2002; Funk, Mahony, & Ridinger, 2002; McDonald & Milne, 1999; Trail & James, 2001; Wann, 1995) on sport consumer motives gave a glimpse into possible factors why fans may or may not attend sporting events, why highly identified fans attend events, and why consumption happens through merchandise sales. Similar to this study, MacDonald & Milne (1997) present three behaviors indicative of bond-type relationships between an organization and its fans: usage, in the form of in-person attendance; media-based consumption, which refers to any consumption done by way of watching television, purchasing special team game packages, or online content on computer or mobile devices; product merchandise consumption, which refers to purchases made on team gear, official merchandising, etc. For this study, I look at media-based viewership consumption through the purchase of the MLS Direct Kick, pay-per-view package.

Media-based consumption can be used to provide consumption metrics on fan behavior, and it can measure a fan's commitment in both time and money (tv ratings, subscriptions etc.). Mass communication and repeated exposure to teams via media serves a as powerful tool in the socialization process, thereby increasing team identification, resulting in greater likelihood to voluntarily expose oneself to events involving the target team in the future (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Wann &Branscombe, 1993; Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). As an example, Disney, ESPN's parent company, reported that the 2014 World Cup was ESPN's most-viewed and highest-rated telecast ever; the total viewership through the first 60 matches of the 2014 World cup increased 42% from the 2010 World Cup, and the 64 matches on ESPN averaged close to 4.5 million viewers (Boudway, 2014). In 2014, the U.S. versus Portugal game attracted 18.2 million viewers, the second-most-watched World Cup game on ABC of all time (Cardillo, 2014). The 2014 World Cup provided a unique opportunity for researchers to examine how media consumption and fan identification of a singular sport impact nationalized attachments, as well as delineate how success (wins) or failure (much more easily defined in a World Cup than the Olympic Games, via team elimination) potentially affect nationalized qualities (Devlin & Billings, 2016). When studying MMA fans, Andrew, Kim, O'Neal, Greenwell & James (2009) found that consumption of media could be enhanced by scheduling matches where dominant fighters were able to assert their dominance on competitors of less skill. These events become a point of attachment for fans. Being able to measure media viewership, its ratings and subscriptions, researchers are better able to understand the fans' appetite and their commitment to

teams, but studying viewership alone provides no detailed approach as to potential patterns of consumption associated with that viewership.

In the context of team sports, studies aimed at explaining behavior make a convincing case for passion as a prime motivator of buying behavior (Lafreinere, Vallerand, Donahue & Lavigne, 2009; Mageau, Vallerand, Rousseau, Ratelle, & Provencher, 2005; Seguin-Levesque, Lalibertea, Pelletier, Blanchard, & Vallerand, 2003; Vallerand, Blanchard, Mageau, Koestner, Ratell, Leonard & Gagne 2003; Vallerand, Paquet, Philippe, & Charest, 2010). Responsiveness to product merchandising is also addressed by MacDonald and Milne (1997) and Gray and Wert-Gray (2012). Sport managers often operate under the assumption that sport consumers, especially highly identified fans, are not price-sensitive or have no ceiling on their willingness to pay for team licensed merchandise. A strong positive relationship was found between purchasing a team's merchandise and memorabilia and team identification (Madrigal, Howard, 1995; Moyer, Pokrywczynski, & Griffin, 2015).

In a study involving college students and their university's athletic teams, Kwon and Armstrong (2006) confirmed that students' psychological attachment (team identification) influenced their impulse buying of merchandise, while also finding that sport consumers, even those with a high level of team identification, do in fact have price sensitivity. Additionally, the perceived value of a product had a much stronger impact on their purchasing intention. Cohen (2017) believes that purchasing the team's merchandise is also a kind of investment in the team, and investment that increases one's identification with the specific team. Andrew, et al. (2009) found four prominent motives for consumption when studying Mixed Martial Arts: consumers who were at the event

merely for the experience and novelty were more likely to buy merchandise; they also found that vicarious achievement was positively correlated with merchandise consumption and that drama was as negative predictor of merchandise consumption. Also, the authors concluded that MMA fans who purchase merchandise are drawn toward fighters who are dominant and win, as the fan experiences vicarious achievement. Kwon and Armstrong (2002) used team identification as a determinant of sport consumers' wearing behavior and also a determinant of behavior when buying licensed apparel. These studies related to merchandise sales highlight the need to understand more on consumption, especially as it relates to team merchandise and licensed apparel.

The relationship between fan consumption and team identification has been well-studied. Similar to Wann and Branscombe (1990, 1993), and Wann and Dolan (1994), I believe team identification is highly useful when understanding consumption habits of fans. Fans who identify strongly with a particular team are more likely to watch games in person or through media, pay more for tickets, spend more on team merchandise, and stay loyal to the team during periods of poor performance (McDonald & Milne, 1997; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Laverie & Arnett, 2000). In highlighting the importance for clubs inciting team identification in fans, Matsuoka et al. (2003) mention how team identification was a more critical factor affecting the intent to attend future games. Similarly, Fisher and Wakefield (1998) and Wakefield and Sloan, (1995) found that loyal attitude toward the team has also been found to have a direct effect on intention to attend future games, as well as actual attendance without reference to a team's performance and/or outcome of games. In professional sports, billions of dollars in revenue are generated yearly as a result of fan attendance, television contracts and team merchandise

sales (Barrett, 1995; Boroughs, 1995). Wakefield (2016) confirmed that fan passion strongly predicted attendance consumption. Consumption may largely be a byproduct of the socialization process, suggesting that team identification is fostered through repeated exposure to the sport (Wann, 2006). With that in mind, and having established the three tiers of consumption, the specific emphasis of this study focuses on two sports marketing techniques which may affect consumption. Sutton et. al. (1997) suggest four different marketing strategies to increase team identification: a. *increase team-player accessibility to the public*, b. *increase community involvement activities*, c. *reinforce the team's history and tradition*, and d. *create opportunities for group affiliation and participation.* This study focuses solely on the first two, as these are specific to the fan-player and fan-team relationships.

Special events

Funk and James (2006) stated that community attachment and pride-in-place explained 30% of variance in team identification. Solansky (2011) suggested that managers of sport organizations should focus on creating events with the purpose to help the wider community, as team identification takes place when the club becomes closer to the local community (events such as soccer camps for children, charity initiatives, youth sports games and competitions for school age children). This sense of community among fans is prominent among all the research on identification (Sutton, et al. 1997). Also, research in mainstream social psychology literature acknowledges that identification does develop a sense of community (Crisp & Hewstone, 2007). Because managers at sporting clubs (especially soccer clubs throughout the world) get to witness and tap into fans' high

levels of engagement and enthusiasm, strategies should be developed in order to optimize and monetize this passion and enthusiasm. In fact, finding multiple ways of converting that engagement and enthusiasm into consumption is one of their primary duties. When team identification is present, fans consume in various ways; consumption may be expressed through one specific area, although fans may consume in a combination of ways.

In addition to in-game and in-venue consumption, fans may also manifest behavioral intentions and may consume, or at least further identify, by way of being part of fan clubs, team community foundations, volunteering, charter clubs, etc. Cohen (2017) states that the main finding in his study when examining soccer fans in Israel was a strong relationship between commitment to community and team identification, as community plays a major role in shaping the relationship with the local sports team. He also highlights how the presence of others who have the same strong feelings about a sports team supports individual fans to continue their allegiance to their team, even at a subconscious level. Other authors (Kolbe & James, 2000; Rhee, Wong, & Kim, 2016; Yoshida, Gordon, Heere, & James, 2015) have also pointed out that when a link can be made between the city and the team, a potentially powerful source of identification is created.

Kwon and Armstrong (2006) found that team identification has positive impacts on attitude formation and purchase intent, many times leading fans to purchase team licensed goods. Similarly, Levin, et al. (2004) found that fans that are highly identified with NASCAR events tend to demonstrate higher levels of brand loyalty towards brands not only associated with their favorite team, but also with NASCAR. As Haden (2018)

describes soccer fans, he states that "most fans stand the entire game. They chant, they sing, they cheer. They love the game, but they also love the experience. They take pride in their teams. They take pride in their cities. It's tribal. It's community. It's a melting pot. Everyone belongs." It is this sense of community that I believe is worth exploring, as that alignment between fans, team and community takes place through special events.

Fan-Player Bonding

The theory of social exchange by Thibaut and Kelley (1959) has been thoroughly studied for decades within the space that borders psychology and sociology. The theory tells us that social interaction entails a process where there is a cost-benefit analysis to determine risks and benefits. In the context of sport, one of the benefits that fans theoretically could have is a perceived relationship with athletes. Sports fans have demonstrated self-serving bias, when they attribute team success to internal factors such as a player's skill and effort, yet fans attribute their team's poor performance on other external variables such as bad luck or poor officiating (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Lau, 1984).

Darley and Berscheid (1967) mention the possibility of players becoming members of a group and fans quickly facilitating an ingroup favoritism effect. It is feasible then, that at a personal level, BIRGing the basking in reflected glory, or CORFing the cutting off reflected failure (Trail, et al., 2003) and the related expectancies from a fan perspective, may be manifested at the athlete level. As suggested by Sutton et al. (1997), a fostering of this type of experience for fans could be explored and could shed light on a source of increased identification with the team, leading to higher

consumption. After an extensive review of the literature, I believe there may be a gap that provides an opportunity to explore the fan-player bonding phenomenon when combined with other potential phenomenon. Crosset (1995) brought forth the construct of reciprocity: the exchange process between the athlete who gives his talent to the fans, who in exchange "give" their adulation and support. He proposed that this exchange is a paramount ingredient in establishing and maintaining fan interest. He argued that the gift that fans want more than anything else is accessibility, at times the gift that players and teams are most protective of and most reluctant to give. Similarly, when studying the development of team identification, Lock, Taylor, Funk and Darcy (2012) found that for fans, developing an understanding of players led to members' team identities becoming more complex and affectively significant, while also becoming promoters of the team.

To measure the construct of fan-player bonding, I focus on fan attendance to player appearances. The higher the affinity towards a player, the higher team identification is likely to be; the more identified the fan, the higher the consumption may be.

Wann et al. (2001), and Wann et al. (2006) suggested that team identification was positively linked with enhanced social identity, improved self-concept, better physical health, and increased life span. Matsuoka et al. (2003), Engel et al. (1995), and Pride and Ferrell (1997), refer to customer loyalty as one of the most critical factors influencing repurchase intentions, due to the fact that customer loyalty contains two dimensions: attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty. An attitude displaying loyalty toward the local team has been found to have a direct effect on intention to attend future games, as well as actual attendance without reference to a team's performance and/or outcomes of games

(Matsuoka et al., 2003). As discussed previously, Sutton, et al. (1997) suggest that team identification could be enhanced by specific strategies, mostly involving a deeper relationship between fans and players. With the four initiatives suggested to increase the proposed levels of team identification and our construct of fan-player bonding in mind, in this submission I focus on the relationship/affinity that fans may have towards players as well as the relationship and affinity that fans may have with and towards the team. Oman et al. (2016) suggest it would be helpful to organize informal gatherings of citizens with the players and to have the players attend charity events. It would be also useful to make the players aware of the damaging effect of negative publicity received when they behave unprofessionally on the field and outside of it, be it a lack of commitment in matches or excessively enjoying the nightlife. I predict that when attending fan-player bonding opportunities, fans may develop a deeper, personal bond with a player, or simply develop a personal affinity towards a player, and as Sutton et al. (1997) suggested, this affinity in turn makes the fan more willing to consume.

The bond created between fan and player through the contact at player appearances may raise interest from both avid and casual fans; they become a chance for teams to galvanize avid fans, but also solidify casual fans who didn't know the athletes (and now see them in person) and now could perhaps become continuous consumers of the brand. Both scenarios are theoretically good opportunities for growth and perhaps good bids for revenue-creation, although neither scenario has been studied empirically in detail.

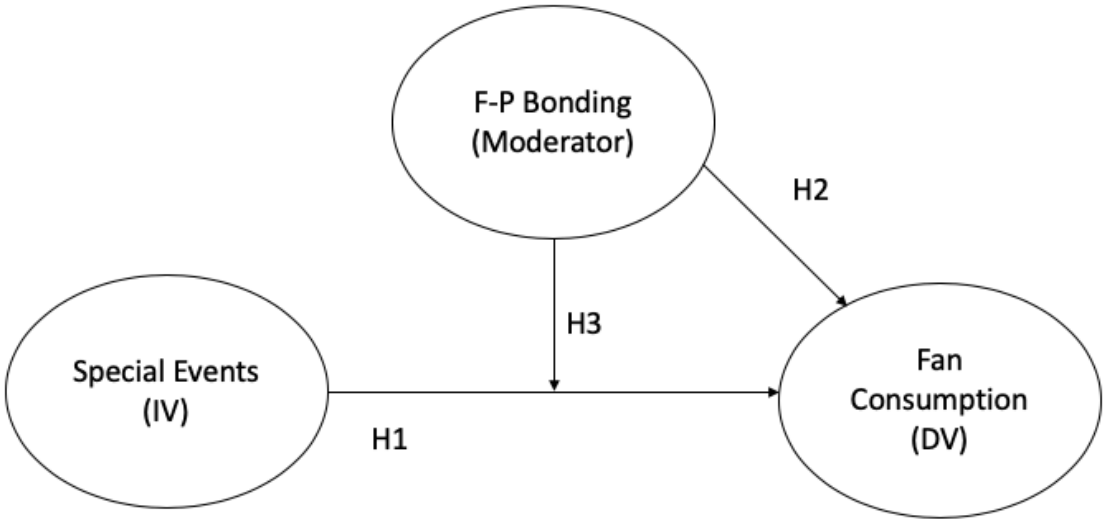
HYPOTHESES

The emphasis of this study explores whether higher attendance at off-field initiatives such as special events (community gatherings, charity functions, watch parties, soccer clinics) and fan-player bonding opportunities (player appearances), ultimately lead to increased levels of consumption. A model examining factors related to driving consumption will be developed and may show that a greater number of off-field events is related to greater consumption levels, measured through game attendance, merchandising/retail sales and viewership of the MLS Direct Kick premium TV package. Dick and Basu (1994), Backman and Crompton (1991), Mahony et al. (2000), all suggested that strong ties between a team and its fans is expressed by a high intensity of consumption. With this in mind and taking into consideration previous research, I focus on relationships between my measures to come up with the following hypotheses:

- *H1a: Special events will positively impact fan consumption as measured by game attendance*
- *H1b: Special events will positively impact fan consumption as measured by merchandising/retail sales*
- *H1c: Special events will positively impact fan consumption as measured by viewership of MLS Direct Kick*
- *H2a: Fan-player bonding will positively impact fan consumption as measured by game attendance*
- *H2b: Fan-player bonding will positively impact fan consumption as measured by merchandising/retail sales*
- *H2c: Fan-player bonding will positively impact fan consumption as measured by viewership of MLS Direct Kick*

- *H3a: Fan-player bonding moderates the effect that special events has on consumption as measured by game attendance*
- *H3b: Fan-player bonding moderates the effect that special events has on consumption as measured by merchandising/retail sales*
- *H3c: Fan-player bonding moderates the effect that special events has on consumption as measured by viewership of MLS Direct Kick*

Figure 1 - Hypothesized relationship between Special Events, Fan-Player Bonding and Fan Consumption



Hypothesis one describes special events positively impacting fan consumption and its three measurements: game attendance, merchandising/retail sales, and viewership of MLS Direct Kick. I predict that consumption will be impacted, as the sense of community and belonging for fans is enhanced by experiences. Similarly, for hypothesis two, I believe that attendance to fan-player bonding experiences will positively impact

overall consumption, as the fans' perceived increased relationship with players could be a trigger for further consumption. For hypothesis three, I believe that attendance to special events will significantly impact more overall consumption as measured by the three variables, while being moderated by fan-player bonding. The moderated interaction between special events and fan-player bonding could point to a more accentuated effect on consumption.

METHODOLOGY

Extending from previous research and following the suggestions of Sutton et al. (1997) and Gray and Wert-Gray (2012), I focus only on the sport of soccer and one specific market. Through a review of the literature I found very few other studies focusing on only one team in one specific market; I believe this approach can shed some light and provide insight to similar sized markets, expansion teams and other sports properties. Although differences do need to be considered for different sports, different geographies and different sports cultures. In a study by Andrew, Kim, O'Neal, Greenwell and James (2009), the authors find a great opportunity in studying the sport of Mixed Martial Arts, which like soccer, is in its rather formative years in the United States and may provide great insights as to what truly attracts customers. MMA, similar to soccer, has recently experienced exponential growth and relevance in the professional sports space, however, the nature of the sport, the type of fan, the frequency of events, as well as the way the sport itself is promoted, is vastly different between and among sports.

Although passion and fervor are at a premium in most of the behaviors of fans while attending events such as rallies, marches and watch parties, which are common to a

portion of soccer fans (and other sports) nation-wide, it is a vastly different experience to experience the same type of event for soccer than it is for MMA. Madrigal and Howard (1995) suggest that between-sport differences in the motives of consumers and their reasons for watching sports should be expected. They mention there may be differences also to a given league (within the same sport). As it was also pointed out by Mahony et al. (2002), previous studies have not examined the relative importance of the consumers emotional attachment to the team.

As previously mentioned, the dependent variable is fan consumption and is composed of three different measurements previously used by the aforementioned authors. The three variables are game attendance, merchandising/retail sales and viewership of MLS Direct Kick. This approach borrows some of the metrics from previous studies by Gray & Wert -Gray (2012), although total dollar amounts are only available for attendance and merchandise sales. Despite my attempts to find a study that has followed Sutton et al. (1997) and his suggestion to explore both special events and fan-player bonding deeper, I have not found any. I believe that through the three hypotheses I address two of the suggestions provided by Sutton et at. (1997) (increase team/player accessibility to the public, increase community involvement activities, or special events). I also believe that teams which do attempt to develop lasting bonds with fans through attendance at special events (community engagement) could generally increase loyalty to the franchise, reflected by higher consumption. Similarly, I measure the fans' attendance at fan-player bonding opportunities; these are autograph sessions or appearances are public or sponsored and bring forth subsequent opportunities for fans to

meet, chat, bond and build unique experiences with players. I argue that attendance at these appearances may ultimately also drive consumption.

The proposed equation in the moderated regression model is below:

$$\text{Consumption}_i = ß_0 + ß_1\text{Special Events}_i + ß_2\text{Fan-Player Bonding}_i + ß_3\text{Special Events}_i * \text{Player Bonding}_i + ß_4\ \text{Controls}_i + E_i$$

$ß_1$ captures the direct effect of special events on consumption. $ß_2$ captures the direct effect of fan-player bonding on consumption. Finally, $ß_3$ captures the moderating effect through the interaction of special events and fan-player bonding. Controls_i captures a vector of control variables including the gender of the season ticket holder, his/her age, and whether s/he has children. E_i is the normally distributed error term. I developed a simple conceptual model. I propose that bonding between players and fans (fan-player bonding) may increase the fans' consumption levels, by building the perceived relationship between the fans (current and potential identified fans) and the players (current and potential fans). In turn, I predict that this increased fan-player bonding experiences will serve as a moderator between special events and the higher consumption levels by fans. This consumption is reflected in higher team attendance, media-based viewership and merchandise sales. The coefficients resulting from ordinary least square regression should provide insight into the effectiveness of these endeavors, so I will explore the statistical significance of the results as well as the individual coefficients of each relationship.

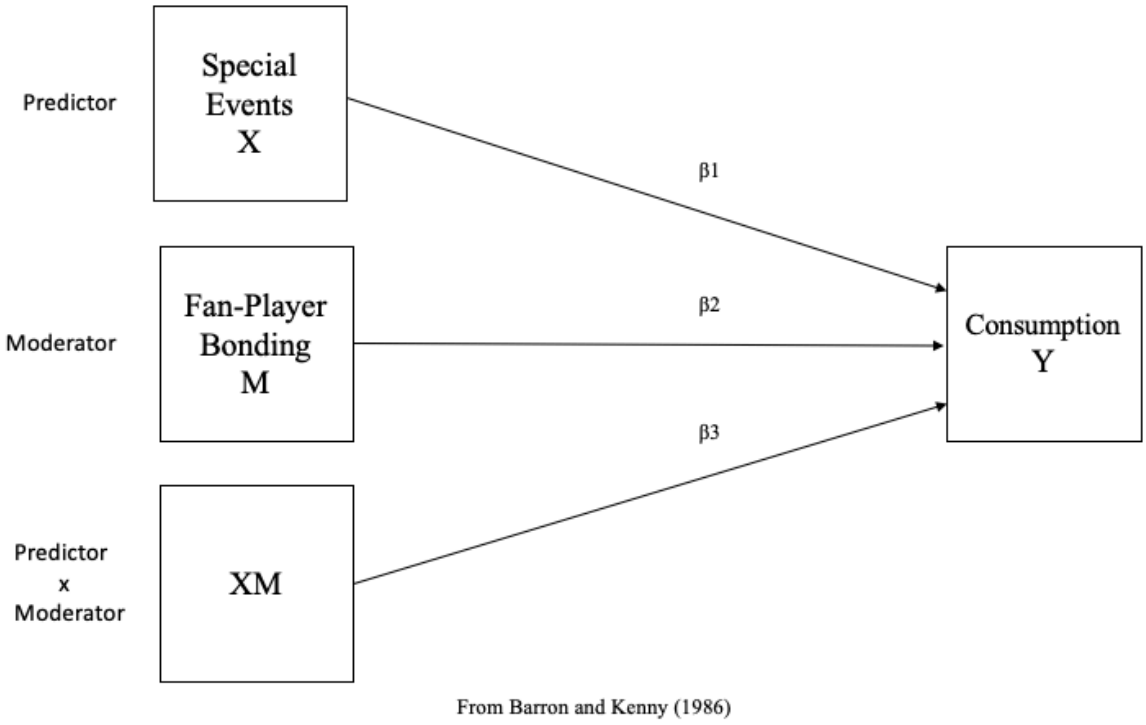
Moderation Model

The moderation model is a good fit for the present study, since a moderator is a variable that specifies conditions under which a given predictor is related to an outcome (in this case, fan-player bonding). This may explain and strengthen the relationship when the predictor and the outcome are related. With a moderation model, special events (independent variable) would impact fan consumption (the dependent variable), moderated by fan-player bonding (moderator variable). Through the moderation model, I aim to explore the interaction effects between special events and fan-player bonding. These effects include the enhancement (increase of the moderator would increase the effect of the predictor on the outcome), buffering (the increase of the moderator decreases the effect of the predictor), or antagonizing (the increase of the moderator reverses the effect of the predictor on the outcome). In this case, the hypotheses posed would suggest an enhancement of the effect of the predictor.

I intend to look at the effect of the predictors on each of the outcome variables through a simple regression for each game attendance, merchandising/retail and viewership of MLS Direct Kick. I will be measuring special events and its effects on consumption as moderated by fan-player bonding. Through this moderation model, first brought forth by Baron and Kenny (1986), there are three pathways that need to be acknowledged and explored: The first pathway of direct effect between X, the independent variable (special events) and Y, the outcome variable (consumption). The second pathway is the effect of the moderator M (fan-player bonding) on Y, the outcome variable (consumption). Lastly, the third path is the interaction effect between X and moderator M (the multiplication of X and M). By exploring these pathways, the

moderator (fan-player bonding) will explain the direction of the effect of the independent variable X on the dependent variable Y (consumption). Additionally, both variables could explain the effect of X on Y.

Figure 2 - Statistical diagram



From Barron and Kenny (1986)

Baron and Kenny's (1986) approach for moderation (illustrated above) will be followed, then explored through simple regressions for each of the outcome variables. In this study, and given the extensive literature already established and cited through the introduction and construct sections, team identification is a foundational assumption for the variables proposed. It may act as a validation agent (and perhaps even a latent variable at work to look at in a future study), but I do not use it as a focal point to my

study, since team identification does not have a direct and independent measurement in the study.

DATA COLLECTION

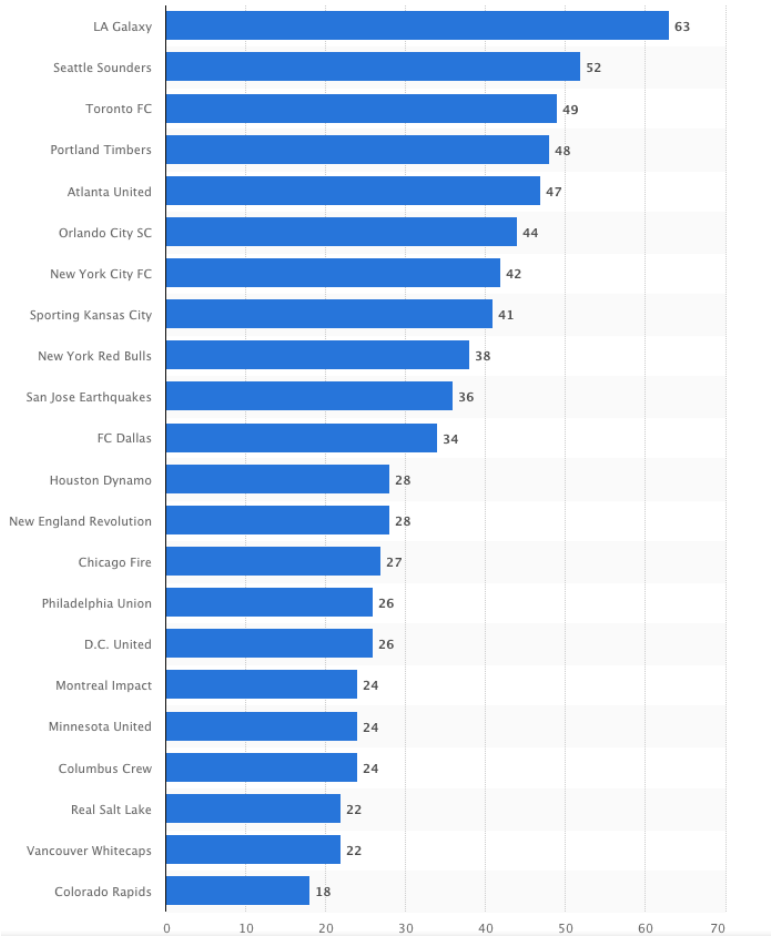
Context

As previously mentioned, fan identification is one of the most important aspects for sport teams to foster. Sutton, and McDonald et al, (1997), stated that fans with high levels of identification actually behave differently than those with lower levels because highly identified fans are more likely to have a strong sense of attachment and belonging to the team. Wann and Branscombe (1990), and Murrell and Dietz (1992), alluded to die-hard fans versus fair-weather fans; the difference between the two being the team's performance. When the team performs well, both sets of fans support, yet when the team performs badly, the fair-weather fans go away. Wann and Branscombe have suggested that fair weather fans are the cause of attendance fluctuations which result from winning or losing seasons. Team identification is vitally important to a team's economic success. But while there are lots of studies that reflect the consequences of team identification (increased loyalty, consumption, etc.), more studies could be performed that focus on the factors that may increase team identification. Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994) model of organizational identification mentions these antecedents to organizational identification: perceived organizational identity and construed external image. I do consider relevant to mention some of the potential environmental factors as part of the overall context of the study, where market size may play a pivotal role as to the team's success or failure.

The Kansas City metropolitan area has a population, 2.2 million people, including two states (Missouri and Kansas), 15 counties, and 7,592 square miles that encompass the metropolitan area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Among the demographics included in the population are white (59.2%), African-American (29.9%), Hispanic or Latino (10%), and other races (4.5%). The city has seen a continuous and steady growth in the last few years, surpassing Missouri's previous largest city, St. Louis, to become the largest city in the state. As a growing market, not only has Kansas City placed a lot of emphasis on encouraging and promoting entrepreneurship (especially in the technology space), but it also has made large efforts in the funding of infrastructure as well as the arts. As part of the infrastructure and entertainment assets, included is Children's Mercy Park, home to Major League Soccer's Sporting Kansas City. It seats a maximum of 20,000 spectators, providing food, beverage and merchandise outlets for visiting fans. In the last few years and largely because of its home venue, Sporting Kansas City has taken a leadership role in how to do the sports business, as the team aggressively pursues technology as part of its differentiated service to fans. Currently, Sporting KC has a 100% paperless ticketing system, which bodes well for the team's data acquisition strategies. The team has also implemented wide use of the team's apps among its fans, which allows for ticketing, Wi-Fi services, e-commerce and other features that have proven to be well-received by the fanbase, which is often incentivized to use the app. Because of these technology-driven initiatives, the team has great communication and traction with the fans through many different channels, including email, direct mail, in-app notification, and excellent social media engagement levels (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.). All of this, despite being ranked as one of the smallest markets in Major League Soccer, has placed

Kansas City towards the top third in terms of revenue-generating teams in the league (see Figure 3).

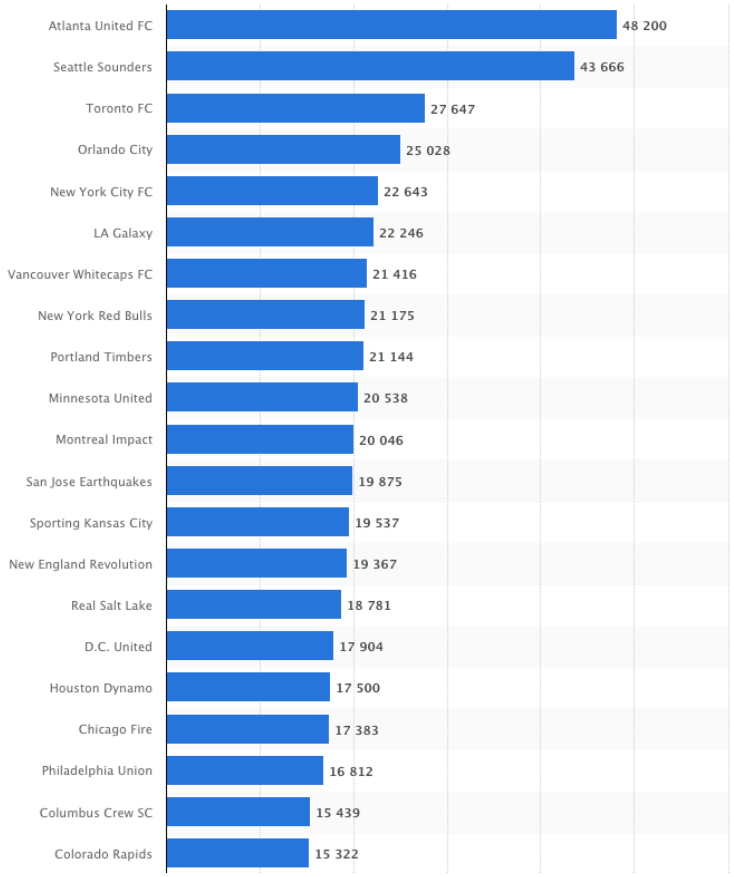
Figure 3 - Sporting Kansas City 2017 Revenue (Statista, 2018)



Children's Mercy Park (CMP) is the product of a public-private partnership between the Government of Wyandotte County and OnGoal, Inc., the ownership group of Sporting Kansas City. It is a multi-purpose facility which boasts state-of-the-art technology, 36 suites, two suite level lounges and great views for fans. Although it's one of the smallest stadiums in MLS, CMP is continually sold out (See Figure 4. To date, 123

consecutive sellouts), which highlights the game experience within the facility and the technological features which makes the fan experience an outstanding one. Because of the technological infrastructure, data of all sorts can be collected in order to learn, improve and attempt to predict consumer behavior within the facility.

Figure 4 - Sporting Kansas City Rank within MLS attendance (Statista, 2018)



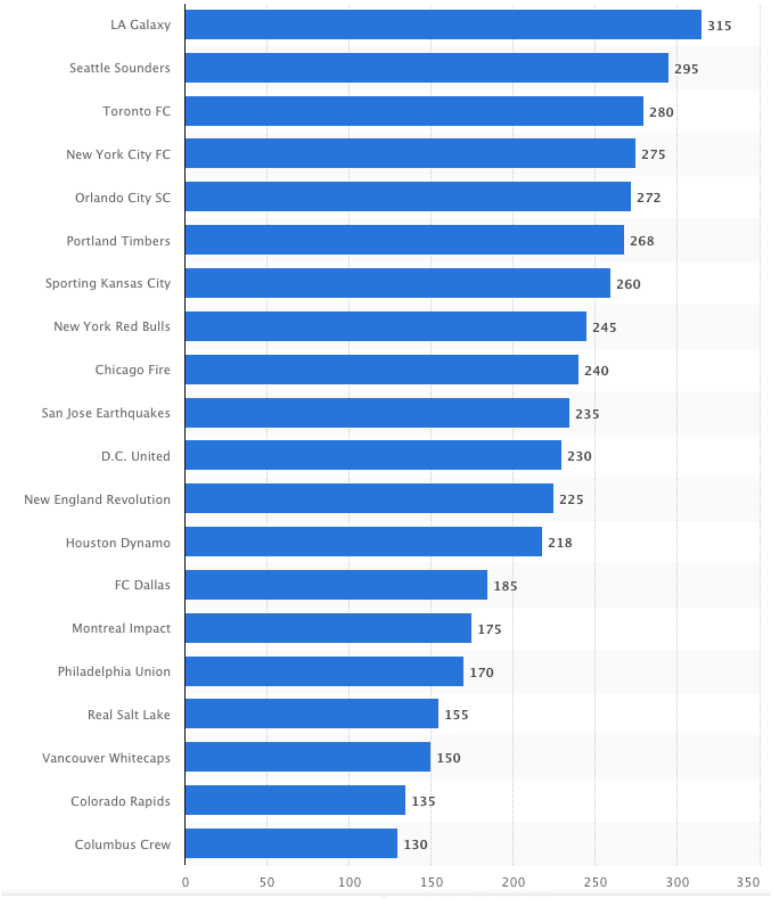
Because of the development of infrastructure and the wide construction of soccer specific stadiums, franchise valuations have exploded in MLS. By owning their own stadium (or at least being the facility's main tenant), clubs are able to control schedule

dates, demand higher sponsorship values (due to the ability for signage, etc.), and develop brand and cultural growth within their respective markets. As a result of this investment and its strategic approach, franchise valuations have exploded within MLS. In 1995, investors paid $5 million to become owners-operators of the original 10 franchises. Today, the average valuation of the 20 teams included in a Forbes study (2018) is now $240 million, up 7.6% from 2017 (and the 2017 valuation was up 20 percent from the 2016 valuation). Somewhat unsurprisingly thanks to the opening of their new stadium in 2018, D.C. United was the biggest individual riser, with the 11th-ranked Black-and-Red now worth $265 million, a 48 percent increase from last year (see Figure 5).

Major League Soccer's growth has been pronounced and aggressive, and the sport has seen both the additions to the market roster as well as other expansion candidates have very similar characteristics to Kansas City (which is 31st in TV market size in the U.S.). Because of this, I believe exploring a market this size is highly relevant. That is, a market of similar size is definitely a factor, as it can help locally, to grow television audiences, and television ratings. Aside from a healthy and reliable TV audience, teams aim for a steady fanbase. MLS has been looking for markets that currently are undergoing growth in both the economic and demographic perspectives; it is important for MLS to go to growing cities, not only as far as population (demographic diversity, job creation, income creation, etc.), but also because of the additional infrastructure and economic factors that come along with the growth. This in a sense reduces risk for MLS and ensures the possibility to captivate new audiences through a fresh entertainment offering. Kansas City therefore embodies very similar characteristics to markets already

in activity within MLS, as well as the large majority of other markets vying for a spot in the expansion list. I believe this study could then represent an opportunity to highlight some practical applications which could make a difference in maximizing revenue, all while establishing a potential strategy to increase team identification and consequently overall revenue for a large portion of MLS clubs.

Figure 5 - 2017 Major League Soccer Team Valuations (Forbes, 2017)



The detail and main characteristics of the Sporting Kansas City are as follows: 8th in MLS in revenue; 13th in attendance (with one of the smaller stadiums in the league);

14,000 season ticket holders (4,500 on waiting list); 9th in team valuation ($260m); 8th in MLS in merchandise sales (Statista, 2018). The franchise's position within the league from economic and business perspectives is privileged, though managers within the team want to continue to improve on all fronts. The data set that will be analyzed is secondary data obtained from a leading market-data analytics firm, specializing in sports marketing and sports data. This Kansas City firm specializes in sports consumer data, analytics and customer solutions for college and professional sports leagues and teams. The firm excels at macro data analysis, segmenting, and enhancing customer engagement for the modern sports organization. With over 10 million customer profiles, this Kansas City firm is quickly becoming the source for smart fan engagement solutions. I will be using a set of secondary data, taking a sample from 499 random profiles of soccer fans in the United States, specifically the Kansas City market, collected over the year 2016. A random sample of 499 fan profiles was provided by the analytics firm, and it was randomized by the firm. The analytics firm used randomization to increase experimental control and eliminate selection bias. The firm took the entire season ticket list (over 12,000 fans), produced randomized ID numbers, and came to a sample size of 10,358 profiles. From there, direct randomization was done, which yielded no missing values in the data. A final randomized sample of 499 profiles was selected as the sample. This dataset consists of males and females between the ages of 20 and 68. To avoid the problem of having to sort die-hard versus fair-weather fans in a data set, I am using only season ticket holders of Sporting Kansas City, a Major League Soccer team. I therefore assume that by consistently investing thousands of dollars to be a season ticket holder, these fans fall into the medium to highly identified fans. In other words, it is known

there's already a medium-to-high level of identification, from the casual/vested to the more die-hard season ticket purchasers, so I believe this provides clarity as to how effective Sutton's suggestions, and the constructs surrounding our research question may actually be.

Though season ticket holders are vital to professional sports revenue and are purported to be the most loyal and involved fans (identified), churn still is prevalent and does exist in virtually every sport. McDonald (2010) listed among the reasons for churn: low on-field performance, low member satisfaction and low game attendance levels; however, results suggested that length of the relationship and number of games attended were better predictors or such churn (Mc Donald, 2010). I believe none of these reasons affect the data sample, as the team has various championships (good on-field performance), high member satisfaction (judging from season ticket waiting lists), and high game attendance levels (120+ consecutive sell-outs). Because already identified fans provide a unique opportunity to test the hypotheses, I believe this data set provides a great sample for the study.

Variable Measurement

The dependent or outcome variable, fan consumption, will be measured by game attendance, merchandising/retail sales for the year 2016, and viewership of MLS Direct Kick. This approach follows previous studies with a similar approach (MacDonald & Milne, 1997).

- Ticketing data

  - This data has records of all games attended by the 499 random subjects. Game attendance refers to the number of games the fan attended during the 2016 season. The attendance to games has been recorded via electronic ticketing, as the club uses software which makes them 100% paperless. The dataset only includes blind transaction records in ticket usage (meaning attendance to a specific number of games).

- Viewership of MLS Direct Kick
  - This data has been collected by a sports analytics firm and included in the overall data sample. These details include whether fans watch games through their purchase of the MLS Direct Kick season package (a subscription package) or do not consume the subscription package. Dummy variables have been created for two different levels of viewership: Self-described fans who have reported to not watch games on television through the MLS Direct Kick premium package (dummy variable of "0"), and those self-described fans that do watch games through the MLS Direct Kick premium package (dummy variable of "1"). The MLS Direct Kick premium package offers most of the MLS league games on a given weekend, 300+ games per season, and it requires a subscription which includes a fee. These dummies allow for a fairly accurate estimate on fans' consumption by the real-world values through the estimated prices that are allocated to the subscription media channel. The MLS Direct Kick is an additional cost to cable/satellite subscribers which hovers around $70-120.

- Merchandise/retail data
    - From the 499 random season ticket holders, in-stadium merchandise and retail purchases tied directly with their season ticket identification number (random) are included. Although information such as items purchased, number of items purchased, amount of each purchase, transaction location, method of payment (card), food or beverage, and total spend are available, only the overall dollar amount has been taken, reflecting overall consumption through merchandise from each profile.

For the key independent variables, special events and fan-player bonding, the number of special community events attended, and the number of player appearances attended are measured respectively.

- Special events (nature of the event and number of events)
    - The amount of times fans attended team-related functions is captured. These include outreach, joint team-fan grassroot activities that take place around the community and not necessarily in the club's facilities. These also include away game watch parties, foundation events, team parties, fan clubs, soccer clinics and soccer festivals which align the fan and the team's goals. These events do not include official games or individual player appearances (players do not attend). There is a total of 6 special events in the 2016 season. These special events are built by team and other third parties with the intent of expanding the team brand and becoming better entrenched in the local community. If these fans attended there may be a bond that was strengthened, so it is proposed that this may

spark an uptick in consumption. Given the high level of engagement with the team in the community, these events are regularly well attended. The data portrays the actual number of special events attended by the fan.

- Fan-Player Bonding
    - I measure fan-player bonding through the number of times a fan went to see and interact with players at player appearances (such as autograph sessions). These include player appearances that are scheduled by the team or the league and are therefore mandatory for the player; these may include team branding events, sponsorship commitments from the team, for the player, but not voluntary appearances the player may have done on his own time. These also do not include appearances where it is optional for players to appear. These appearances are different from special events since these don't include player community engagement, such as when the player forms part of charities, boards, etc. Additionally, there are not commercial activities from the team (no merchandise sales) at these events. There was a total of 6 player appearances fans could attend in the 2016 season, therefore providing 6 fan-player bonding opportunities.

There are some control variables included in the study, and they consist of:

- Demographic data
    - This data consists of 260 males and 239 females, and the dataset is taken from in-app information, supporter groups and season ticket databases. Included in the data set are a unique identifier given by the company, age, gender, marital status, and whether fans have children or not.

- For age, the true age number will be given. Age contributes as a proxy for income, as income information is not available. The rationale here is that the older fans are, the more likely they are to have higher levels of income.
- For children/no children, I provide a dummy variable which tells whether or not they have children (no children = 0, children Yes= 1).
- For gender, another dichotomous dummy variable will be created (male =1, female=0).

Previous literature has suggested team identification may be enhanced through the attendance to both special events and fan-player bonding. This identification is vitally important to a team's economic success (Sutton, et al., 1997; Fink, Trail & Anderson, 2002), so it is important to attempt to find vehicles to measure its impact in economic terms. Ultimately, consumption will likely be influenced by the amount of times fans attended games, their level of media-based viewership, and dollar amounts spent on in-venue purchases. If as predicted, attendance at both types of events influences consumption by way of moderation, I'd likely to be able to see such influence manifested through the amounts fans actually spend. Wann and Branscombe (1993) found that identification influenced several sport spectator consumption variables, so aside from game attendance, other variables within the study are also of utmost interest. Through the results, it is believed that the exploration of these measures will provide a suitable

measurement of how these experiences might have influenced fans within the sample to spend more during the 2016 season.

I will present descriptive statistics, summary stats, a correlation table, as well as potential interactions within and across variables. I will be performing various robustness tests, including a Poisson regression. Additionally, I want to explore the control variables to see if there is any variance within gender, kids/no kids, or age, as income is not available with the dataset for this study. My intent is to analyze each of the variables, search for stronger predictive power, and show stronger or weaker relationships between predictive variables and the variables within consumption to see which ones would have the most significance, while at the same time discerning which ones have the most partial variance. Naturally, if the partial slopes are significant, then the variables mentioned would imply an increase in amount of consumption.

It is worth considering a couple of opportunities within the present study: Since special events and fan-player bonding have not been studied together or in relation to overall consumption, nor have they been studied in association with a moderation model, this study may have good validity. Additionally, the approach of studying one team (as opposed to a sport, a specific league, or multiple teams), especially if the hypotheses are supported and moderation exist between variables, may suggest the model proposed should be at least partially applicable for other teams as well as the ways of measuring these constructs. Consequently, the validity of the model potentially showing the relationship between special events and consumption, fan-player bonding and consumption, and special events and fan-player bonding should be of no concern.

Additionally, similar to Theodorakis et. al. (2012) in testing moderation by team identification, I will test for the moderation effect of fan-player bonding by following the approach used previously by Baron and Kenny (1986), Judd and Kenny (1981), and Kenny, Kashy and Bolger, (1998), and also used by scholars in sports and leisure (Alexandris, Kouthouris, & Girgolas, 2007; Stevenson & Lochbaum, 2008; Thogersen, Fox & Ntoumanis, 2002), including simple regression analyses.

RESULTS

Considering the methodology proposed above, in this section I provide a summary of descriptive statistics of the data. I also provide a presentation of all the results stemming from the regressions performed on each measure of consumption. These results are tested for robustness and also presented. Lastly, the results section concludes with a summary of the appropriateness of the moderation approach as previously described above. The outcome variable of fan consumption has been measured in three different categories which together make up overall consumption. These three activities, game attendance (usage), merchandising/retail, and media viewership (MLS Direct Kick), collectively should be assumed to demonstrate the individual fan's behavioral tendencies of consumption.

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics for the control, dependent, and key independent variables of interest used for the regression analyses. The sample contains 499 season ticket holders (N=499). The mean for games attended is 13.21 (SD=4.24).

The mean for the amount of dollars spent on merchandising/retail in those 13.21 games is $393.14 (SD=216.89). Essentially, the amount spent per game overall by all fans per game is $29.26. The gender within members of the sample is evenly distributed to almost half males, half females, with just over half of the sample being males. In this case, because male/female is a binary control variable, the mean of gender is actually its frequency. The frequency for males is .521, which says there are roughly 260 males in the sample. The mean for age is slightly above 41 years old. Also, just over half of the individuals in the sample have children. The frequency of children (yes/no) is .507 (or roughly 253 with children). Separately, the average number of games attended by the sample of season ticket holders is 13 games each year (out of 20). On average, season ticket holders within the sample are spending around $393 USD per year in merchandising and retail within the stadium. Half of the season ticket holders within the sample has an MLS Direct Kick subscription. The mean for the independent variables is quite similar for both special events and fan-player bonding; fans attended an average of 2.94 special events and attended 3.07 fan-player bonding opportunities (as measured by player appearances).

Table 1 - Descriptive Statistics

	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Control Variables:					
Male	499	.521	.500	0	1
Age	499	41.14	13.56	18	64
Children (Yes=1)	499	.507	.500	0	1
Dependent Variables:					
Games Attended	499	13.11	4.24	6	20
Merchandising/retail	499	393.92	216.89	0	855
MLS Direct	499	0.505	0.500	0	1
Independent Variables of Interest:					
Special Events	499	2.94	1.99	0	Out of 6
Fan-player bonding	499	3.07	1.93	0	Out of 6

Correlation Matrix

The strongest associations displayed on the correlation matrix are fan-player bonding and F-B at least one (0.5526), Special Events at least one and special events (0.6025), and MLS Direct Kick and Merchandise (0.5299). Examples of weak, positive associations for special events include fan-player bonding and special events (0.0089), special events and games attended (0.0207), special events and MLS Direct Kick viewership (0.2452), and special events and Merchandise (0.2833). As for fan-player bonding, the matrix shows a weak negative relationship with Games Attended (-0.0154),

a weak, positive relationships with Merchandising (0.2026) and MLS Direct Kick viewership (0.1785).

Table 2 - Correlation Matrix

	Male	Age	Children (Y=1)	Games Attended	Merchandise	Special Events	Fan-player Bonding	MLS Direct K	SE at least one	F-PB at least one
Male	1.0000									
Age	-0.0053	1.0000								
Children (Y=1)	0.0255	-0.0228	1.0000							
Games Attended	-0.0125	0.0067	-0.0381	1.0000						
Merchandiseing/retail	-0.0240	0.0125	0.061	0.1044**	1.0000					
Special Events	-0.0139	0.0075	0.0175	0.0207	0.2833***	1.0000				
Fan-player bonding	0.0781*	0.0153	-0.0429	-0.0154	0.2026***	0.0089	1.0000			
MLS Direct K	-0.0024	0.2425***	0.082*	0.114**	0.5299***	0.2452***	0.1785***	1.0000		
SE at least one	-0.0001	0.0442	-0.0689	0.0418	0.1**	0.6025***	0.0511	0.136***	1.0000	
F-PB at least one	0.0147	-0.4000	-0.0338	-0.0212	0.1023**	0.0287	0.5526***	0.1067**	0.0058	1.0000

***1% significance, **5% significance, *10% significance

The correlation matrix provided in Table 2 reflects the correlation coefficients of all the variables in the study. Through the matrix, there are some positive associations among some of the variables, though while I can see some relationships, there are also numerous other weak coefficients. Other examples of weak positive associations include: Age and watching MLS Direct Kick (0.2425), Merchandising and Games Attended (0.1044), MLS Direct kick and Games attended (0.1140), Special events and merchandising (0.2452), MLS Direct Kick and fan-player bonding (0.1785), Special events at least one, and MLS Direct Kick (0.1360), and fan-player bonding and MLS Direct Kick (0.1067). Keeping in mind that correlation does not imply causation, this correlation shows that as one variable increases, so does the other one. The older fans are, the more they are likely they seem to acquire MLS Direct Kick. The more games fans attend, the more merchandise they are likely to buy. The more fans subscribe to MLS Direct Kick, the more likely they are to attend games. The more special events they attend, seemingly the more merchandise they are likely to purchase. The more fan-player

bonding opportunities they attend, the more likely they subscribe to MLS Direct Kick. If they have attended at least one special event, the higher the likelihood they will subscribe to MLS Direct Kick. Finally, those attending at least one fan-player bonding are more likely to subscribe to MLS Direct Kick.

Table 3 describes the breakdown of the number of special events and fan-player bonding opportunities attended by the 499 season ticket holders. Out of the 499 subjects in the sample, only 71 did not attend a special event. As for fan-player bonding opportunities, only 54 did not attend any. These numbers may address validity concerns, supporting the notion that there are enough subjects covering the spectrum of having attended, attended more than once, and attended several times.

Table 3 – Attendance to Special Events and Fan-Player Bonding

Attendance, out of 6	**0**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**N**
Special Events	71	82	62	76	72	70	66	499
Fan-player bonding	54	78	71	85	72	63	76	499

Game Attendance

Table 4 provides a brief description of the breakdown by fans to each number of games (up to 20). Game attendance, a dependent variable, appears to be fairly evenly distributed with the provided range.

Table 4 - Games Attended – By the Number

	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Games Attended	29	36	35	20	35	34	37	28	43	37	31	32	38	36	28

Table 5 provides the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression for fan consumption as measured by the number of games attended by season ticket holders. When conducting an OLS regression on the number of games attended, there are no statistically significant results. Specifically, attending special events has no impact on attending games, nor does attending fan-player bonding opportunities. In addition, there is no moderation effect that takes place between fan-player bonding and special events, in relation to attending games. In all, this suggests that neither special events nor attendance to fan-player bonding are affecting an uptick in attendance.

Table 5 - OLS Number of Games Attended

	I	II	III
Male	-.094	-.083	-.076
	(.380)	(.382)	(383)
Age	.001	.001	.001
	(.014)	(.014)	(.014)
Children (Yes=1)	-.323	-.329	-.340
	(.382)	(.382)	(.383)
Special Events	.045	.045	.129
	(.093)	(.093)	(.173)
Fan-player bonding		-.036	.043
		(.097)	(159)
S. Events*Fan-player bonding			-.028
			(.048)
Observations	499	499	499

Robust standard errors in parentheses
***1% significance, **5% significance, *10% significance

Table 6 provides a robustness check to assess the impact of attending special events and/or fan-player bonding on game attendance. Given that the dependent variable of

games attended is arguably classified as count data (i.e. it takes a small range of non-negative integer values), Poisson regression is arguable preferred to OLS. Consideration of this preferred estimation method is especially important as no variables were found to be statistically significant in the OLS specification provided in Table 5. Similar to Table 5, when examining for Poisson regression in Table 6, results also show no statistical significance of special events or fan-player bonding on attendance. This implies that an increased number of special events and/or fan-player bonding attended does not affect the amount of games attended by fans within the sample.

Table 6 - Poisson - Number of Games Attended

	I	II	III
Male	-.007	-.006	-.005
	(.028)	(.024)	(.029)
Age	.000	.000	.000
	(.001)	(.000)	(.001)
Children (Yes=1)	-.024	-.025	-.025
	(.029)	(.024)	(.029)
Special Events	.003	.003	.009
	(.007)	(.006)	(.013)
Fan-Player Bonding		-.002	.003
		(.006)	(.012)
S. Events*Fan-player bonding			-.002
			(.003)
Observations	499	499	499

Robust standard errors in parentheses
***1% significance, **5% significance, *10% significance

Merchandising/Retail

Table 7 provides the regression results for when merchandising/retail sales is the dependent variable of fan consumption. The control variables age, gender (male or

female, according to the dummy variables provided) and whether an individual has children, do not have a statistically significant impact on merchandise and retail sales. The key independent variables of attending special events and fan-player bonding yield much more interesting results, however. Across all columns, attending special events has a large effect and is statistically significant on merchandising/retail sales. The results show that its direct effect on merchandising consumption is significant at 1%. According to column I, for each additional special event attended, merchandise consumption increases by $30.71. In column II, that the dollar amount decreases slightly to $30.47 but increases to $33.40 in column III, the interaction column. Although there is some variation in these two regressions, the results are relatively close in value and therefore provide confidence that the effect capture is true and accurate. In all, the OLS regression shows that each additional special event attended generates up to $33.40 in merchandise and retail sales for the club (column III). Similarly, each fan-player bonding experience attended also has a direct impact on merchandising consumption, ranging from $23.00 in column II to $25.79 in column III. Although attending special events and fan-player bonding have a direct impact on merchandise and retail sales, the results suggest that attending fan-player bonding opportunities does not enhance the benefit of special events when it comes to increases in merchandising; therefore, I find no evidence of a moderation model (column III).

Table 7 - OLS Estimation of Merchandising and Retail Sales ($USD)

	I	II	III
Male	-9.307	-16.39	-16.16
	(18.62)	(18.10)	(18.11)
Age	.185	.137	.137
	(.683)	(.668)	(.668)
Children (Yes=1)	24.64	28.63	28.26
	(18.64)	(18.21)	(18.20)
Special Events	30.71***	30.47***	33.40***
	(4.52)	(4.45)	(8.63)
Fan-player bonding		23.00***	25.79***
		(4.78)	(8.27)
S. Events*Fan-player bonding			-.995
			(2.50)
Observations	499	499	499

Robust standard errors in parentheses
***1% significance, **5% significance, *10% significance

MLS Direct Kick (Media Viewership)

Table 8 considers the final dependent variable used to approximate fan consumption, whether the specific fan subscribes to MLS Direct Kick. Given that the dependent variable is binary, a logit regression is preferred to OLS. The coefficients for logit regressions can only be interpreted in terms of direction of causality and level of statistical significance. Marginal effects of logit regressions can be interpreted in terms of the magnitude of the effect. Marginal effects provide an estimate of the likelihood a fan subscribes to MLS Direct Kick.

The results in Table 8 yield the most interesting relationship between attending special event and fan-player bonding on fan consumption. Several variables, both controls and independent variables, show to be statistically significant influences on

media viewership of MLS Direct Kick. Results show that attending special events and fan-player bonding each have a direct effect on whether fans subscribe to MLS Direct Kick. Gender does not impact whether or not fans subscribe to MLS Direct Kick. However, age does impact subscription. Also, having children also impacts subscription, as fans with children are more likely to subscribe to MLS Direct Kick.

Table 8 - Logit Regression Estimation of Subscription to MLS Direct Kick

	I	II	III
Male	.005	-.063	-.057
	(.191)	(.195)	(.194)
	[.001]	[-.015]	[-.008]
Age	.040***	.041***	.041***
	(.007)	(.007)	(.007)
	[.010]	[.010]	[.009]
Children (Yes=1)	.377**	.428***	.421**
	(.191)	(.196)	(.196)
	[.094]	[.106]	[.112]
Special Events	.2716 ***	.299***	. 354***
	(.049)	(.051)	(.100)
	[.067]	[.069]	[.205]
Fan-player bonding		.213***	283***
		(.051)	(.096)
		[.053]	[.204]
S. Events*Fan-player bonding			-.025
			(.027)
Observations	499	499	499

Marginal effects are in square brackets. Robust standard errors for logit are in parentheses.
***1% significance level, **5% significance level, *10% significance level
-Marginal effects of interaction variables are specific to the value of each variable. Therefore, a single marginal effect cannot be computed for interactions

According to column I of Table 8, age shows to be impactful, with each additional year in age increasing the likelihood an individual acquires a MLS direct subscription by

10%. Having children also has a significant effect, with fans being 9.4% more likely to have a subscription if the subject has children. Also, in column I, results show that for every special event attended, the likelihood of subscribing to MLS Direct Kick will increase by 6.7%. In column II, each special event attended will increase the likelihood by 6.9%, and each player appearance attended will increase the likelihood by 5.3%. The marginal effects produced for column III show that with each additional special event, fans increase their likelihood of subscribing to MLS Direct Kick by 20.5%. Similarly, each additional player appearance attended increases fans' likelihood of subscribing by 20.4%. The marginal effects within the logit regression are really amplified in column III. While control variables and key independent variables oscillated between 3% and 10% higher likelihood per event or appearance, once there is interaction between the two independent variables, the likelihood spikes up to 20% or higher. Across all columns, the marginal effects of the control variables are stable, but the marginal effect of special events and fan-player bonding are exceptionally amplified in column III. However, it should be highlighted that the negative effect of the interaction between these two variables will likely mute the marginal effects to values more consistent in columns I and II.

Robustness

A different robustness check was performed in tables 9-11, this time creating dummy binary variables determining whether fans had attended at least one special event or player appearance. If fans had attended none, they received a "0;" if they had attended at least one, they received a "1." This was done to explore whether the results would vary

between one appearance or more, and if so, how pronounced the difference would be. Does it make a difference whether you see and spend time with at least one player versus no players? What about one player versus three, or five different ones?

In table 9, results show once again that none of the variables are statistically significant for game attendance. Even when testing for those subjects that have attended at least one special event or player appearance, there is no empirical support for special events or fan-player bonding making an impact on attending games. Simply put, the results show that when looking at whether a fan attended any special events and/or fan-player bonding, the result that these variables have no impact on games attendance holds true. This perhaps dispels the notion that higher numbers of attendance to non-related events could potentially drive attendance to games.

Table 9 - OLS – Special Events/Fan-Player Bonding Attended at Least Once – Games Attended

	I	II	III
Male	-.098	-.095	-.093
	(.380)	(.380)	(.381)
Age	.001	.000	.000
	(.014)	.014	(.014)
Children (Yes=1)	-.297	-.304	-.304
	(.382)	(.382)	(.382)
SE, at least one	.476	.478	.685
	(.484)	(.484)	(1.36)
F-PB, at least one		-.305	-.106
		(.592)	(1.29)
SE01*F-PB01			-.233
			(1.45)
Observations	499	499	499

Robust standard errors in parentheses
***1% significance, **5% significance, *10% significance

Table 10 provides the robustness check when merchandise sales is the dependent variable. In column I, attending at least one special event is found to have a statistically significant impact on merchandising sales at the 5% level; more specifically, attending at least one special event will increase a fan's consumption of merchandising and/or retail by $64.73. In column II, when player appearance is also included in the regression equation, attending at least one special event decreases merchandise sales slightly to $64.38, though attending at least one player appearance shows a marked effect of increasing merchandise sales by $73.28. This is an interesting result, as it shows that fans seem to be willing to spend more when actually meeting a player at least one time throughout the season. While special events can create a good increase on its own, meeting a player seems to spark higher consumption. Of particular interest, however, is whether attending a player appearance moderates the effect of attending a special event on fan's consumption of merchandise and retail. According to column III, the interaction of both attending at least one special event and attending at least one player appearance is not statistically significant. The interaction between variables is not supported for merchandising, meaning that fan-player bonding does not have an impact on special events in relation to consumption through merchandising/retail. Again, no moderation effect is observed.

Table 10 - OLS – Special Events/Fan-player Bonding Attendance at Least Once – Merchandising/Retail

	I	II	III
Male	-11.14	-11.84	-12.55
	(19.34)	(19.24)	(19.32)
Age	.149	.218	.233
	(.712)	(.713)	(.715)
Children (Yes=1)	29.92	31.50	31.61
	(19.40)	(19.34)	(19.31)
SE, at least one	64.73**	64.38**	-14.51
	(25.86)	(26.02)	(82.10)
F-PB, at least one		73.28**	-2.39
		(30.70)	(79.79)
SE at least once*F-PB at least once			88.82
			(86.36)
Observations	499	499	499

Robust standard errors in parentheses
***1% significance, **5% significance, *10% significance

The robustness results using binary measures for whether a fan attended any special events and/or fan-player bonding are also tested with the third and final proxy for consumption – whether a fan subscribes to MLS Direct Kick. These results are found in Table 11. The logistic regression results indicate that age continues to be a positive factor on whether fans subscribe to the MLS Direct Kick package with 1% statistical significance, thereby confirming that the older fans are, the more likely they are to subscribe to MLS Direct Kick. This may occur as age is proxying for more disposable income that fans can spend on luxury goods, such as MLS Direct Kick. Similarly, having children increases the likelihood of having the subscription by 10.5%. Fans are also 20% more likely to subscribe if they attended at least one special event. In column II, both

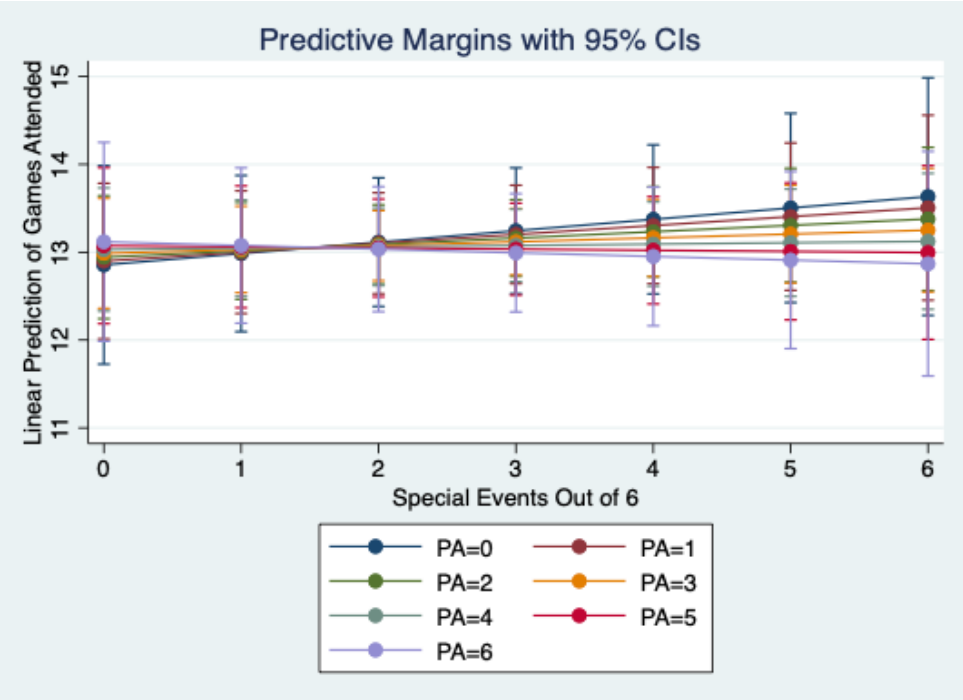
special events and fan-player bonding show a marginal effect of 0.207, meaning fans are 20.7% more likely to subscribe when going to at least one special event or at least one player appearance. Column III provides similar results for the control variables but does not show a significant interaction between attending at least one special event and at least one fan-player bonding. With media viewership, the moderation model is clearly not supported.

Table 11 - Logit - SE/F-PB Attendance at Least Once – Estimation of Subscription MLS Direct Kick

	I	II	III
Male	-.015	-.028	-.034
	(.187)	(.188)	(.188)
	[-.003]	[-.007]	[-.008]
Age	.037***	.039***	.039***
	(.007)	(.007)	(.007)
	[.009]	[.009]	[.009]
Children (Yes=1)	.423**	.447**	-.450**
	(.187)	(.189)	(.190)
	[.105]	[.111]	[.112]
SE, at least one	.844***	.858***	-.247
	(.289)	(.297)	(.930)
	[.204]	[.207]	[.205]
F-PB, at least once		.863***	-.208
		(.326)	(.918)
		[.207]	[.204]
SE at least once*F-PB at least once			1.23
			(.980)
Observations	499	499	499

Robust standard errors in parentheses
***1% significance, **5% significance, *10% significance

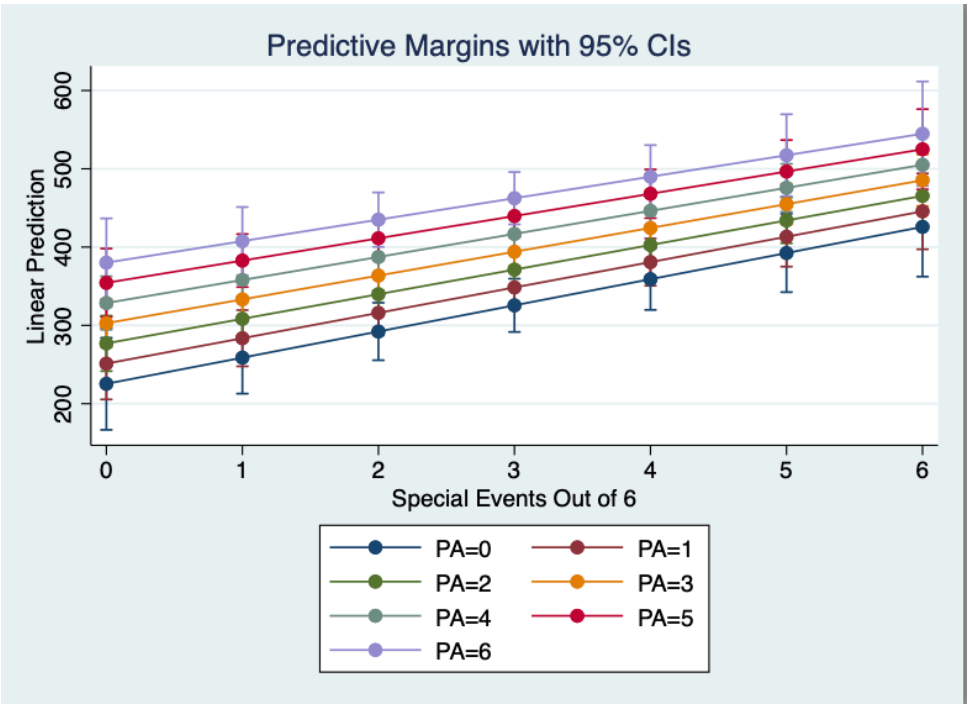
Figure 6 – Game Attendance Graph



From the graph displayed on Figure 6, I see that the more fan-player bonding experiences fans go to, the higher the spend. As fans go to more special events and more fan-player bonding, the level of consumption for merchandising becomes definitively higher. There is no crossing of the lines in the graph, but instead, they almost appear parallel to one another across the various number of fan-player bonding opportunities attended, thereby confirming what I already knew from column III of Table 7, that there is no moderating effect from fan-player bonding on special events. But as I analyze the increase from one special event to the next, it is seen that consumption increases. When looking at special events and also looking at each increase of one fan-player bonding, the level of consumption on merchandising by fans continues to increase in a pretty

consistent manner. If someone goes to no special events, but they go to six fan-player bonding opportunities, they will spend around $390 in merchandising. But if fans attend 6 fan-player bonding opportunities, and attend 6 special events, the graph clearly shows a much higher level of spend, at around $550. If fans attend 6 special events but don't attend any fan-player bonding opportunities, the graph shows that fans spend around $425. Overall, it would seem by this logic, that when attending all special events, and attending all fan-player bonding opportunities, the special events are a more worthy investment for the club, as it attracts a higher return in regard to merchandising.

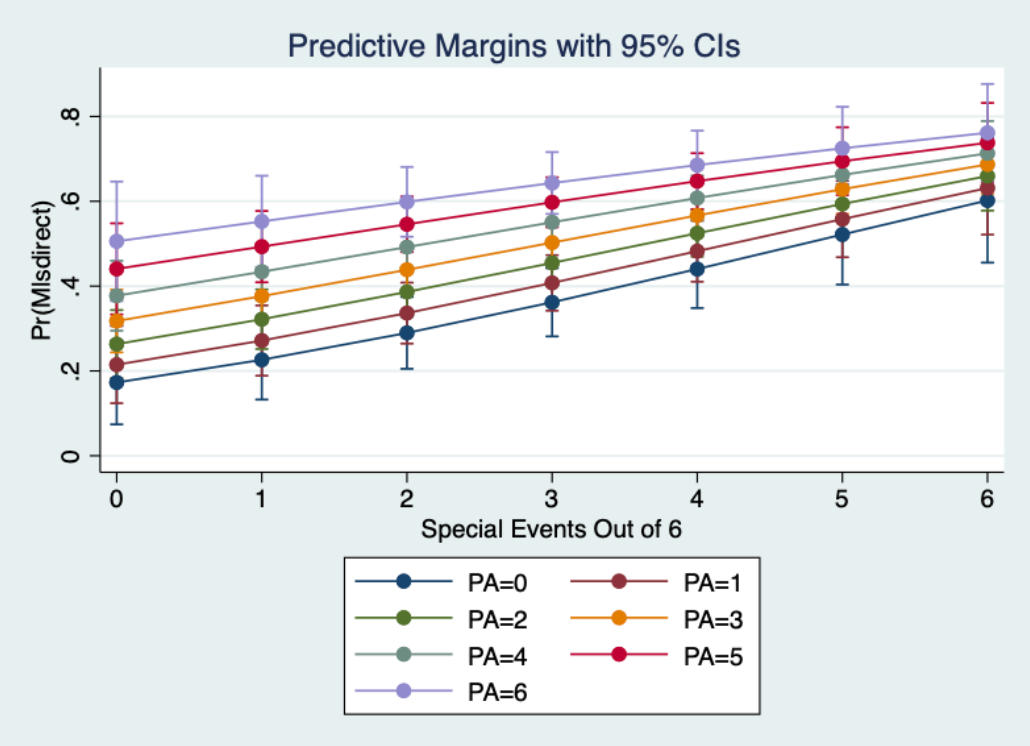
Figure 7 - Merchandising Graph



The graph displayed in Figure 8 looks quite similar to the graph involving merchandising. This graph is a logit regression of subscribing to MLS Direct Kick, without marginal effects, therefore the Y-axis provides the likelihood of subscription to

MLS Direct Kick. The interaction between special events and fan-player bonding is displayed in the graph. Each line represents how many fan-player bonding opportunities each of the subjects has gone to. It is clearly seen in the graph that the more fan-player bonding fans go to, the more likely fans are to subscribe to MLS Direct, regardless of the number of special events they attend. Again, the parallel nature of these lines suggests player appearance attendance does not moderate special event attendance. Therefore, this graph supports the results found in column III of Table 8.

Figure 8 - MLS Direct Kick Graph



In evaluating the results produced by the regressions, Hypothesis 1 shows the following results: Hypothesis H1a is not supported. Special events do not positively impact fan consumption as measured by game attendance. H1b is indeed supported.

There is a positive effect for each special event attended. H1c is also supported; special events do positively impact the amount of MLS Direct Kick viewership. As far as H2, H2a was not supported, as fan-player bonding does not have a positive impact on consumption, as measured by game attendance. H2b and H2c are supported, since for every fan-player bonding experience attended, there is a clear positive effect on both merchandising and viewership of MLS Direct Kick. The empirical evidence shows that hypotheses H3a, H3b and H3c are not supported, thus the moderated model is not supported. The interaction between the two variables of interest does not show to be impactful to consumption. While there is plenty of evidence that special events do impact consumption directly as measured by merchandising/retail and MLS Direct Kick, and attendance to fan-player bonding experiences also impacts consumption, there is no support for the notion that fan-player bonding accentuates or directs the effect that special events has on the three types of consumption. It is clear that these non-game related activities, although not acting directly as clear commercial opportunities, do increase the exposure and contact with the brand and have an impact on how much more fans consume when attending.

DISCUSSION

The results within this study provide several distinct learnings. First, H1 provides great insight for managers and practitioners who are looking to manage resources. Managing and monitoring the amount and type of special events, categorizing these endeavors more in detail, specifying return on investment metrics, and gathering more data from consumers, could allow managers to learn more about fans, provide and cater what fans want, and better customize and target avid fans. Similarly, the results for H2

should be insightful for academics and practitioners alike, as they may provide information on constituents and their consumption behavior, as stimulated by contact with players, as opposed to other non-game-related events. When learning that these fan-player encounters in fact provide higher earning opportunities for the team, managers should maximize these opportunities. One of the ways teams could do this could be by incorporating a commercial aspect to these experiences. Merchandising seems to be a natural fit for these, as fans may be compelled to purchase jerseys and other apparel for autographs, pictures, etc. While contractually most players may have similar obligations to engage in player appearances, managers could pay close attention to the players who garner the most attention, gather the most traction and bring the club higher revenue-creating opportunities through these fan-player bonding experiences.

Upon following Baron and Kenny (1986) in their approach for testing moderation, results yielded the conclusion that a moderation model was not supported. The interaction observed in this study and posed as H3 did not reflect an accentuation of the direct effect of special events as moderated by fan-player bonding, on consumption. While there is direct impact shown from special events to consumption, and from fan-player bonding to consumption, there is no evidence that fan-player bonding directly influences, enhance or accentuate special events' influence on consumption as a whole.

Also, evidence shows that attending at least one special event or player appearance has a positive effect on two of the three forms of consumption studied. Game attendance is not affected by fans attending more special events or fan-player bonding. It is difficult to speculate why attendance to games is not affected, as there are too many unaccounted variables and possible explanations for the lack of impact on attendance.

One possibility could be that attendance to these events may create a conflict to fans who have limited time; fans may earmark specific time to be dedicated to the team, so perhaps if they are attending some of these events, they may not opt to attend games. Another possibility is the resale of single-game tickets by season ticket holders in the secondary market, even if they're not attending the game themselves. This could be extremely useful to managers wanting to know where to devote resources when addressing non-game activities.

It is clear by both the levels of statistical significance, the potential increase in merchandising spend per visit, as well as the likelihood percentages involved with viewership of MLS Direct Kick, that both special events and fan-player bonding are worthy endeavors through which fan identification can be grown, leading to overall consumption. It is worth it then, to deeper explore and document which fan-player bonding opportunities (player appearances) and special events fans are attending, as well as the potential impact on both merchandising/retail spending and subscriptions associated with incremental attendance to these endeavors. Potentially, some players could lure some fans out to their appearances, as some players are more popular than others. Also, locations for special events may also be important; while special events seem to provide a pronounced boost to two of the three metrics, perhaps having geographically-centered locations, or children-friendly locations, could boost consumption even more. Third, equally as important (or more) than the profits incurred from those fans that subscribe to viewership or any additional profits made from merchandising, is the ability to predict who those fans are and how often they may spend. Having the ability to predict these fans' behavior may facilitate communication,

promotion and overall marketing efforts. Therefore, proper documentation of dates, locations attended, players visited, aside from amounts spent, may provide visibility into fans' consumption behavior.

As previously mentioned, managers throughout the sports and entertainment industries struggle with consumer behavior predictability from one week to the next. The results from this study could potentially shed a light on consumer behavioral patterns which could allow managers to control inventory flow (merchandising), communicate (promotional strategies), target (promotion and pricing) and promote (advertising) their product suite better.

Robustness tests were performed to examine the certainty of the regression coefficient estimates and how they reflected results when adding other regressors. First, a Poisson regression was performed to assume the logarithm of the expected value can be modeled by a liner combination of unknown parameters. The results of the Poisson regression were congruent with the ordinary least regression results. Second, a robustness check using marginal effects was performed to determine precise likelihood percentages for all variables. Third, dummy variables were created for both variables of interest. Given that it could be possible that attending at least one special event or one player appearance would have an effect on any of the three outcome variables, and there was a non-continuous number of both special events and fan-player bonding opportunities, attendance by season ticket holders to at least one special event and one player appearance was measured. Fans may want to see a player, but not necessarily five or six players, so I asked the question, could attending one fan-player bonding have the

same effect as if the season ticket holder attended five or six? Results showed similar results for both pre and post robustness check. Results also showed there is still no moderating effect by fan-player bonding.

One of the more interesting findings from the paper is the seemingly interchangeability between the independent variables. Especially when looking at the graphs, special events and fan-player bonding show that they not only can complement one another, but they can also substitute for one another when it comes to generating and increasing revenue stemming from consumption. The relationship between the two sparks curiosity and brings tremendous opportunity for managers who want to increase and maximize revenue opportunities. For managers, it becomes a matter of understanding the patterns of attendance for each and finding the right combination of each of these non-game gatherings in order to increase spending through merchandising and MLS Direct Kick subscriptions.

CONTRIBUTION

I set out to examine professional soccer fans' consumption in a midwestern city in the United States and its relationship with two specific drivers: special events and fan-player bonding. I believe these two drivers are an important contribution for the study of consumption of sports and address a gap in the body of literature. These drivers are also important factors for managers to consider when trying to increase direct and indirect consumption in soccer. Being that the two factors have a positive impact on fan consumption behaviors in professional soccer, they may serve as a good guide for other

studies, though these two consumption behaviors cannot be assumed to be generalizable for soccer fans throughout the United States. This study has contributed in capturing the value of two non-game related activities to a team. Special events and fan-player bonding in concert reflect the intangible construct of team identification, widely assumed to be a bedrock concept of why fans may consume and in what quantities. As the review of the literature showed, this was the first time the special events and fan-player bonding variables had been studied together. It was also the first time the two variables were studied together in relation to consumption, as well as providing a quantitative approach to the qualitative framework presented by Sutton et al. (1997).

Among some of the significant findings within the study, I include that hypothesis 1 was partially supported. Special events do indeed impact two types of consumption: merchandising/retail sales and viewership of MLS Direct Kick (two of the three consumption metrics). Practitioners can benefit from the model within this study as well as the results obtained for hypothesis 1. Special events (events different than autograph sessions by players) do have merit and seem to be a good driver for consumption, becoming important triggers when trying to get fans to consume. Hypothesis 2 was also partially supported. Similar to special events, fan-player bonding also impacts merchandising/retail sales and viewership of MLS Direct Kick. The assumption was that fans loved to meet players and increase their affinity towards the team by becoming "closer" to the team, through the perceived relationship with a player. Since hypothesis 2 was partially supported, it is now known that fan-player bonding indeed does drive higher levels of consumption. Managers can document, measure and design initiatives surrounding fan-player bonding, while knowing that there is in fact some level of return

that can be grown. Hypothesis 3 was not supported. Results show that fan-player bonding does not moderate special events' effect on consumption. Additionally, as managers collect consumer behavior over time, they will be able to better target specific fans with tailored and targeted initiatives that may also drive revenue. Another contribution is the provision of clarity as far as attendance is concerned. While two of the three types of consumption studies do show higher levels of consumption, attendance does not. This provides managers with the understanding that non-game related activities such as autograph sessions, watch parties, etc., do not empirically show results when trying to attract fans to the stadium.

A key contribution from this study is the composition of the data sample. First, based on the ample ranges of the control variables within the study, the data sample is composed of fans of great diversity. Unlike other studies in the past, I am not using samples of students only; while students are willing and good contributors to studies, this study's data sample is composed of different ages and professional groups, which I believe could be more representative of a professional soccer fanbase, while also being more generalizable and could provide a stronger contribution to literature. Soccer as a fast-growing sport can benefit from more empirical studies. Potential expansion cities are of similar size and population as the market studied in this paper. Learnings from this study could benefit practitioners wanting to maximize on off-field and non-game related activities. Implications for academics that may result from this paper would be opportunities to further the stream of literature as it pertains to fan consumption in professional soccer. I propose that while there may be several ways to increase fan consumption, two specific techniques suggested by previous authors may be effective and

should be tested in other environments. These are the inclusion and growth of special events that can attract and develop a sense of community with fans and team. Special events of the nature discussed may increase consumption. Similarly, fan-player bonding achieves the same objective. I believe that through effective marketing initiatives, a robust social media strategy and some other targeted techniques (future opportunities), soccer clubs can develop a highly identified fanbase that can be continually targeted and retargeted through these events. Scholars may want to further explore the combination of these two constructs and their potential positive impact on consumption, as both of them, combined, compose a compelling set of constructs only recently examined.

Other managerial implications of this paper could be a clearer picture and understanding of behavioral tendencies by soccer fans in the United States, so that managers can further refine their strategy as to how to market to the soccer consumer, how to communicate with the customer, how to improve customer retention, and how to grow and deepen the relationship between organization and its clients, the fans. One of the suggested techniques would be to grow the accessibility of players to community and to individuals. This will promote a positive, real, and increased level of ownership and relationship by the fan, becoming more engaged and perhaps prompted to consume more. The results in this study have demonstrated that these bonding efforts can provide clear financial benefits to the organization.

Some opportunities for managers stemming from the study may also lie in taking a deeper look at the way teams are communicating with fans and promoting information about special events. Teams, to the extent that they can, should provide opportunities for fans to engage in community themed special events, as it may provide an opportunity to

increase consumption of team assets. Similarly, fan-player bonding opportunities should be provided for fans so that they may meet players and coaches, become more familiar and even develop a perceived relationship with players through outreach functions. This allows the fan to feel closer to the team and perhaps increase consumption as well. Examples suggested by Lock et al. (2012) are to include ticketing initiatives in these functions and also disseminating educational and enlightening news and media articles for consumers to learn about player personas, statistics and constantly develop history. Additionally, as Lock and his colleagues suggest, managers should develop strategies to encourage fans to discuss the benefits of involvement as a way to develop membership and grow the fanbase. Fan-player bonding opportunities at times may be widely publicized while at other times they may not, but the extent that it can be done, the team should make these opportunities known to fans. Effective social media engagement and targeted customer marketing may increase attendance at both fan-player bonding and special events and may also trigger an increase of other consumption behaviors, so it would be worth looking at the communication methods currently being used by teams to disseminate information for those events. Lastly, a strategic approach needs to be considered when having sponsored events. Sponsorship-based events may add another layer of complexity, as it now pushes another brand into the picture for the fan's consideration. They may also pose a decision for the fan: If there is limited time by the fan, the fan may opt to go to the special events as opposed to the game itself.

LIMITATIONS

As with all research, this study also has several limitations. First, while the present study can be useful for practicing marketers when studying fans of a specific market, there may be a lack of generalizability of the results. I focused on one team (Sporting KC) and specifically on the Kansas City market soccer fans. It is to be considered that different season ticket holders from different databases may bring forth different attributes, which may bring different results altogether. It would also not be advisable to assume the same attributes with all Kansas City fans in general, without collecting data specific to these fans, as Kansas City has other professional sports with different dynamics, different schedules, different history, among other important variables. The present study is a specific study of fans of Major League Soccer and of Sporting KC, specific to the Kansas City community values, goals and needs. Given the potential influence of culture, it is not absolutely clear or certain that the replication of this study would provide similar results in other markets, other leagues or other countries.

Second, there was also a limitation in the control variables included in the study. Variables such as income were not available for the subjects within the study. In order to mitigate this, I included age (younger people are less likely to buy and consume as much as older and more established adults), gender, and whether the individual had children. The control variable "children/Yes" potentially gives some insight as to marital status and also the stage of life, although not necessarily. Collectively, the three were meant to provide a control variable similar to income, which was not available. Future studies exploring these marketing approaches or other team identification studies may benefit from including such variable. Also, the somewhat consistent on-field success for

Sporting Kansas City could conceivably be a factor when dealing with different and less successful teams; therefore, results of replicated studies could be deceiving in contexts where teams are less successful when it comes to on-field team performance.

The data used for the sample was pretty robust. Having said that, there are some things that are not covered within the observations. For merchandising, as fans purchase at the stadium, the technology follows their transaction and records it. However, transactions done outside the venue or through other third parties, are not recorded. While there may be some transactions missing, the transactions contained within the dataset are solid and reliable. In other words, consumption levels may not be 100% accurate for all subjects, but they are not less than the data sample indicates. Also, only 499 random observations were used and not the entire population of season ticket holders. While the results may show plenty or validity and reliability, studies could be performed utilizing all season ticket holders.

FUTURE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

There are several potential opportunities to expand on the present study. One of those opportunities would be to explore the assumed and underlying construct, team identification. A study could be designed where a survey is deployed before the season, data are collected, then combined with some of the transactional data through the year. Team identification scales previously used in the study of this construct could be used to corroborate previous results or have a point of comparison. This would potentially provide true, primary data, with a measurable score for team identification, which would allow more flexibility for conceptual modeling purposes. Also, Sutton et al. (1997)

presented two other proposed techniques that can be explored and/or combined with the dependent variables presented throughout in this study. These were (a). reinforce the team's history and tradition, and (b). create opportunities for group affiliation and participation. Expansion into these two initiatives in an empirical fashion could be added as a compliment to the present study, obviously revising all the pertinent variables.

Since fan-player bonding is in fact a driver of consumption it is documented that higher attendance to fan-player bonding opportunities drives higher consumption, an opportunity to follow return on investment for certain players is certainly feasible. In the same way, return on investment for each individual event could be measured in order to use these learnings to better design and execute promotional campaigns and brand growth opportunities. Furthermore, a study which amalgamates fan-player bonding (player appearances) with commercial opportunities could also be undertaken. If fan-player bonding is indeed driving merchandising sales, can merchandise sales be measured when apparel and merchandise are present at the fan-player bonding opportunities? This type of study could certainly benefit practitioners looking to learn best and acceptable practices within the industry, while also maximizing on opportunities for revenue. Finally, I believe that a longitudinal study could be undertaken; one that provides a detailed observation of the same consumers' consumption and trends from one season to the next.

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APPENDIX

Team	Value ($m)	Revenue ($m)	Operating Income
1. Atlanta United	330	47	-2
2. LA Galaxy	320	63	6
3. Seattle Sounders	310	52	6
4. LAFC	305	n/a	n/a
5. Toronto FC	290	49	-10
6. Portland Timbers	280	48	3
7. New York City FC	278	42	-15
8. Orlando City SC	275	44	1
9. Sporting Kansas City	270	41	2
10. D.C. United	265	26	-6
11. New York Red Bulls	250	38	-3
12. Minnesota United	248	24	-6
13. Chicago Fire	245	27	-12
14. San Jose Earthquakes	235	36	-2
15. New England Revolution	225	28	1
16. Houston Dynamo	220	28	-1
17. FC Dallas	190	34	-3
18. Philadelphia Union	175	26	-2
19. Real Salt Lake	170	22	2
20. Montreal Impact	168	24	-7
21. Vancouver Whitecaps	165	22	-3
22. Columbus Crew	160	24	-6
23. Colorado Rapids	155	18	-6