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So your team is out...now what? US soccer fans and the 2018 FIFA Men's World Cup

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Abstract: In 2018, the US men's national soccer team failed to qualify for the FIFA World Cup for the first time since 1986. The purpose of the current study was to investigate how sports fans react when their favourite team is not participating in a competition by surveying US soccer fans about the 2018 World Cup. In the current study, 841 US soccer fans completed a survey asking about which alternate teams they planned to support, the reasons for supporting a particular team, as well as their levels of soccer involvement, nationalism, and internationalism. Respondents most frequently intended to support Germany, and the ten most frequently supported teams were all from Europe or Latin America. With respect to reasons for supporting a given team, team-specific factors tended to be more important than relational-type factors.

Keywords: fandom; involvement; nationalism; internationalism; soccer; international sport; sport marketing; sponsorship; World Cup; FIFA.

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1 Introduction

On the evening of October 10, 2017, fans of the United States men's national soccer team found themselves in a state of shock and disbelief. Falling to Trinidad and Tobago by a score of 2-1, the US men had failed to qualify for the FIFA World Cup for the first time since 1986. Executives with the Fox Broadcasting Company likely shared a sense of dismay at the team's elimination, as the network had paid more than \$400 million for the English-language rights to broadcast the 2018 and 2022 World Cup tournaments in the US (Longman, 2011). With the US men not in the competition, how would American soccer fans react? Which teams, if any, would they choose to support and follow in the 2018 World Cup? And what factors would influence their decisions about which teams to support?

Such questions caught the attention of numerous sponsors and media commentators. In a marketing campaign for Wells Fargo, former US captain Landon Donovan encouraged American fans to support Mexico, saying 'vamos México' while holding a scarf that read, "My other team is Mexico". Notably, such encouragement to support an arch-rival did not go over well with a number of Donovan's former teammates (Goff, 2018). Meanwhile, Volkswagen's prominent 'Jump on the Wagon' commercial series featured fans from various nations (e.g., Iceland, Belgium, Germany, Brazil) making pleas about why Americans should support their respective teams (Conrad, 2018). Such examples highlight the very real question facing many American soccer fans heading into the summer of 2018 – who should I support?

2 Research purpose

Factors that motivate fans to support a particular team are a key consideration for many sport marketers. There have been few opportunities in recent years to examine the perspectives and behaviours of US sport consumers with respect to major international tournaments in which the US does not have a representative team. Studying supporter preferences in this context offers implications for a number of situations in which a person's usually-preferred team is not in a given competition (e.g., one's favourite NFL team does not make the playoffs, favourite NCAA basketball team is eliminated from the tournament). In these cases, sport marketers must consider how to keep fans interested in the competition even when their favourite teams are not playing. For instance, sport marketers might ask, "what factors lead fans to select a new team to root for in the NFL playoffs or NCAA basketball tournament if their regular favourite is out of the competition?"

In light of such considerations, the purpose of the current study was to examine the motivations that led US soccer fans to support a particular team during the 2018 FIFA Men's World Cup. In the simplest terms, we were interested in identifying the teams that soccer fans in the US planned to support, and why they intended to support those particular teams.

3 Review of literature

3.1 Team identification and domain involvement

Pioneering work by Funk and James (2001) proposed the psychological continuum model (PCM) as a way of understanding people's psychological connection to sport. The PCM describes four levels of connection that progress from one's initial awareness of a sport or team to eventual allegiance – awareness, attraction, attachment, and allegiance. Building on such work by focusing on attraction to a specific team, the current study draws an overarching theoretical framework of *team identification* from Wann (2006), who organises motives for identifying with a particular team into three categories, including:

- a psychological
- b environmental
- c team-related motives.

The *psychological* dimension of team identification motivation encompasses the need for belonging to a group, the need to be distinguished from others, and the need to maintain a positive self-image. In general, the psychological connection provides fans of a team a "feeling of belongingness gained through interactions" [Branscombe and Wann, (1991), p.117]. Studies looking at college sport and minor league sport have acknowledged how the social side of the fan experience (i.e., engaging with and being with other fans of the same team), can be a strong pull toward supporting and engaging with a specific team (Slavich et al., 2018; Wann et al., 2008). In this way, fans leverage sport as a way to connect, feel special, and buffer against negative external stimuli (Wann, 2006; Wann and James, 2018).

A second motive for identifying with a specific team has roots in *environmental* factors. The environmental category includes such factors as socialisation into fandom and geographical proximity to the team. This category highlights the ways in which interactions with other fans, the team itself, and players on the team, either physically or digitally, can socialise a person to become a fan of that team. That is, recognising, learning, and adopting the group norms and expectations of fan groups, and even developing friendships among the fan group itself, is an important part of fan socialisation (e.g., chants, cheers, hand gestures, etc.; Brown et al., 2013; Katz et al., 2018). Sport marketing practitioners explicitly tap into these sources of team identification motives with younger fans through attempts toward youth socialisation with tactics such as kid clubs (Mastromartino et al., 2020).

In addition, because geographic proximity may naturally increase opportunities for socialisation and connections with the team to occur, it is logical that living close to a certain team is an important factor in a person's team identification development (Wann, 2006; Wann and James, 2018). Some studies examining this kind of geographic attachment view the member of a team as representatives for their community or city, in which pride for the community/city is interconnected with pride for the team (Kwon et al., 2005). In addition, recent research has pointed to even out-of-market fans (i.e., fans of a particular team who no longer live in the same city of the team) also feeling this geographic connection even though they no longer live in the team's locality (Mazodier et al., 2018; Stensland et al., 2020).

Finally, *team-related* motives can further explain a fan's identity with a particular team. Team-related motives include elements of the team's characteristics, team performance, and player attributes (Wann, 2006). Team characteristics are influenced by history, tradition, rituals, and off-the-field image. In addition, successful team performance has been linked with positive team identification, although success can be framed in many ways (Kerr and Emery, 2011). That is, winning and losing is not always the ultimate measure of success, as fans frame narratives surrounding competitions in various ways (e.g., 'putting up a good fight', 'coming together as a team', showing some 'flashes of skill'). The player attributes of attractiveness and similarity may also influence team identification. As fans perceive players on the team to be attractive (e.g., popular, having specific skills, maintaining celebrity status) or similar to themselves (e.g., having similar demographic, personality, or geographic characteristics), team identification is expected to increase (Hyatt and Andrijew, 2008; Wann, 2006).

Greenwood et al. (2006) drew from Wann (2006), measuring these psychological, environmental, and team-related characteristics in developing their 'Becoming a Fan' scale to investigate these relationships. By examining initial fan motivations for team identification with a football club, they found significant connections between new team identification and the influences of players and coaches, family and friends, team success, tailgating, and geographic factors (Greenwood et al., 2006). Their study suggests the establishment of team identification may be influenced by marketing that focuses on geographical and family variables, the talent level and personalities of players and coaches, as well as by providing an environment in which a tailgate or party atmosphere is encouraged (Greenwood et al., 2006).

Gwinner and Swanson (2003), meanwhile, described the influence of *domain involvement* on team identification. Specifically, domain involvement includes the level at which an individual is familiar with, knows about, and cares about a given sport, league, or competition. That is, domain involvement highlights how familiar and invested

a person is with a given sport and the context surrounding the competition (e.g., past results, current players, teams, game rules, tournament narrative). Some in the sport marketing literature have discussed the construct of domain involvement using the language of fanship (i.e., identification with the sport itself), in contrast with fandom (i.e., identification with a specific sport team). Fanship, much like domain involvement, relates to the degree a person feels immersed in the sport culture for which they have an interest (Melnick and Wann, 2011). In addition, studies suggest increased domain involvement (i.e., learning about the sport, competition, context) was related to increased team identification (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003). This finding highlights the importance of fans understanding and being involved with the context and narrative of their sport, not just the team alone.

In sport marketing research, the measurement of sport domain involvement has produced insight when comparing the behaviours and attitudes of consumers who report high involvement to those who report low involvement. Such findings highlight the ways in which these groups can behave differently (Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012; Tokuyama and Greenwell, 2011). For example, in their study of soccer participants' motivations for playing and watching soccer, Tokuyama and Greenwell (2011) found that respondents with lower involvement cited stress reduction as a primary reason for watching, whereas high involvement fans cited competition as a primary motivating factor. These types of differences are important for marketers to consider when targeting potential consumers.

However, it is important to note research examining team identification is based in the goal of understanding fan connections with a primary team (Wann, 2006). That is, the literature is useful for explaining why someone connects well and develops an identification with their favourite team. However, less is understood about factors that influence secondary team fandom. More specifically, what factors influence fans to root for a team that is not their typical favourite? The current study contributes to the literature by examining how fans choose which team to support when their primary team is no longer involved in an elimination-style tournament.

3.2 Nationalism, internationalism, and sport fandom

National identification stems not from a static set of ideals, but from the social construction of a nation's characteristics and qualities as imagined by its citizens (Anderson, 2006). Citizens of a given nation only ever encounter a very small percentage of their fellow citizens. Therefore, it is not direct relationships with other citizens that unite people under the flag of a nation, but rather it is the shared ideas about what it means to be a citizen of that nation that instil a sense of nationalism and demarcate discursive boundaries of the imagined nation (Newman and Paasi, 1998). An essential caveat to this process relates to the varying privilege of citizen subgroups; those groups in dominant cultural positions based on factors such as race or class are able to project their views of national identity as true or central, thereby further entrenching their privileged status near the 'core' of a nation, positioning other groups as 'peripheries' (D'Agati, 2011).

Sport has long been considered an effective tool for nation-building, as "the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of 11 named people" [Hobsbawm, (1990), p.193]. Yet, as globalising forces continue to shrink the effective distances that separate nations and their citizens, the fluidity of national boundaries complicates the process of imagining national identity. In the context of sport, Poli (2007, p.657)

described this effect as “denationalization [which] can be defined as the loss of importance of the label of origin in the identification process with sportsmen and teams”. The extent to which this stands true of US citizens is contested, however; studies suggest that US sport consumers may hold stronger nationalist than internationalist attitudes (Billings et al., 2013), and that greater fan identification with US teams relates to stronger nationalist attitudes among fans (Billings et al., 2016). In the current study, we adopt the definition of nationalism from Billings et al. (2013, p.915) as “comparative patriotism in which distinctions are made between the presumed superiority of one’s own nation and the inferiority of all other nations,” and internationalism as “a sense of global citizenship”.

Again, however, the ability to identify with a national team as a proxy for national identity seems related to one’s positioning in the imagined nation. Several studies suggest that factors such as race and ethnicity significantly influence the identification of citizens with a national soccer team (Stodolska and Tainsky, 2015; van Sterkenburg, 2013). These alternative factors are particularly relevant in exploring the team identification of US soccer fans in a World Cup without the USMNT.

4 Method

To investigate US soccer fans’ motivations for identification with teams playing in the 2018 FIFA Men’s World Cup, we conducted a survey that received 1,312 responses, resulting in a final sample of $N = 841$ after excluding partially completed responses. Individuals who participated in the study self-identified as both US citizens and fans of soccer. To access a considerable sample of this population, the research team shared links to the online survey on websites frequented by US soccer fans. These included soccer-related forums on websites such as Reddit and SBNation. The researchers also advertised the survey through social media accounts on Twitter and Facebook. The questionnaire was delivered using Qualtrics and data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) 25. The questionnaire was open and available for participation from May 14, 2018 through June 13, 2018. This time period represented the month directly preceding the opening match of the 2018 World Cup, which took place on June 14.

4.1 Instruments

Respondents were presented with a list of the 32 teams that qualified for the 2018 FIFA Men’s World Cup and were asked to identify the ‘primary team’ they planned to support. This was followed by an adapted version of Greenwood et al.’ (2006) ‘Becoming a Fan’ scale to examine reasons for supporting that particular team. This scale was selected over other related instruments because the topic of interest in the current study was the reasons for supporting a particular team, as opposed to the strength of fan identification with a team. Respondents rated the importance of each reason on a Likert-type scale, anchored by 1 as ‘unimportant’ and 7 as ‘extremely important’. Adaptations to the ‘Becoming a Fan’ scale included adjustment of item wording to reflect a focus on the FIFA World Cup, as well as the inclusion of two items regarding:

- a distinctiveness of team identification, supported by Wann (2006) and Hyatt and Andrijiw (2008)
- b the importance of a country to American foreign policy, supported by Billings et al. (2013).

Attitudes of nationalism and internationalism were measured using corresponding 7-point Likert-type scales developed by Billings et al. (2013), featuring five items and six items, respectively. These scales were designed specifically to study nationalist and internationalist attitudes in relation to international sporting competitions. Finally, sport identification levels were measured using the 'domain involvement' scale formulated by Gwinner and Swanson (2003), which asked respondents to rate their overall interest in the sport of soccer. The questionnaire also asked respondents for basic demographic information, including age, race, and gender.

4.2 Analyses

Descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, means, and standard deviations) were calculated to assess:

- a overall demographics of the sample
- b the specific teams that were most commonly selected as the primary team of support
- c the overall reasons for team identification across the entire sample of respondents, regardless of which team they supported
- d the team identification reasons for the seven most popular teams
- e respondents' levels of domain involvement, nationalism, and internationalism.

Subsequently, correlations between the nine reasons for supporting a particular team and domain involvement, nationalism, and internationalism were calculated to examine associations between the reasons for support and the other variables.

5 Results

5.1 Descriptive statistics

5.1.1 Participants

Demographically, 93.9% of respondents identified as 'male', 5.5% identified as 'female', and 0.6% identified as 'other'. Regarding the sample's racial/ethnic identification, 83.6% identified as 'White', 8.4% as 'Hispanic or Latino', 3.8% as 'Asian', 1.5% as 'African American', 0.4% as 'American Indian or Alaska native', and 2.3% as 'other'. White male respondents constituted 79.8% of the overall sample. Latino male respondents followed as the second largest demographic group at 7.8%. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 75 with a mean of 31.1 years.

5.1.2 Primary teams of support

Table 1 provides an overview of the teams most frequently supported by participants in the current study. Germany received the support of 18.3% ($n = 154$) of the sample, followed by England (11.8%), Iceland (11.3%), Argentina (9.4%), Mexico (5.7%), France (5.5%), and Belgium (5.4%). Team identification in this sample was diverse overall, as a total of 21 teams were selected by at least 1% of participants. The top 10 teams garnering the greatest number of supporters were all from Europe or Latin America; Egypt (11th overall with 2.5%) was the most frequently supported team from Africa, while Japan (18th overall with 1.4%) was the most commonly supported team from Asia.

Table 1 Teams with support from 1% or more of the sample

<i>Team</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Germany	154	18.3
England	99	11.8
Iceland	95	11.3
Argentina	79	9.4
Mexico	48	5.7
France	46	5.5
Belgium	45	5.4
Brazil	25	3.0
Costa Rica	25	3.0
Spain	23	2.7
Egypt	21	2.5
Poland	20	2.4
Colombia	17	2.0
Sweden	17	2.0
Peru	16	1.9
Portugal	14	1.7
Croatia	14	1.7
Japan	12	1.4
Australia	11	1.3
Denmark	10	1.2
Senegal	9	1.1

5.1.3 Reasons for team identification

Table 2 provides the mean scores of various reasons for team identification across all responses. The reasons with the highest mean scores were: 'I enjoy watching one or more of the team's specific players' ($M = 4.92$), 'I expect the team to be successful in the 2018 FIFA World Cup' ($M = 3.97$), and 'I appreciate the team's historical success' ($M = 3.39$). Conversely, the items 'The country is important to the US politically' ($M = 2.13$) and

‘The country is close to where I live geographically’ ($M = 1.68$) received the lowest mean scores across all responses.

Seven teams (i.e., Germany, England, Iceland, Argentina, Mexico, France, and Belgium) were identified as the primary team to support by 5% or more of the study participants. Collectively, these teams represented more than two-thirds (67.4%) of respondents’ primary teams of support. Table 3 provides an overview of data regarding the reasons why participants supported these particular teams. Notably, the item ‘I enjoy watching one or more of the team’s specific players’ received the highest mean scores for fans of Germany ($M = 5.23$), England ($M = 5.23$), Argentina ($M = 6.71$), France ($M = 5.76$), and Belgium ($M = 6.16$). The item ‘I expect the team to be successful in the 2018 FIFA World Cup’ also scored above the midpoint on the seven-point Likert-type scale for supporters of Germany ($M = 5.16$), Argentina ($M = 4.37$), France ($M = 5.39$), and Belgium ($M = 5.33$). For Germany, two other items also received scores above the scale midpoint: ‘I have ancestral ties to that country or area’ ($M = 5.01$) and ‘I appreciate the team’s historical success’ ($M = 4.81$). Germany was the only team for which these two items scored at or above a mean of 4.0.

Table 2 Means and standard deviations of respondents’ reasons for support

<i>Items</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Rank</i>
I have ancestral ties to that country or area	2.99	2.55	4
I have friends who are fans of the team.	2.45	2.09	7
Being a fan of the team is unique.	2.73	1.90	6
I appreciate the team’s historical success.	3.39	1.99	3
I expect the team to be successful in the 2018 FIFA World Cup.	3.97	1.94	2
I have spent time in that country.	2.98	2.50	5
I enjoy watching one or more of the team’s specific players.	4.92	2.19	1
The country is close to where I live geographically	1.68	1.59	9
The country is important to the US politically.	2.13	1.85	8

The mean scores of fans who selected either Iceland or Mexico as their primary team of support were quite different than those from the other five teams mentioned above. For Iceland, the only item that received a score at or above the Likert scale midpoint was ‘Being a fan of the team is unique’ ($M = 4.0$). For Mexico, meanwhile, the items ‘I have friends who are fans of the team’ ($M = 4.31$), ‘The country is close to where I live geographically’ ($M = 5.56$), and ‘The country is important to the US politically’ ($M = 4.73$) also registered above the scale midpoint.

5.1.4 Domain involvement, nationalism, and internationalism

The overall mean for soccer involvement of participants ($M = 5.30$) was significantly above the midpoint of the seven-point Likert-type scale. The means for nationalism ($M = 3.82$) and internationalism ($M = 4.27$) were nearer the midpoint. Table 4 provides an overview of data regarding soccer involvement, nationalism, and internationalism for the teams with more than 5% support.

Table 3 Means and standard deviations of reasons for teams with more than 5% support

Reason	Germany		England		Iceland		Argentina		Mexico		France		Belgium	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
I have ancestral ties to that country or area	5.01	2.40	3.92	2.32	1.13	0.55	1.65	1.78	3.69	2.96	1.93	1.77	1.64	1.46
I have friends who are fans of the team	3.13	2.2	2.23	1.67	1.54	1.27	1.84	1.57	4.31	2.38	1.61	1.37	1.47	1.10
Being a fan of the team is unique	2.15	1.52	1.72	1.13	4.00	1.91	2.00	1.76	2.75	2.01	1.93	1.27	3.00	1.72
I appreciate the team's historical success	4.81	1.78	2.88	1.56	3.21	2.21	3.70	2.13	3.48	1.68	3.74	1.81	2.62	1.42
I expect the team to be successful in the 2018 FIFA World Cup	5.16	1.85	3.39	1.60	2.85	1.41	4.37	1.82	3.67	1.42	5.39	1.77	5.33	1.82
I have spent time in that country	3.74	2.66	3.34	2.27	1.62	1.65	1.91	1.92	3.92	2.53	2.98	2.40	2.11	1.89
I enjoy watching one or more of the team's specific players	5.23	2.01	5.23	1.99	3.20	2.10	6.71	0.72	4.19	2.20	5.76	1.54	6.16	1.48
The country is close to where I live geographically	1.32	1.07	1.61	1.29	1.26	0.78	1.32	0.94	5.56	1.86	1.20	0.91	1.07	0.25
The country is important to the US politically	2.34	1.71	3.87	2.32	1.16	0.55	1.29	0.92	4.73	2.35	2.15	1.67	1.33	0.88

Table 4 Means and standard deviations of soccer involvement, nationalism, and internationalism for teams with more than 5% support

	<i>Overall</i>		<i>Germany</i>		<i>England</i>		<i>Iceland</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Soccer involvement	5.30	1.35	5.23	1.31	5.48	1.46	5.19	1.41
Nationalism	3.82	1.24	4.00	1.23	4.09	1.19	3.59	1.17
Internationalism	4.27	1.29	3.85	1.21	4.01	1.31	4.23	1.34
	<i>Argentina</i>		<i>Mexico</i>		<i>France</i>		<i>Belgium</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Soccer involvement	5.63	1.24	4.95	1.34	5.54	1.21	5.97	0.90
Nationalism	4.08	1.33	3.59	1.29	3.87	1.32	3.59	1.14
Internationalism	4.34	1.24	4.91	1.33	4.73	1.27	4.29	1.11

5.2 Correlation analysis

Table 5 provides an overview of the correlations among the reasons for supporting a particular team with soccer involvement, nationalism, and internationalism. One notable finding was a positive relationship between level of soccer involvement and three specific reasons for supporting a team: ‘I appreciate the team’s historical success’ ($r = 0.123$, $p < 0.01$), ‘I expect the team to be successful in the 2018 FIFA World Cup’ ($r = 0.166$, $p < 0.01$), and ‘I enjoy watching one or more of the team’s specific players’ ($r = 0.308$, $p < 0.01$). With respect to participants’ sentiments of nationalism and internationalism, the item ‘I have ancestral ties to that country or area’ demonstrated a significant positive relationship with nationalism ($r = 0.145$, $p < 0.01$) and a significant negative relationship with internationalism ($r = -0.100$, $p < 0.01$). Further, the item ‘The country is important to the US politically’ showed a significant positive relationship with nationalism ($r = 0.192$, $p < 0.01$), while the item ‘The country is close to where I live geographically’ showed a significant positive relationship with internationalism ($r = 0.120$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 5 Correlation analysis between reasons for support, soccer involvement, nationalism, and internationalism

	<i>Soccer involvement</i>	<i>Nationalism</i>	<i>Internationalism</i>
I have ancestral ties to that country or area	0.000	0.145**	-0.100**
I have friends who are fans of the team	-0.011	-0.008	0.050
Being a fan of the team is unique	-0.004	0.043	0.111**
I appreciate the team’s historical success	0.123**	0.127**	-0.017
I expect the team to be successful in the 2018 FIFA World Cup	0.166**	0.110**	-0.055
I have spent time in that country	0.025	0.004	0.059
I enjoy watching one or more of the team’s specific players	0.308**	0.009	0.017
The country is close to where I live geographically	-0.040	0.038	0.120**
The country is important to the US politically	-0.050	0.192**	0.004

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

6 Discussion

The aim of the current study was to identify which teams soccer fans in the US planned to support during the 2018 FIFA Men's World Cup as well as the reasons why participants planned to support those particular teams. Because the US Men's National Team (i.e., their usual team of preference) would not be participating in the tournament, this provided a context to assess how fans of the USMNT would engage with a World Cup without their favourite team as well as consider various factors that influence their decisions. First, from a practical perspective, the results provide insight useful for keeping fan interest high during elimination-style tournaments in which many fans' favourite teams will only compete for a portion of the tournament (i.e., their favourite team will likely be eliminated prior to the tournament championship). Second, from a theoretical perspective, the results contribute to our understanding of the role that star players, team success, perceived uniqueness, and geographic proximity play in supporter behaviour and fan identity.

When responding about why they chose a particular team to support, participants rated the enjoyment of watching a team's specific players, the expectation of a team to be successful, and a team's historical success as the most important reasons overall. For fans who chose to support Germany, England, Argentina, France, and Belgium, enjoyment of watching specific players was the most important reason for their support. As illustrated by the case of Argentina, the particular strength of this motivation (6.71 on a 7-point Likert scale) might be deemed the 'Lionel Messi effect', in homage to the multiple-time recipient of the Ballon d'Or – an annual award given to the world's top player. Demonstrating the desire of fans to identify with a winning team (Kerr and Emery, 2011; Sutton et al., 1997), an expectation of team success in the 2018 World Cup also rated highly as a reason for support among those selecting Germany, Argentina, France, and Belgium.

For practitioners in sport management and marketing, these findings have useful practical implications, especially in the context of knockout-style tournaments. When a fan's preferred team is eliminated from a competition (or when it fails to qualify in the first place), it is justifiable to fear that fans' interest in the tournament overall may decline. If fans were to lose interest throughout a tournament, viewership and engagement would suffer after each successive round of elimination. However, by highlighting star players, reminding fans of teams' historical successes, and discussing which teams might go on to win the tournament (i.e., creating expectations of success), practitioners in marketing can influence fans' likelihood of remaining interested and engaged with the tournament. Further, US -based sponsors, which are often a major revenue source for international competitions, might mitigate against the impact of a US team's absence in international competition through strategic endorsement by international players. Such strategies are especially relevant within the context of helping fans identify a secondary team to support, even after their preferred team is eliminated. Current literature highlights how team-related motives (e.g., team characteristics, team performance, player attributes; Wann, 2006) can drive initial team identification among fans. The data from the current study extends this understanding and suggests this is even true of those who are making decisions about who to support as a secondary team. Notably, the team-related items regarding expected success, historical success, and star players were positively correlated with domain involvement, suggesting that they may be particularly influential in the decisions of established soccer fans.

The findings also highlight some differences with respect to what those familiar with sport marketing might expect from fan behaviour. Most notably, psychological and socialisation motives were less important among fans choosing their secondary team. Previous research examining displaced or out-of-market fans highlights how connection to other fans, searching for belonging and acceptance, and relationships among fans are all primary drivers for team identification, even among those who live far away from the team they are supporting (Mazodier et al., 2018; Stensland et al., 2020). However, respondents in the current study's sample more frequently highlighted the importance of team-related factors, rather than relational-type motives such as belonging or connecting with other fans. For instance, the item 'I have friends who are fans of the team' ($M = 2.45$) received among the lowest ratings of factors in the current study. Rather than focusing on building a team identity based on feelings of belonging and relational connection, building up star player narratives and highlighting teams' success appear to be a powerful attraction for fans when choosing a secondary team to support. A relevant avenue for further research would be to test the stability of these fans' support based on team motives rather than psychological or socialisation motives. In other words, it would be beneficial to understand whether fans consistently support their secondary team, or whether they may be more likely to select a secondary team on a competition-by-competition basis.

From a theoretical perspective, Iceland stands as somewhat of an outlier with respect to the teams most frequently selected by participants. Fans who identified Iceland as their primary team rated the uniqueness of being a fan as the most important reason for support. The importance of perceived uniqueness is relevant given the fact that Iceland had never before sent a team to the FIFA Men's World Cup; further, it is also the smallest country in population ever to do so. The influence of such factors on fan behaviour has some relevant connections to existing literature. For instance, to fulfil certain psychological needs, fans seek to differentiate themselves from others via team selection (Wann, 2006; Wann and James, 2018). From this perspective, Iceland fulfils this need. However, if uniqueness or differentiation among peers were the primary variables influencing fans, one may expect substantial support to exist for the Panamanian team – a small country also making its first World Cup appearance – or the Senegalese team, playing in just its second ever World Cup. However, participants in the current study did not frequently indicate an intent to support these teams. One possible explanation for this may be racial and cultural similarities between the primarily white composition of the Icelandic roster and the current study's sample demographics (83.6% white). Ultimately, the factors that made fans perceive Iceland as 'unique', did not appear to foster substantial identification with other similar 'underdog' teams, which warrants further research. While the strategy of promoting an underdog as an opportunity for fans to differentiate themselves from peers and identify with a unique team has viability, more investigation is needed to understand how the appeal of a 'unique' team interacts with other variables of attraction.

In addition, a striking finding in the current study was the lack of importance that geographical proximity played in fans choosing a team to support, as this diverges from prior research about team identification (Greenwood et al., 2006; Wann, 2006; Wann and James, 2018). Of course, this may be due in part to the size of the US and limited number of nearby countries that sent teams to the 2018 FIFA Men's World Cup. The notable exception is Mexico, which received 5.7% of the sample's primary support, fifth most among all teams. In this case, since Mexico has been the primary rival of the US men's

soccer team in the eyes of many US soccer fans, it may be that proximity was not enough to convince fans to root for an arch-rival. Indeed, previous research has found that fans are more likely to insult or disparage a rival, rather than support it, when it is involved in competition against other teams (Lee et al., 2018). As noted earlier, Landon Donovan's support for Mexico inspired substantial backlash (Goff, 2018). Thus, in the case of US soccer fans, their disdain for a rival may be a more potent force than geographic proximity. Further, advances in technology over the past 20 years have provided 'satellite supporters' (i.e., fans who live in foreign countries), with greater access to televised sporting events from around the world (Kerr and Emery, 2011). For such long-distance fans of soccer in the US, the current study supports the importance of star players, expectations for team success, and previous team achievements as primary motivations when choosing a team to support in a tournament without a team from the US (Kerr and Emery, 2011). In this way, it may be that geographic proximity becomes less of an influence as players and teams from far away become more accessible to consumers.

Giving further consideration to proximity, it is notable that the top 10 teams garnering the greatest number of supporters in the current sample were all from Europe or Latin America. While on a basic level one might be tempted to suggest that sport marketers should focus on promoting European and Latin American teams to the US audience, it may conversely be the case that African and Asian teams' relative lack of popularity in the current study results from the fact they are promoted less in the US. In this way, it is important to consider the role of sport media and marketing professionals in 'audience-building' (Messner et al., 1996), as they bring consumers' attention to particular teams at the expense of others. Further, issues of race and nationality are also likely to be relevant in this area. The item 'I have ancestral ties to the country' was the fourth-highest rated factor among participants in the current study, and, as highlighted earlier, the sample was disproportionately white.

One important limitation of the current study pertains to sample demographics. According to Simmons Research on soccer consumers, of the approximately 43.5 million soccer fans in the US, 67% are male and 33% are female (MLS All Star Game, 2017). The fact that the current study's sample was 93.9% male, and that white men in particular constituted 79.8% of the overall sample, raises questions about the population who frequent the online soccer-related forums where the survey was advertised. While the internet may serve as a democratic space in some ways, in the case of soccer fans in the US, it seems that white men are overrepresented in such online arenas.

Future research might build upon the current study by including a measurement of team identification to investigate the strength of fans' identification with a secondary team in comparison to their favourite. It may also be useful to conduct similar research during other elimination-style tournaments (e.g., NFL playoffs, NCAA tournament) so as to study fan motivations and levels of identification when a favourite team's loss is fresh on the minds of fans. The US team was eliminated from World Cup contention over eight months prior to the tournament, perhaps giving fans space and time to reflect. Such research would help us better understand how identification motives for a secondary team may be different if a fan's primary team is eliminated mid-tournament.

7 Conclusions

The US men's soccer team's failure to qualify for the 2018 FIFA World Cup provided a unique opportunity to investigate how sports fans react when their favourite team is eliminated from a competition. In a sample of 841 US soccer fans, respondents most frequently intended to support Germany (18.3%), while a total of 21 teams received support from at least 1.0% of the sample. Participants most frequently identified the item 'I enjoy watching one or more of the team's specific players' ($M = 4.92$ on a seven-point scale) as the reason they chose to support a particular team, although reasons for supporting some teams (e.g., Mexico, Iceland) diverged from those of other popular teams. The attraction of an underdog team as 'unique' appeared influential in fans' identification with Iceland, but this did not extend to identification with other 'underdogs' (e.g., Panama), demonstrating the potentially complex nature of 'uniqueness' as a motivation for identification with a team. While the importance of team-related factors (e.g., team success and star players) in attracting fan support is consistent with much existing research (Kerr and Emery, 2011; Wann, 2006), it is notable that relational-type factors (e.g., having friends who are fans of the team) were less important in the context of the current study. Ultimately, according to FIFA and Publicis Media Sport & Entertainment, in-home viewership of the 2018 World Cup in the North American and Caribbean region dropped by 43.8 million (or 13.6%) from the 2014 World Cup (FIFA.com, 2018). This double-digit decline in viewership exemplifies the ways in which sport managers and marketers can benefit greatly from a better understanding of the factors that influence fan behaviour with respect to identifying a team to support when one's favourite team is out of a competition.

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