

**DEVELOPING INTERNATIONAL SPORTS MARKETS: PROFESSIONAL SPORTS  
SELLING TO NEW SEGMENTS WITH NEW PROMOTIONS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Sports' leagues struggle to maintain and grow. To do so many are returning to marketing fundamentals; creating satisfied customers with better products directed at undeveloped segments. This strategic marketing focus is examined as it is applied to a Major League Soccer product targeted at the yet-enigmatic American soccer sport market. The paper examines the demographics of American sports fans and soccer fans, motivations, and behavioral intentions of those fans as related to shirt sponsorships. The findings are intriguing as respondents didn't think the shirt ads were unprofessional; instead, they felt these sponsorships made MLS clubs look more like prestigious international counterparts. Soccer fans felt more strongly about these questions than sports fans or non-fans. Our research showed that shirt sponsorships helped connect sponsors and teams. Finally, non-fans were most likely to believe that shirt sponsorships would spread beyond MLS followed by soccer fans and sports fans.

**INTRODUCTION**

The proliferation of alternative and competing entertainment options during the last two decades has heightened competition for attendance, television revenue, and sponsorship dollars for sport organizations and leagues. While the pressure has been hard on new leagues, even established leagues have experienced declining attendance. Major League Baseball's attendance dropped again for the third straight year, down for 2010 by another 1 percent from 2009 (Bennett, 2010). The NHL's 2009 ticket sales were down from the previous year by 2.2 percent (Mickle, 2010). The NFL's attendance for regular season is again down for the third straight year; down to 1998 levels (McCarthy 2010). NBA attendance has fallen by 2 percent from the 2008-2009 season, according to experts at *Street & Smith's Sports Business Journal* (2010).

The trend has reinvigorated a focus on executing sound marketing and generating new revenue streams and markets. Some teams and leagues have a history of innovative marketing, like the NFL's Dallas Cowboys who spent \$1.3 million to create a traveling exhibit to reach fans unable to make it to games (Bernstein 2001) and the San Francisco 49ers who proposed hosting regular luncheons for business executives (Brockington, 2003). Today, that focus is perhaps even stronger with more teams and leagues looking for growth opportunities. It's not surprising then to read in *Street & Smith's Sports Business Journal* that NFL commissioner, Roger Goodell brought in Disney CEO, Bob Iger to the league meeting to send a signal to owners for the need to continue to innovate its marketing efforts (2010).

Although the sport industry continues to become more business-like and thus grow in its strategic needs, the study of strategy in sport by researchers has yet to fully catch up. Some work has discussed strategic marketing issues such as marketing orientation and developing new market segments (e.g. Brindley & Thorogood 1998), but it is still sparse. In particular, knowledge of strategic issues regarding entering new markets with the right promotional efforts is inadequate. With sports looking internationally to develop markets like the NBA playing more regularly in Europe and China and signing international corporate sponsors (Lombardo, 2010), now is the time to explore how new markets respond to new [to American professional sports] marketing efforts.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the strategy of growing revenue in sports and the challenge of developing new international markets. Data were collected from American soccer fans about a traditionally non-American, at least as far as major league sports are concerned, promotional effort: shirt sponsorships. From these respondents, we explore what this segment thinks and feels, and their behaviors. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for sports marketers and future research directions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

While it is a topic central to firms striving to gain a competitive advantage and improve organizational effectiveness, the study of strategy has received little attention among sport marketing researchers. Strategic planning guides the organization so that it might effectively manage within its environment. Getting new markets to respond favorably to shirt sponsorship efforts in this competitive environment is just such an issue.

Shirt sponsorship has been a common practice and robust revenue stream for football clubs in the United Kingdom and much of Europe since the 1970s and has since grown to be accepted throughout most of the world. Some of the earliest shirt sponsorship deals in European football were established during the 1970s and included Jagermeister buying the shirt sponsorship of German club, Eintracht Braunschweig and English club, Kettering, placing "Kettering Tyres" on their shirts, and Hitachi purchasing the shirt sponsorship for Liverpool FC (Moor, 2009; Preston, 2008).

For European soccer leagues, shirt sponsorship constitutes a substantial source of revenue. In 2010, the top 20 teams in the English Premier League (EPL) generated more than \$155 million from shirt sponsorships (Thomaselli, 2010). For the most popular English clubs, shirt

sponsorships can be worth more than \$33 million per year (Gillis, 2009). In 2008, the best professional teams in the six major leagues across Europe generated more than \$460 million in revenue, with clubs in the German Bundesliga and the English Premier League leading the way (Szczepanik, 2008).

While shirt sponsorship is well-established globally, the most tradition-rich and prestigious professional sports leagues in America have yet to accept shirt sponsorships for uniforms worn during actual matches. These include the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the National Hockey League (NHL). It needs to be noted that the NFL and the NBA currently sell ads on practice jerseys and Major League Baseball allows teams to wear sponsored-jerseys in some international competitions such as the World Baseball Classic (Thomaselli, 2010). However, sport marketing researcher David Carter said (Sandomir, 2009), “For newer domestic leagues (in America), or even those that lack heritage, the ability to move forward with jersey sponsorship will be far easier and will happen sooner. The barriers will be reduced slowly in leagues that have rich traditions and storied histories.”

In the United States, professional team sports leagues, that have adopted shirt sponsorship, include Major League Soccer (MLS) (Bell, 2006), the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) (Medina, 2009), Women’s Professional Soccer (WPS) (Women’s Soccer Insider, 2010), the United Football League (UFL) (Janoff, 2010), and the National Basketball Association Development League (Thomaselli, 2010). All these leagues are relatively new and they lack the tradition and history of more established professional sports in the USA. Dave Checketts, owner of Major League Soccer’s Real Salt Lake, said “For the other sports (in the USA), there is a group of owners who would not let (shirt sponsorship) happen...but the aura of soccer is different from other sports” (Bell, 2006).

In 2007, MLS became the first professional sports league in the USA to embrace shirt sponsorship (Bell, 2006). Since then, 15 teams have developed shirt sponsorships. Shirt sponsorships can be lucrative for MLS clubs. HerbaLife considered the extent which David Beckham could give the company additional brand exposure when they purchased the jersey-front for the Los Angeles Galaxy. After fans bought 300,000 copies of Beckham’s shirt, it became apparent that this deal benefitted the Galaxy, HerbaLife, and Beckham (Schwartz & Badenhausen, 2008). Mahmoud (2008) suggests that HerbaLife earned the equivalent of \$175,000 in television exposure to its brand from a 2007 ESPN broadcast of a game featuring David Beckham wearing a Los Angeles Galaxy jersey with the company’s brand. Marketing data show that Real Salt Lake was earning better than average returns on investment from its shirt sponsorship deal with XanGo (Lieberman, 2009). Similarly, Thomaselli (2009) said reports that Atlantic Health, a corporation that bought the shirt sponsorship to practice jerseys worn by the NFL’s New York Jets, earned more than \$200,000 in free exposure when the team was featured on the HBO network “Hard Knocks” television series.

<b>Team</b>	<b>Shirt Sponsors</b>
Los Angeles	HerbaLife
Chivas USA/Los Angeles	Comex, Corona
Columbus	Glidden
San Jose, California	Amway
Seattle	Xbox 360
Salt Lake	Xango
Houston	Amigo Energy, Greenstar
Chicago	Best Buy
New England	United Healthcare
Toronto	BMO Bank
New York	Red Bull
Washington, DC	Volkswagon
Philadelphia	Bimbo
Portland	Alaska Airlines
Montreal	BMO Bank
Vancouver, BC	Bell Telephone

**FIGURE 1. MLS SHIRT SPONSORSHIPS**

Why have American sport leagues been so slow to accept shirt sponsorship? Part of the answer lies in the notion that in the United States professional sports has often been historically viewed as a “memory place” that should be free of commercial intrusion (Boyd, 2000). For example, the first stadiums in the United States were typically named for a feature of the community (e.g., Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh) or a noted community leader (e.g., Wrigley Field in Chicago) or a noble cause (e.g., Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia), not a corporation. Some of the first professional sports teams in the United States were named to reflect the types of workers in the region in a community (e.g., the Pittsburgh Steelers) or the heritage of a region (e.g., the Minnesota Vikings) instead of being named for a corporation (Allen, 2010). If one follows this line of thinking, it may not be so surprising that shirt sponsorships are criticized in America because to many people they represent a bigger intrusion of commercialism onto the sports landscape. Paul Lukas, who monitors trends associated with sports uniforms in America, said (in Jackson and Lukas, 2009), “An ad patch on my favorite team’s jersey...would be the latest in a long series of drip-drip-drip maneuvers that have led to a tremendous degree of cynicism about sports...This type of marketing takes a very real toll in terms of fan attitudes to the point where watching sports becomes more of a chore and less of a pleasure.”

In another article, Lukas (2009) opined, “The case can be made that (American professional sports) teams are also civic entities—that’s why we care about them so much. They carry the names of our cities and states...and we rally around them, we live and die with them...Simply selling off the team’s jersey sends a terrible message that our civic institutions are for sale.” Similarly, Johns (2009) wrote about how fans in Seattle might react to shirt sponsorships for the region’s sports teams, saying “I shudder to think that the Seahawks jersey could someday bear Honda across the front. I’m not eager to see the Mariners become billboards for Bank of America.” Another criticism of shirt sponsorship in America is that only those sports which are less-prestigious as the NFL, NBA, MLB or NHL or in dire financial circumstances would

embrace the concept. Scoop Jackson of ESPN wrote (Jackson and Lukas, 2009; Marcus, 2009), “The WNBA has been...financially strapped for years... The fact that they decided to add sponsorships to their jerseys is relevant to their continued (economic woes).” Harris (2009) described the circumstances surrounding the first-ever sponsorship deal signed by the Phoenix Mercury of the WNBA. He quotes Todd Davis, the chief executive of LifeLock who sponsored the Mercury’s jersey, as saying “Mercury fans...will embrace the sponsorship because it gives the team financial stability...but there would be a pretty big backlash if you tried to put a sponsor on the front of the (Arizona) Diamondbacks or (Phoenix) Suns.” In the following section, we pursue the validity of the statement with a study of American sport fans.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The aim of this paper is to describe the results of a pilot research project that examined attitudes of Americans about shirt sponsorship in Major League Soccer (MLS). Some of the key issues we explore center around whether the American public may be opposed to all shirt sponsorship in America professional team sports. We also wanted to learn more about the extent to which Americans might approve of shirt sponsorships in soccer and to try to explain how these perceptions contrasted to the rest of the world in which shirt sponsorships have been embraced for many years.

Drawing from the academic and popular literature about shirt sponsorship and media accounts about reactions to the introduction of shirt sponsorship in the USA, we developed an online survey that participants could take at [www.psychdata.com](http://www.psychdata.com). The survey included 59 questions and on average took the 533 respondents less than 30 minutes to complete. The initial sections of the survey asked participants some demographic information. Participants were then asked to self-identify if they were a soccer fan, a sports fan but not necessarily a soccer fan, or a non-sports fan. This question is somewhat unique and it became critically important in the data analysis since it allowed us to examine potential differences in survey responses between these distinct groups of fans. The survey also presented questions about the specific conditions under which they might accept shirt sponsorship, and the extent to which their media use and purchase decisions might be influenced when teams adopted shirt sponsorship. This line of questioning ties into a study done by Markovits and Smith (2007) in which they surveyed college athletes and other students at the University of Michigan about the ways in which they participate in and follow sports. Similarly, a 2010 report by the SportFive consulting group differentiated between English football fans who were very interested in football and casual fans when determining the extent to which there was growing interest in the sport (Hasenbein & Hinke, 2010).

We recruited potential participants through notices on academic list serves that discuss sports management issues. These efforts yielded few participants. Each of the researchers also recruited students on their own university campus, thus the majority of respondents who took part in this study were college students. We intentionally chose to recruit college students for the survey both because: (a) we had the most access to them, and (b) young people, particularly college students, are demonstrating more interest in becoming soccer fans (Markovits & Smith, 2007) and are a sought-after demographic for MLS and other leagues alike (Howard, 2009; Bachman, 2009). In fact, college students are a sought-after market for other US professional leagues and teams as well. Over the past several years, teams such as Major League Baseball’s Philadelphia

Phillies treat college students as their target market for the beginning months each season until they shift to families as primary schools release for the summer (George, 2006).

## **Procedure**

Participants were college students from American universities solicited via e-mail with an invitation to respond to a survey designed to “determine the attitudes about large advertisements on Major League Soccer uniforms.” The American university criterion was used to allow researchers to test the effect of shirt sponsorship on “American markets.” After reading an informed consent form, participants responded to a set of demographic questions. Following this, participants self-selected into three categories of sports avidity and completed a series of measures related to our research questions. Finally, participants were invited to enter a drawing for a free MLS team jersey of their choice. Data collection began in June 2009 and concluded in December 2009.

## **Measures**

Demographic measures include: basic self-report questions measuring participant gender, geographic location, education, income, and ethnicity were asked. Additional issues were also investigated.

Experience with sports and soccer measures included experience with soccer as both a participant and a spectator. As for being a sport spectator, we asked respondents to self-identify as non-sports fans, sports fans but not soccer fans, or soccer fans. Respondents were also asked an abbreviated version of the Trail and James (2001) sports consumption scale, with three response items tailored for soccer in general (“soccer is boring,” “no opinion” or “soccer is exciting”) as well as Major League Soccer specifically. Five questions were asked about interest in different soccer leagues, including college and international soccer using six-point Likert-type scale.

Fan behaviors’ measures include: attending soccer games, watching games on television (or following soccer using other media outlets such as magazines, newspapers, or the Internet), and purchasing soccer-related merchandise were measured using categorical responses. In addition to these self-reported behavioral measures, a series of five-item Likert-style questions were asked regarding whether or not respondents felt that the presence of shirt sponsorships on MLS jerseys would affect their willingness to attend games, follow MLS teams, or discuss teams and league action with friends. Responses of “1” indicated “strongly disagree” while responses of “4” indicated “strongly agree,” and a neutral response was coded as “0.”

Opinions of/approval of MLS shirt sponsorship measures were perhaps the most central questions to our study as respondents were asked a series of questions related to their response to MLS shirt sponsorships. Questions were worded to capture prevailing fan opinions. These questions related to general impression of MLS jersey ads (“are ugly,” “make the league look unprofessional,” “look more like the jerseys worn by international soccer clubs,” “show me that corporations think the teams are valuable,” and “setting a trend other professional sports in the USA will follow”), conditional acceptance of MLS shirt sponsorships (“if it lowers ticket

prices,” “if it helps my team attract or retain the best players,” “if it prevents my team from seeking public funds”), and sponsor attitudes (“allow me to identify a team with a product/product with a team,” “make me more likely to purchase the sponsor’s products or services,” “make me want to avoid buying the sponsor’s products or services,” “make me want to learn more about the sponsor,” “are a waste of money”). Responses of “1” indicated “strongly disagree” while responses of “4” indicated “strongly agree,” and a neutral response was coded as “0.”

## RESULTS

### Participants

A total of N=533 student participants completed our online survey. These students were recruited from several American universities. About 43% of the respondents (n=229) were male, and almost half of the respondents (47.8%) were freshmen or sophomore college students in South Dakota, New Jersey, Georgia, Pennsylvania and Texas. Most of the respondents (62.5%) were from middle-income families (annual household income ranges from \$25,000 to \$150,000). A majority of the respondents (84.5%) were Caucasian. About half of the respondents (49.9%) played in a soccer league as a youth. More than a half of the respondents (52.5%) thought that soccer was exciting in general, but only 35.4% of the respondents described Major League Soccer (MLS) as exciting; 49.8% had no opinion about MLS. Because we sought to investigate if a person’s status as a fan affected their attitude toward the MLS or shirt ads, participants were asked their fan status (“not a sports fan,” “sports fan but not a soccer fan,” or “soccer fan”). Table 1 shows the self-reported fan status among respondents; this measure was used to create three groups of fans so we could assess the relative influence of self-identified fandom on our dependent measures.

**TABLE 1. FAN STATUS (n=533)**

	Frequency	Percent
Not a sports fan	83	15.57
A sports fan, but not a fan of soccer	256	48.03
A soccer fan	194	36.40

**Effect of shirt advertising on perceptions of MLS** - We first examined the effect of shirt advertising on perceptions of the league. Overall, answers revealed a positive response toward shirt sponsorship. Respondents did not think that shirt advertisements were ugly (M = 2.26, SD = .838) or unprofessional (M = 2.21, SD = .870), and reported that the presence of shirt advertisements made the teams look more like their international counterparts (M = 2.68, SD = .845) and appear more valuable to corporations (M = 2.90, SD = .765).

We next investigated if a person’s status as a fan affected their attitude toward the MLS or shirt ads. Soccer fans were the least likely to perceive the presence of shirts advertisements as unprofessional (M = 2.08, SD = .873) as compared to the other fan groups. Both soccer fans and general sports fans also felt most strongly that the presence of ads on jerseys made the MLS teams look more like their international counterparts; all of these differences were significant.

See Table 2. Furthermore, results related to aesthetics of the ads and corporations' motivations for advertising were not significant.

**TABLE 2. ANOVA RESULTS FOR THE EFFECT OF SHIRT ADVERTISING ON PERCEPTIONS OF MLS**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$
<i>Ads on MLS shirts are ugly</i> <sup>1</sup>			1.16	.314	.007
Soccer fans	2.20a	.866			
Sports fans	2.34a	.840			
Non fans	2.24a	.699			
<i>Ads on MLS shirts are unprofessional</i> <sup>2</sup>			3.44	.033	.017
Soccer fans	2.08a	.873			
Sports fans	2.32b	.865			
Non fans	2.25b	.838			
<i>Ads on MLS jerseys are more like int'l soccer</i> <sup>3</sup>			5.19	.006	.031
Soccer fans	2.78a	.870			
Sports fans	2.67a	.801			
Non fans	2.28b	.815			
<i>Ads on MLS jerseys imply corporations see value in teams</i> <sup>4</sup>			1.78	.170	.010
Soccer fans	2.97a	.739			
Sports fans	2.87a	.753			
Non fans	2.74a	.871			

*Note: Different subscripts within groups indicate honest significant difference at the  $p < .05$  level or higher using Tukey HSD method.*

<sup>1</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,350); <sup>2</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,390)

<sup>3</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,329); <sup>4</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,359)

**Benefits of MLS shirt advertisements** - We then looked at factors that might impact a respondent's attitude toward the presence of shirt advertisements: what would it take to get the respondent to accept shirt advertisements? Overall, we found that respondents supported the presence of shirt advertisements if it resulted in lower ticket prices ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = .784$ ), attracting and/or retaining top players ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = .852$ ), and prevented teams from seeking public funds ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = .910$ ). All results were significant at the .05 level. For all three measures, soccer fans felt significantly more strongly about these outcomes than sports fans and non-fans. Table 3 contains the means, standard deviations, F-test and observed power statistics for each of these analyses comparing our self-identified fan groups.

**TABLE 3. ANOVA EFFECT OF SPORTS STATUS ON CONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE OF MLS SHIRT ADVERTISING**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	$\eta^2$
<i>Lower ticket prices</i> <sup>1</sup>			6.35	.002	.032
Soccer fans	3.21a	.697			
Sports fans	2.92b	.824			
Non fans	2.96b	.815			
<i>Attract and retain top players</i> <sup>2</sup>			9.30	~.001	.049
Soccer fans	3.25a	.737			
Sports fans	2.85b	.907			
Non fans	3.00a,b	.877			
<i>Prevent from seeking public funds</i> <sup>3</sup>			7.63	.001	.045
Soccer fans	3.20a	.833			
Sports fans	2.80b	.974			
Non fans	2.85b	.760			

*Note: Different subscripts within groups indicate significant difference at the  $p < .05$  level or greater using Tukey HSD method.*

<sup>1</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,387); <sup>2</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,390)

<sup>3</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,329)

**Effect of shirt advertising on fan behaviors** - We next sought to investigate the effect of MLS shirt advertisements on critical fan behaviors, such as attending MLS games and watching games on television. Overall, respondents did not feel as if the presence of advertising on MLS jerseys would entice them to watch games on television ( $M = 1.68$ ,  $SD = .745$ ), attend games in-person ( $M = 1.59$ ,  $SD = .705$ ), purchase team merchandise ( $M = 1.85$ ,  $SD = .830$ ), follow MLS teams in the mainstream media ( $M = 1.79$ ,  $SD = .816$ ), or discuss MLS teams with friends ( $M = 1.92$ ,  $SD = .850$ ). Thus, it doesn't look like the presence of jersey advertisements has any positive effects on these behaviors. However, it should be noted that participants in our study did not seem heavily engaged in these activities; 91 percent of respondents do not attend MLS games ( $n = 485$ ), 59 percent of respondents don't watch games on television ( $n = 315$ ), 95 percent of respondents do not purchase MLS merchandise ( $n = 505$ ), and 76 percent of respondents do not follow MLS in mainstream mass media ( $n = 406$ ). Finally, while the overall patterns suggest non-agreement with the measured intended behaviors, we find that across all five fan behavior measures in our study, soccer fans were more likely to engage in them as a result of shirt advertisements as compared to sports fans and non-fans. Table 4 contains details.

**TABLE 4. ANOVA EFFECT OF SPORTS STATUS ON FAN BEHAVIORS**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	$\eta^2$
<i>Watch games on television</i> <sup>1</sup>			5.80	.003	.032
Soccer fans	1.84a	.781			
Sports fans	1.56b	.692			
Non fans	1.67b	.753			
<i>Go to games in-person</i> <sup>2</sup>			8.63	~.001	.047
Soccer fans	1.78a	.730			
Sports fans	1.45b	.642			
Non fans	1.54b	.743			
<i>Buy team merchandise</i> <sup>3</sup>			8.15	~.001	.043
Soccer fans	2.07a	.861			
Sports fans	1.71b	.767			
Non fans	1.78b	.848			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	$\eta^2$
<i>Follow team in the mass media</i> <sup>4</sup>			10.4	~.001	.056
Soccer fans	2.04a	.864			
Sports fans	1.64b	.752			
Non fans	1.62b	.741			
<i>Discuss MLS team with friends</i> <sup>5</sup>			5.61	.004	.031
Soccer fans	2.10a	.860			
Sports fans	1.77b	.803			
Non fans	1.94a,b	.909			

*Note: Different subscripts within groups indicate significant difference at the  $p < .05$  level or higher using Tukey HSD method.*

<sup>1</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,357); <sup>2</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,353)

<sup>3</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,364); <sup>4</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,356)

<sup>5</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,356)

**Effect of MLS shirt advertisements on fan’s attitudes toward sponsors** - We next examined the effect of shirt advertisements on fan attitudes toward sponsors, including offering support for the advertiser’s business, connecting teams with products (and vice versa), and purchasing the advertised products or services. Overall, respondents felt that MLS jersey advertisements helped to establish goodwill with the corporate sponsor ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = .851$ ), were slightly more likely to connect a product with a team ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = .732$ ) and connect a team with a product ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = .771$ ); however, there did not seem to be an effect of advertising on purchasing a sponsor’s product or services ( $M = 2.27$ ,  $SD = .860$ ), and respondents disagreed slightly that the presence of ads would prevent purchasing products or services ( $M = 1.99$ ,  $SD = .817$ ). Respondents felt slightly that ads on MLS jerseys would increase information-seeking behaviors about sponsors ( $M = 2.37$ ,  $SD = .824$ ). None of these opinions differed significantly as a result of sports fandom groupings. Table 5 contains the means, standard deviations, F-test and observed power statistics for each of these analyses.

**TABLE 5. ANOVA EFFECT OF SPORTS FANDOM ON FAN BEHAVIORS**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	$\eta^2$
<i>Advertiser goodwill</i> <sup>1</sup>			2.56	.079	.015
Soccer fans	3.05a	.834			
Sports fans	2.83a	.893			
Non fans	2.96a	.721			
<i>Identify a product with a team</i> <sup>2</sup>			.550	.577	.003
Soccer fans	2.78a	.726			
Sports fans	2.73a	.752			
Non fans	2.84a	.682			
<i>Identify a team with a product</i> <sup>3</sup>			1.27	.283	.006
Soccer fans	2.67a	.777			
Sports fans	2.72a	.772			
Non fans	2.86a	.749			
<i>Purchase advertised products/services</i> <sup>4</sup>			1.94	.145	.011
Soccer fans	2.36a	.844			
Sports fans	2.17a	.845			
Non fans	2.35a	.926			
<i>Avoid purchasing products/services</i> <sup>5</sup>			.048	.953	~.000
Soccer fans	1.97a	.839			
Sports fans	2.00a	.801			
Non fans	1.98a	.821			
<i>Information seeking about sponsors</i> <sup>6</sup>			1.85	.158	.011
Soccer fans	2.44a	.811			
Sports fans	2.28a	.834			
Non fans	2.48a	.809			

*Note: Different subscripts within groups indicate honest significant difference at the  $p < .05$  level or higher using Tukey HSD method.*

<sup>1</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,347); <sup>2</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,404)

<sup>3</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,406); <sup>4</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,349)

<sup>5</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,347); <sup>6</sup> Degrees of freedom are (2,348)

**Effect of MLS shirt advertisements on acceptance of shirt advertising in other professional sports** - Finally, we examined whether or not the presence of shirt advertisements in MLS might affect people's perceptions of allowing such ads on other major professional sports in the United States. Overall, respondents agreed slightly that MLS jersey advertisements were setting a trend for other professionals to follow,  $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = .877$ ; moreover, a significant difference was found between different types of fans,  $F(2,357) = 3.22$ ,  $p = .041$ ,  $\eta^2 = .018$ . Non-sport fans were most likely to think that a trend was being set ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = .85$ ) followed in order by soccer fans ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = .877$ ) and sports fans ( $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = .884$ ), although the latter two groups did not differ significantly from one another.

## DISCUSSION

Our study was designed to take an exploratory look at how different self-identified classifications of sports fans, particularly the coveted college student market, felt about the emergence of shirt sponsorship in American professional sports. Understanding fans attitudes and behavioral intentions is the first step toward anticipating responses that impact sport revenue. Because fan revenues are such a vital part of a sport team's and league's overall revenue stream, their opinions and intentions are studied in this paper. We examined how fans and non-fans alike were responding to the presence of jersey advertisements in MLS, and whether or not fans felt these ads would influence their perceptions of MLS and its advertisers.

When asked whether they felt MLS shirt sponsorships were ugly, respondents replied no. Nor were the ads seen as unprofessional; instead, they felt these sponsorships made MLS clubs look more like prestigious international counterparts. Soccer fans and sports fans felt most strongly that shirt sponsorships made MLS teams look like international clubs. Respondents said they would support shirt sponsorships if this practice lowered ticket prices, helped a team recruit players, or not have to seek public funds. Soccer fans felt more strongly about these questions than sports fans or non-fans.

We asked respondents about the extent to which shirt sponsorships may affect fan behavior. However, since many of our respondents did not live in areas close to MLS franchises, it is hard to infer what this data is really telling us. For example, 91 percent of respondents had never attended an MLS match. Broadly, the data suggest that soccer fans are more likely than sports fans or non-fans to attend games, purchase team merchandise, follow the league in the media, and discuss MLS with friends because the league allows shirt sponsorships.

In addition to having respondents from far enough outside MLS teams' geographic market to accurately gauge fan behavior, our measure of fan behavior might not have captured the full behavioral spectrum. This study's measures sought to determine what positive effect a shirt sponsorship brought to the team and league. Results were only slightly positive. However, as one reviewer noted, there is a research stream that might lead marketing researchers to hypothesize that fans would behave negatively immediately toward the team. In the future questions could be different – measuring the negative effects of using shirt advertising rather than the positive effects. For example, future studies might ask, “Would advertising on sports' jerseys dissuade you from buying the team's jerseys” or “from watching the team on television” or “attending games in-person.”

Respondents told us how they felt shirt sponsorships affected their attitudes towards team sponsors and helped connect sponsors and teams. Interestingly, respondents said that shirt sponsorships did not make them more likely to seek more information about a team sponsor or purchase a sponsor's goods. However, keep in mind that many of the study's respondents were not located near an MLS team and could not, therefore, easily access MLS team merchandise. This might have affected some results.

One of our major goals was to discern if shirt sponsorship was only a trend that would be confined to international teams and the MLS or if it might be spreading to other more high-

profile professional team sports such as the NFL, Major League Baseball, the NHL and the NBA. When taken as a whole, respondents said MLS was setting a trend other pro sports in the USA would follow. But when you sort out the opinions of all three groups, significant fractures emerge: Nonfans were most likely to say shirt sponsorships would spread beyond MLS followed by soccer fans and sports fans.

## **IMPLICATONS**

This study looks at the effect that shirt sponsorship of teams in a professional league has on fans' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Managerially, more than ever, these answers are sought: competition from other forms of entertainment is diluting the consumer base, consumers have less disposable income and are weathering current economic hazards, and marketing signage is turning some viewers off. Our study shows that American fans overall accept shirt sponsorship on professional soccer jerseys. The MLS and even other professional sports team managers are seemingly in a position to introduce the idea of shirt sponsorships, at least in a limited way.

That's not to say that the issue is resolved, on the contrary. One implication, for researchers is whether these findings extend to other more entrenched professional sports in the U.S. Industry; experts suggest that shirt sponsorship is a viable revenue stream. Fan advocates are not so favorable. Our research generally supports that idea that fans are not wholly against shirt sponsorships on MLS jerseys, and anticipate the coming of shirt sponsorships in other American professional sports.

This study provides a small aspect of one look into the much broader issue of how avid sports fans in the United States feel about one issue related to the increasing intrusion of commercialism and sponsorship into sports. Some obvious lines of follow-up research might investigate such issues as the extent to which other intrusions into the game-day experience (e.g., more sponsored segments within games, such as: "This kickoff is sponsored by Brand X") as well as the extent to which sports fans are able to recall the increased numbers of sponsored messages that are directed towards them. Finally, studies might need to be done to advise potential sponsors about how they can engage avid fans and get their brand embraced by them, rather than instead alienating them.

## **LIMITATIONS**

As with all research, the study has limitations. First, this was a pilot study that we hoped would serve as a litmus test that would provide preliminary insights. We are now administering a follow-up study that probes more deeply into the relationships between sponsorship and fan avidity. Secondly, many of our respondents were college students who lived too far away from an MLS franchise to be avid fans of a Major League Soccer team. In future studies, we hope to reach more avid fans who attend sports games and consume information about their team in the mass media.

Respondents for this survey were a convenience sample comprised largely of college-aged students, and some of whom were not located in or near major MLS markets. While we are confident that our study still contained a large cross-section of sports and soccer fans as

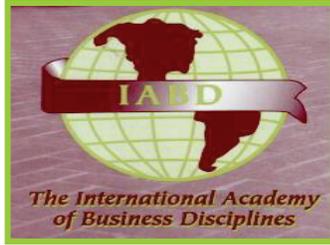
represented by our descriptive statistics, we acknowledge that this sample is but a small portion of the larger US sport fan base. However, the lack of representation from MLS markets in our sample confirms the MLS Commissioner Don Garber's comments that "we're not trying to create soccer fans. We're trying to convert soccer fans into fans of MLS" (Marcus, 2009). This low prevalence of fan behaviors (i.e. about 10 percent of our sample attended MLS games, and only about 40 percent watched MLS games on television) suggests that our respondents, while many self-identified as soccer fans, were not necessarily fans of a particular MLS franchise. Replication of this research should carefully consider a broader cross-section of sports fans and make careful efforts to include respondents from MLS markets.

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