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MAKING THE WORLD'S FAVORITE, AMERICA'S FAVORITE - A CAMPAIGN FOCUSED ON PROMOTING MAJOR LEAGUE SOCCER TO YOUNG ADULT AMERICANS

Zion Deon Sealy
Florida International University, School of Communication, zsealy@fiu.edu

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MAKING THE WORLD'S FAVORITE, AMERICA'S FAVORITE - A CAMPAIGN
FOCUSED ON PROMOTING MAJOR LEAGUE SOCCER TO YOUNG ADULT
AMERICANS

By

Zion Sealy

Instructor: Dr. Paula Powell

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Executive Summary

Longevity through connecting with multiple ages groups is key to any brand's success. For sporting brands, it is crucial that the brand is able to connect to the millennial and Gen Z age groups in order to begin introducing newer audiences to the brand; gaining a deeper appreciation for the brand, the teams, and their players. As the youngest premier league in North America sporting and highest league for North American soccer, Major League Soccer (MLS) is currently growing its market size, although, there are not many fans between the ages of 18-30. With the introduction of world renowned players like Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez and David Beckham's newly formed Inter Miami CF, MLS has potential to capitalize on their growth so reach a young adult audience. This reports provides insights and a comprehensive strategic communication plan to increase the brand awareness of MLS among young adults, and increase sales of in-game tickets and merchandise. Through the research, it was also sought to understand the current level of awareness of MLS among young adults (age 18-30) in the United States. Through surveying 18-30 years old with an interest in soccer, quantitative data was gathered and formed the basis of the strategic communication plan. Strategies and tactics implemented adopted a multimedia approach using both traditional and digital marketing and communication, as well as influencer marketing to meet the intended goals of awareness and sales growth. By the end of the campaign(s), MLS should see a greater connection to their young adult audience.

Introduction

Across the world, soccer (or what some prefer to call football) has been the top sport and the most favored sport among different communities. It may also be considered one of the most popular. Interestingly enough, in the United States of America, it is not any of those things to Americans. In fact, it is not in the top three sports played and is far lower when looking at the viewership of the top league in the United States - Major League Soccer (MLS). Unlike the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the National Football League (NFL) which have massive fanbases, MLS has struggled to be as popular.

Soccer in the United States has never been known to attract top talent since European leagues have an international reach. Over the years we have seen the likes of Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Zinedine Zidane, and Pele rise to fame and put soccer on the map across the world. If you wanted to get some sort of notoriety in the sport, you were expected to play for a club in a league in countries like Italy, Spain, France, or England. Therefore, as players rose, and moved into those leagues, their fan bases grew massively. As a result, the leagues gained the nickname, "The Big Five". This year, soccer continues to dominate the European sports market, according to Statista (2024).

Over the years, soccer in the United States has seen some growth in fans, after many appearances in global soccer events such as the FIFA World Cup, and the significant and record-breaking showcase of the national women's soccer team. Recently, with the conclusion of the 2022 FIFA World Cup and the United States Men's National Team (USMNT), and the recent move of Lionel Messi (one of the greatest soccer players in the world) to Inter Miami CF, there has been an increase in interest in the sport in the United States. Americans are paying more attention to players that are in their local league. For the eighth year, excluding those years

effected by the COVID-19 pandemic, MLS has seen increase in their match attendance, recording an over two million increase from 2019 to 2023 (LoRe 2023).

There is a particularly growing interest in the MLS among young adults (Pelit 2023). These are the people who will drive the popularity of the MLS. Through social media and the streamlined access to MLS content via Apple TV's "MLS Pass", and the inclusion of major players to the U.S. league, not only are the clubs getting more interest, but the MLS as a whole. They are following local players who play for MLS club teams, and they are following entire clubs. For example, Inter Miami CF's Instagram account grew to over 10 million followers within weeks of Lionel Messi announcing his plans to join the team for the rest of the season (Pelit 2023). Having an online presence has become key for MLS; from email campaigns, digital ads, and exclusive streaming content, they are maximizing their reach to digital natives. As such, there are many opportunities to grow the popularity of the MLS in the United States as it continues to trend upward towards the likes of the NBA and NFL.

Problem Statement

Despite their growth over the years, MLS still trails behind the most competitive leagues for other sports within the United States. It trails in the shadow of the likes of the NBA and the NFL. There is a lack of affinity towards MLS for young adults, leaving room for them to explore other sporting leagues that may already be extremely well-established. MLS do not market themselves to the level of these other sporting leagues and American residents still tend to be unaware of the MLS, who they are, and what they do. As a result, there is little to no brand loyalty, which can affect long-term sales and profitability. In addition, it can become increasingly difficult to receive sponsorships and partnership opportunities from other large

organizations as the return on investment may be minimal. Not to mention, it would become more difficult to attract exceptional talent.

This lack of affinity and awareness can be attributed to a lack of advertising from the MLS that capitalizes on the best of what they have to offer. Another major component that may be impacting these issues is a lack of integrated marketing and communication efforts that focus on building a relationship with consumers. There isn't an effective means of receiving potential consumer contact information such as emails or phone numbers which can allow for more targeted efforts. In the same manner, there is some inconsistency in social media engagement which lends itself to affecting their ability to connect with their young adult audiences. Furthermore, there are minimal advertising efforts both traditionally and digitally outside of major notable games within the league, which can affect the audience's perception of their brand identity. Therefore, this campaign seeks to build affinity with MLS and expand its fanbase among young adults in the United States through various efforts and strategies, traditionally and digitally.

Objectives

- To understand the current state of interest in MLS among young adult Americans and consumer rationale
- To boost awareness of the MLS among young adult Americans
- To increase game attendance through expanded interest in club players

Situation Analysis

Company Analysis

Before MLS came to be, there had already been two Division 1 soccer leagues in the United States and Canada - the American Football Association (AFA) which ended in 1924, and the National American Soccer League (NASL) which ended in 1985. With the United States set to host the 1994 World Cup, the U.S. Soccer Federation (currently U.S. Soccer) committed to the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) to create a new Division 1 professional soccer league, and thus, in 1993, MSL was conceived (Lister 2022). This makes the league one of the youngest Division 1 sports leagues in the United States. Lister (2022) notes that the first game was played in 1996 with 10 teams from across the United States. Although the league gained a lot of attention because of the World Cup, the league reported an estimated $250 million in losses over the next five years. Coupled with the early elimination of the United States Men's National Team (USMNT) from the next World Cup, the league struggled to become popular among Americans. Over the next ten years, with continued efforts to grow their affinity with those in the U.S., MLS continued to net losses. Then in 2007, popular European soccer star David Beckham signed a monumental deal valued at $250 million with MLS's LA Galaxy. Notably, he was leaving one of the most popular and high-ranking soccer clubs in the world, Real Madrid, during what was considered the prime of his career. This marks a shift for MLS as they began to get large attention both nationally and internationally.

Teams within the league began to grow and mimic LA Galaxy's approach of paying top dollar to recruit top international players to the United States. They also began constructing their own state-of-the-art stadia that would serve as the dedicated home fields for their teams. These implementations, along with the continual growth in awareness of soccer in the United States,

have benefited MLS greatly. This is largely in part due to the USMNT and the United States Women's National Team (USWNT) performing well at international tournaments and matches, and United States players being recruited to international leagues. Now, MLS has generated over $90 million in revenue every year since 2015 (Lister 2022). They also signed a major deal with Apple to broadcast their games for the next 10 years. Currently, the league has 29 teams (29 from the United States and 3 from Canada). They set the rules and regulations that each team must follow and oversee the overall operations such as match schedules, branding, and partnerships.

MLS relied heavily on traditional integrated marketing communication tactics to reach their audiences such as television and radio placements, and billboards, and have since introduced digital advertising via social media such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram while marketing themselves organically using those platforms as well. They rely heavily on their teams within the league with these efforts as they sign prominent players, create exciting matches, and grow their fanbases in the cities they represent. They have also begun to capitalize on the esports market; having a presence on the most popular soccer video - FIFA (now FC).

MLS's main vision is to be one of the top leagues in the world. As such, they want to continue to strategically expand their presence within the United States and outside. On their website, they dedicated themselves to serving and supporting where they are established and where games are played. They desire to always create spaces for viewers, players, partners, and owners to be treated with dignity and respect, with diversity, equity, and inclusion. "Club, Country, Community" became the anchor words to represent a focus on fans rather than teams. Looking towards the future, MLS hopes to use the upcoming 2026 FIFA World Cup hosted by the United States, Mexico, and Canada as fuel to boost MLS to greater audiences.

Consumer Analysis

<u>The MLS Fan</u>

Over the years, it is evident that MLS may have struggled to reach its intended audience, however, their growth over the years serves as an opportunity to become the world-renowned league status they desire to attain. MLS targets any audience that has an interest in soccer, however, there is a particular focus on those in the United States. According to Hill (2018), the most important group of fans for MLS are 18-34-year-olds as they are most likely to purchase tickets and buy merchandise such as t-shirts and fan gear. They also have the most potential to become long-term fans of the league. Notably, the viewership of this age group for MLS games on television has been trending downward since 2011, however, the Senior Vice President of Services at MLS noted that their push to streaming through MLS Pass on Apple TV has not only met forecasts but surpassed them in its early days - large thanks to the introduction of Lionel Messi to Inter Miami CF and his debut game being streamed on the platform. However, this increases placed MLS as the fifth most-watched sports league in the United States in 2023 (Nielsen 2023).

Based on statistics from Morning Consult (2023), most people in the United States are not fans of MLS. The age group with the most fans (whether casual or avid fans) is 35-44, making up 42% of total respondents. Fans aged 18-34 make up the second largest group of fans (39% total). More males (41%) are fans of the MLS than females (30%) which can be attributed to the sport historically being dominated by males. During the 2023 season, the MLS set a personal record for the highest average attendance at 22,111 attendees per game (Kennedy 2023). This shows that there is a growing interest (at the least) in MLS and their teams. Furthermore, there seems to a satisfaction when viewing MLS games. Close to 50% of fans were

satisfied with the on-field products of MLS like matches and coverage during the 2023 season (Wright 2023). Unfortunately, fans still do not believe they are on par or better than other major top-flight leagues globally. On a five-point scale, the majority of fans (54.7%) fans scored them a three or lower. This shows that MLS fans do not view the MLS like they view other leagues such as the Premier League (England), La Liga (Spain), or Bundesliga (Germany).

During the 2023 season, MLS introduced their streaming option for fans - MLS Pass, which is housed on Apple TV. Fans seemed to enjoy using this form of watching matches and were generally satisfied. 43.9% rated their level of satisfaction a four out of five, while 32.4% rated their satisfaction a five out of five. Fans noted that the quality of the broadcast was high visually and they enjoyed the coverage (commentary, replays, highlights, etc.). On the other hand, it was also noted that having MLS matches only accessible through a paywall can likely limit the league's reach as only avid fans may be willing to pay the additional subscription than those new to the league.

The U.S. Soccer Fan

As of 2023, according to Statista Consumer Insight Global (2024), outside of MLS, soccer is still a male-dominated sport, but 51% of all fans are Millennials, meaning they tend to be young adults. The majority of them (59%) are high-income earners and reside in larger metropolitan cities. This paints a picture of where they are geographically to better target marketing and communication efforts. They also tend to watch the sport on all types of media but primarily through television (84%) and digital video (83%) such as YouTube. More so than the average consumer which indicates an investment of attention to that form of media. Furthermore, they access content via their smartphones (94%), laptops (77%), and Smart TVs (70%).

Among males, soccer is the fourth most viewed live sport in the U.S. at 33% (LG Ad Solutions 2023), while for women, it was the third (39%). In the same manner, participation in soccer in the U.S. has been on an upward trend over the past 10 years, both indoors and outdoors (SFIA 2O23). This shows that those in the United States are not only watching soccer but also seeking to play and engage in that way.

Market Analysis

Since MLS is the only Division 1 league in North America, it operates among all professional sports like football, basketball, and baseball. As the sport grows in popularity, its market share will surely increase. From 2009 to 2023, the North American sports market has grown by over $34 billion (PwC 2023) with revenue trending upwards consistently within the same period (Statista 2023). SponsorUnited indicates that the U.S. professional sports market is expected to increase by 20% in sponsorship revenue to over $8 billion. In 2023, $3.1 billion of those funds were contributed by MLS. This means that there is a lot of potential for growth going into the coming regular season and tournament season with more potential opportunities for strategic partnership and revenue that can be used to attract greater talent.

The highest revenue-earning team in the MLS is currently Los Angeles FC at $116 million as of 2022 (Birnbaum 2023). However, the highest matchday attendance for all teams is held by Atlanta United with an average attendance of over 49 thousand fans, according to official MLS reporting in 2023. Most of the expenses are dedicated to attracting high-quality talent to MLS, with many players earning multi-million and six-figure salaries.

When widening the scope to the global soccer market, the European soccer market completely outperforms the MLS. The top 10 most valuable club teams worldwide are all in European countries and generate approximately $1 billion in value each. The highest revenue-

earning club as of the 2022-2023 season is Real Madrid with over $800 million in revenue. In the same manner, though, the majority of expenses go towards paying players and accommodating them to play for their team.

Both nationally and internationally streaming has become integral to operations. In addition to MLS Pass, many European leagues have made deals with streaming platforms such as Paramount+ and Peacock to exclusively distribute matches. In fact, global spending on sports rights by subscription services has reached over $8.5 billion in 2023 (Insider Intelligence). This seems to be critical to the future of professional league soccer distribution and broadcasting.

Another growing trend in the market is the use of video games. Esports has grown significantly in the United States and leagues are now hosting competitions with fans to build affinity.

Competitive Analysis

<u>Direct Competition</u>

The main competition for MLS is other major Division 1 sports leagues in North America such as the NBA and NFL. Given the data presented previously, it is already clear that MLS is trailing these other leagues, however, it is the youngest among them. Since they have been established for much longer and have much larger fanbases in the United States, there is more income from consumers for the league. These leagues also have a clear and consistent brand identity across social media and constantly showcase themselves as a brand in addition to the teams that are in the league. Notably, they also produce a plethora of content both on and off the fields that give insight and personalization to the players. For example, the NFL does many short-form videos of players during their practices, and the NBA attaches a microphone to specific players during their games and captures what they're saying about the game thus far.

This is then broadcast on their dedicated platforms and shared via social media. This helps build affinity to the leagues and allows fans to build parasocial relationships with the players, in turn increasing the likelihood of loyalty. They also host more charitable and fan-centric events like the NBA All-Star Weekend. Events like these not only showcase their values but also give fans another opportunity to engage while generating revenue.

National Basketball Association (NBA)

The NBA is the premier basketball for North America with 30 teams competing from United States and Canada. As of 2022, the NBA was the second largest sports league franchise in value (Statista 2022) and was the third most watched sports leagues in the United States in 2023 (Nielson 2023). Since the first season game in 1946, the NBA has grown this fan base and built a community where fans are not only engaged with players, but with the teams. These fans can be seen both physically and virtually.

As of 2023, according to ESPN, the NBA recorded its highest total attendance to games during a regular season with 22.16 million attendees on average. In addition, the 2023 regular season saw a 1.59 million viewer average (Forbes 2023). They also have a large social media presence. On Instagram, it is one of the most followed brands with over 78 million followers with 50% of their social media audience being aged at 25 years old or younger (Sim 2023). One unique strategy they have implemented is growing their community via video games. Their yearly release, NBA 2K, has an online feature where players are create their own basketball players, and connect and compete with others online. They have created a virtual world in order to engage different ages in their community.

National Football League (NFL)

The NFL is the premier American football league with 32 teams from cities across the United States. It was founded in 1920, which places the leagues as one of the oldest sports leagues in a U.S. market. It is the largest sports league franchise in value (Statista 2022) and the most watched sports league in the United States in 2023 (Nielson 2023).

According to ESPN (2023), the most fans attended in person games in the league's history, 18.82 million fans typically in attendance to their games, however, views on television has steady declined over the years. According to Forbes (2023), the primetime broadcast viewership of the NFL was 4.5 million viewers on average, which is a gradual drop from 10.3 million viewers. 35% of persons in the United States consider themselves avid fans of NFL, while 31% consider themselves casual fans (Morning Consult 2023).

Like NBA, the NFL have created communities that emphasize "fanship" of teams and individual players. Their video, Madden, has a similar set up at NBA 2k and is used to engage their younger audiences. On Instagram, the league has amassed a following of over 20 million followers and uses it to grow their audience engagement and highlight moments of the league. The signature event yearly for the NFL is the Superbowl which is the culmination of all the matches in the season to determine the champion team. The NFL has grown this event to include many aspects beyond the actual game, including the celebrity halftime show and the commercials. This has allowed them to grow and reach audiences who may not be huge football fans.

Major League Baseball (MLB)

Founded in 1876, MLB is the highest league of professional baseball in Northern America. It consist of 30 teams between the United States and Canada. It is the third largest

sports league by franchise value as of 2022 (Statista 2022). They currently average 66.2 million attendees to games on average in 2023 and been trending upward since the COVID-19 pandemic (Baseball Reference 2023).

36% of persons in the United States consider themselves casual fans of MLB while 22% consider themselves avid fans (Morning Consult 2023). Most of their interest is between 35-44 year olds, while the second largest group at those between the ages of 18-34. Like MLS, MLB is a younger franchise that is also growing and has the potential to connect with a young adult audience in the United States.

National Hockey League (NHL)

Like the NFL, the NHL is one of the oldest leagues and is the top premier league for hockey in North America. It comprises of 32 teams from the United States and Canada. Although the NHL accounts for the fourth largest sports franchise by value (Statista 2022), many people in the U.S. are not fans of the NHL (Morning Consult 2023). MLS and NHL are the closest competitors currently in the market.

<u>Indirect Competitors</u>

Although MLS primarily operates within the United States, there is also competition indirectly with other Division 1 soccer leagues like Serie A (Brazil), and the Premier League (England). They implore many of the same tactics as direct competitors, however, these leagues invest heavily in their fan experience both on the field and off. On the field, they do giveaways and organize various chants that are organized. In addition, many more established league-specific stadiums are heavily branded by the individual teams. Furthermore, off the field, they tend to implore sponsorships for entertainment content such as TV shows where players may guest star, or the league is showcased. A massively successful example of this is the Premier

League licensing their brand to the Apple TV hit show, Ted Lasso to showcase the league

process and competition, rules, awards, and teams. Ted Lasso became one of Apple TV's biggest

shows and went on to win many awards with many fans showing interest since it is about soccer

and competing in a professional league but in a comedic genre.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths (Internal)

- Cohesive branding through standardizing communication collateral (t-shirts, websites,

  etc.) for participating teams – standardized logo placements for example

- Consistent email marketing to subscribers

- Youth academies which allow local talent to develop while building affinity

- Clear competition process making it easier for fans to follow which can lead to further

  interest

- Strong presence on social media – particularly their Instagram has a lot of content catered

  to a younger audience

Weaknesses (Internal)

- A lack of clear brand identity that is unique and easily identifiable if outside of soccer

  world

- Larger emphasis on teams with more well-known players which leaders to an imbalance

  in messaging

- Low market share for the professional sports industry in the United States

- Quality of matches in lower than major European leagues

- Lack of targeted branding to local cities (such as digital ads and billboards)

Opportunities (External)

- 2024 Paris Olympic Games that can showcase MLS players on a global stage and increase brand awareness

- Retaining high-quality international and local talent to increase local fandoms

- Popular owners and investors associated with teams in the league can be used to promote matches and the league overall

- North America hosting the 2026 World Cup, bring all soccer enthusiasts and stakeholders together to the MLS front door.

- Esports competitions that build local affinity to the sport, the league, and teams in the league as well as their players.

Threats (External)

- The continual growth of other major sporting leagues

- A lack of diversity in the popularity of players on teams which may lead to a lack of fan loyalty across the league (it will be skewed to a small percentage of teams and players) – all the target audience in one section

- A lack of awareness among Americans of the MLS and a lack of interest

Methodology

It was determined that primarily quantitative data would be effective for gathering data about audience awareness. This was done instead of qualitative data because it allowed a larger amount of data from diverse individuals to be gathered in a timely manner give the time constraints. Therefore, in order to satisfy the research objectives accurately, a 19-question survey on Qualtrics was distributed to young adults between the age of 18-30 years old via social media, word-of-mouth, and face to face-to-face interaction. This age group was chosen to gain a diverse understand from as many young adults as possible. In addition, based on the secondary research, it is an accurate representation of the emerging, current, and future interest market for MLS. It was distributed using a non-probabilistic sampling judgement method to anyone that fit the age range and had some interest in soccer. This was mitigated by having two screening questions at the beginning of the survey. One asked for their age, and the other asked if they had an interest in soccer. If respondents answered "Yes" to both questions, they were shown the rest of the survey.

The survey was designed into have five parts. The first part being the screening questions to ensure we had the right respondents. Once this was completed, the second focused on the first research objective and asked questions around their awareness of MLS and their activities. The third sought to gather responses about the second research objective by asking questions around their motivations towards MLS, going to games, and the league in comparison to other similar leagues within the United States. Next, the fourth section focused on gaining data for the third research objective around what would motivate them to attend matches. Lastly, there were demographic questions in order to identify any distinct variation between genders, where they consume soccer content, and the social media they use.

Responses to the survey was collected over the span of two weeks. Two respondents were outside of the age range specified and were eliminated from the results. In addition, five respondents were also not interested in soccer at all and were also removed from the survey responses. In total, 35 respondents completed the survey but after cleaning the data, only 27 responses could be used for further interpretation. The full survey can be found in the appendix.

Findings

The respondents were 52% male and 48% female with no respondents identifying as non-binary/third gender, or not specifying. The top three social media platforms used by the sample are Instagram (89%), YouTube (70%), then TikTok (52%), while one respondent added an additional platform Reddit. Forty-four percent said they use Facebook while, 30% use X (formerly Twitter), and 19% use Snapchat. These bits of demographic information are important to note as it will shape the strategy that is to be developed for MLS. It allows for strategy media and content planning as well as having a more targeted strategy.

Consumer Interest and Rationale

Respondents were asked to rate their interest in MLS on a scale from one (indicating minimal interest) and five (indicating extreme interest). Respondents have a low interest in MLS (mean = 2.44). Therefore, overall, there isn't much interest in the league. However, when asked about what aspects of the league they are most interested in, the majority (78%) indicated that they are most interested in the players. This was followed by the individual teams (52%) playing in the league, the tournaments (41%) affiliated with the league (e.g. FIFA Club World Cup. CONCACAF Gold Cup), the location of the matches (26%), and lastly the sponsorships and partnerships (22%) associated with the league. This information is also helpful because it identifies a need to grow the interest in MLS among the targeted audience, but it was identifying

the potential catalysts for that to happen. It allows for better quality content since consumer interest is already established.

All respondents indicated that they watch 1-3 matches in MLS per week with only two indicating that they are subscribers to the MLS Season Pass on Apple TV. Given the newness of the subscription platform, it may take some time for consumers to adopt, but this also shows that consumers may get their MLS content from other outlets. In the same manner, 15% of the respondents have attended a MLS match in-person, which also indicates that there may be minimal interest in watching live games specifically. However, it is also important to note that of those that have went to an MLS match, they mostly identified their proximity to the game (50%) as their reason for attending, while price, the players and the team were next equally at 25%. A respondent also added that their friends was another reason why they decided to go to an in-person game. There is also a lower desire to attend matches as the majority of respondents said that it is extremely unlikely that they attend an MLS match within the coming calendar year (33%). Twenty-two percent said that they are somewhat unlikely to attend a match, 19% each saying they are neither likely nor unlikely or somewhat likely to attend a match, and 7% stating that they are extremely likely to attend. Fascinatingly, 67% of the respondents said they would be motivated to attend a match based on how close they are to the game, 63% said the price would motivate their decision, 33% said the players, 26% said the team, and one respondent added that travelling would motivate them. A desire to watch and attend MLS matches can be considered a key indicator as to where the interest lies – be it the live matches, or the content that is produced form these matches.

Competitive Landscape

There is a low level of awareness of the players in MLS (mean = 2.37) when respondents were asked to share their awareness on a scale from one to five. This is also important to know given that players motivate the consumers' decisions. Among their direct competitors in the premier sports league industry, consumers seem to see MLS less than other competitions. They have ranked the National Basketball Association (NBA) as the league they are most aware of, followed the National Football League (NFL) and then MLS (See Figure 1). Notably, they are more aware of MLS than Major League Baseball (MLB) and the National Hockey League (NHL). This indicates a potential competitive opportunity to grow in their awareness.

FIGURE 1
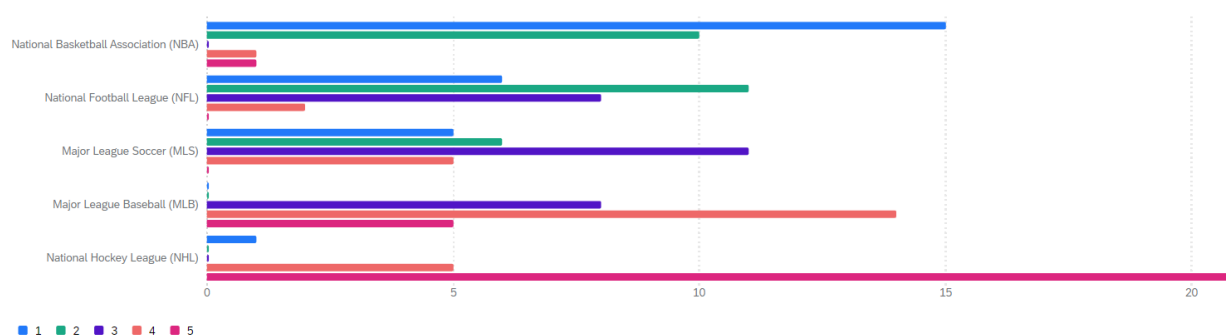
The respondents indicated that they are also willing to purchase MLS merchandise (78% yes) which was surprising considering their awareness of the teams and players, yet, those two factors are also key motivators for them.

Community

The majority of respondents (56%) currently do not follow any MLS team on social media; however, a similar majority (also 56%) do follow MLS players individually. This information is important as MLS can raise awareness through building their online community with fans and potential fans. In addition, current MLS fans express that they believe the best ways to increase appeal is by having cheaper tickets (70%), increasing access to watch game

beyond the MLS Season Pass (67%), gathering notable players and more competitive teams (66%), increasing their advertising (41%). Currently, most of their soccer content consumption comes from Instagram at 705 (see Figure 2). This can be a potential asset to MLS as social media like Instagram is already built for communities as well as many of the outlets they use.

FIGURE 2
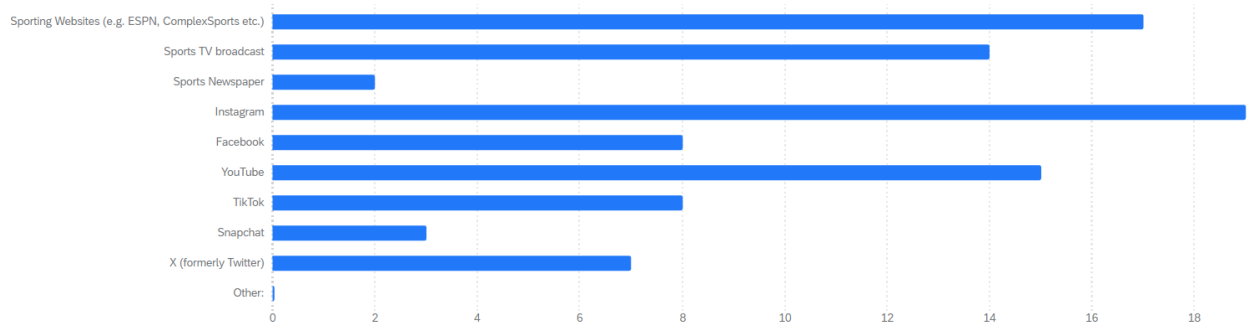
Recommendations

Target Profile

For this strategic communication and marketing plan, the target audience are people in the United States between the ages of 18 to 30 years, living in cities that currently have an MLS team. These people have some interest in soccer and are aware of MLS. They may occasionally watch a game broadcast and attend a live local match, but they may not consider themselves avid fans of either the sport or the league. The consume most of their soccer content through social media, namely Instagram and YouTube. They also get updates from sporting websites such as espn.com and complex.com/sports. They are attracted to visuals that show prominent players in the league and showcase great soccer skills.

When it comes to attending games, they are likely to attend when given the opportunity to, especially at a discounted price. They would also likely watch a game when they can access it easily. They may also purchase merchandise from teams in MLS if it features players they enjoy and are priced correctly. They are also more likely to connect with a particular player before a team.

They are sociable people who are likely more involved in soccer when done in community. They would attend matches in groups, watch games in social settings like a sports bar, and are far more invested when done with others. Their annual income can typically range from $40,000 to $105,000. They are most likely single or in a dating relationship with no kids, and a relatively high level of disposable income. They likely shop for MLS merchandise while attending an in-person match and may purchase online occasionally.

Integrated Marketing Communication Objectives

- To increase brand awareness of MLS among persons in the United States ages 18-30

- To increase in-person and live broadcast match viewership among persons 18-30 in the United States

- To increase MLS merchandise sales among 18–30-year-olds in the United States

Integrated Marketing Communication Goals

- Boost awareness by 15% by launching an influencer campaign with local sports/soccer analysts by June 2024 that showcase the fan experience of attending an MLS match. This campaign will be called #ThisisMLS and will feature social media content as well as blog posts. This will include 5 influencers on 5 separate feature content pieces.

- Generate a 25% increase in social media engagement across Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube for the central MLS accounts through images, story polls, giveaways and videos.

- Grow email marketing audience list by 10% over the next year for the MLS newsletter.

- Launch a traditional marketing campaign on television with MLS players inviting viewers to experience MLS by August 2024.

- Boost merchandise sales by 10% by collaborating with sporting community platforms for special exclusive discount offers and giveaways.

Integrated Marketing Communication Strategies and Tactics

Positioning Statement: Major League Soccer is the premier league for North American soccer with a brand that supports fairness, unity and excitement for all soccer and sports fans. The strategies implemented will be in alignment with MLS mission, policies, and image. The

strategies will begin rollout during the Summer as the league pauses for the Leagues Cup will continue into the second half of the 2024 season.

Strategy #1: #ThisIsMLS Influencer Marketing Campaign

In the age of social media, online 'influencers' can be quite useful to reach large amounts of your intended audiences through one person. This can particularly be effective with the target age demographic. This strategic would seek to engage soccer enthusiasts via blog posts from writers and contributors of prominent sporting websites, as well as social media content through photos and short form videos for YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. The ideal blogger would be someone that frequent writes about soccer league matches and has respect from fans for their analysis of matches, player performance, and team displays. They can already be speaking about MLS or any other top division soccer league like the Priemer League in the United Kingdom, or the Spanish LaLiga. They would already have rapport with the target audience so when there will already be a level of trust and credibility established. Some ideal candidates are Mark Ogden from ESPN FC and Jeff Rueter from The Athletic. The social media influencers are those that already create content and analyze the same areas as the blogs. Ideal candidates should have at least 50k followers with high engagement rates. Prospective candidates are Nouman who has a large following on Twitter and YouTube, Charlie Davies who had a known podcast, large social media following and is on broadcast television, and Brittany Isenhour who has a large Instagram following.

Tactic #1: A PR list of influencers will be created along with a creative brief to establish tone, hashtags, key message points, and timelines. Offers will then be sent to influencers, inviting them to attend a game of their choice – all expenses paid. In return, we ask them to

create content around their experience through blog posts, and content creation like live analysis, that MLS can collaborate with, repost, and reshare across all their communication platforms.

Tactic #2: The hashtag #ThisIsMLS must be on display during games where the influencers are in attendance, in the MLS newsletter with links to created content.

Tactic #3: Influencers will receive a package displaying #ThisIsMLS with custom merchandise from league teams and players that they must wear and have on display to their audiences, either when speaking on their experiences or creating content.

Tactic #4: Influencers will be given a special promo code for their audiences to for 10% discount on select MLS/Leagues Cup matchday tickets and merchandise, as well as a special link. This is to track impact of the campaign.

Strategy #2: Boost online engagement of current and prospective MLS fans

Engaging with fans builds communities that are attractive to sports fans. This strategy seeks to build a parasocial relationship between fans and MLS by utilizing the various communication touchpoints for MLS. This includes email lists for subscribers to the MLS newsletter, responding to comments on social platforms like YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. In addition, hosting different activities that encourage the fans to share MLS content and engage with it through reacting and commenting, as well as identifying and partnering with top MLS talent to reach their fans. This can be effective since primary research showed that more people follow players than the actual teams. Some players to include are Lionel Messi, Thiago Almada, and Joseph Paintsil.

Tactic #1: Generate content by giving players access to "takeover" social media accounts so their fans can see what training for MLS entails, answer questions via livestreams, and engage directly through MLS platforms. Fans can then build the understand that they can connect with

their favorite players through MLS and that connection is built. Each week during the MLS season, one or two players can be chosen to takeover accounts.

Tactic #2: Host virtual giveaways and competition through Instagram for merchandise signed by players, and tickets to matches. The giveaways would require fans to follow the MLS page, reshare content, and tag their peers in content. The competitions can be lighthearted such as creating a caption for a moment during an MLS match.

Tactic #3: Offer an exclusive discount to merchandise, content, and tickets for those that sign-up to the MLS mailing list. In order to boost sign-ups, a pop-up will appear to new users on the website asking for their email address and they would be incentivized through the exclusive discounts and offers.

Tactic #4: Create daily story content for Instagram with polls, exclusive behind-the-scenes, and collaborative videos from different geographic locations where MLS has teams to establish consistency and diversity.

Tactic #5: Continue to engage with social and community issues, as well as participate in celebrating festivals, holidays, and events that align with MLS values through feed posts, long and short form videos on YouTube and TikTok, and special invited guest segments from activists such as for gender equality, racial equality, and equitable access to the sport for all.

Tactic #6: Partner with The Athletic, The Bleacher Report, ESPN FC to give their audiences exclusive MLS player content if they follow MLS pages as well as subscribe to their channels. Discounts can also be given for MLS Season Pass on Apple TV, merchandise, and match tickets.

Strategy #3: ThisIsMLS Traditional Marketing Campaign

Traditional marketing through commercials and billboards can be effective in attempting to reach new audiences that may be on the older end of the target demographic, as well as quickly get their attention if they are busy. This strategy would entail television advertisements, YouTube and TikTok advertisements, and specialized billboards. The key message would be, as the hashtag states, #ThisIsMLS, where the advertisements indirectly answer the questions, "what is MLS?", "who is MLS for?", "what will I experience?", and "how can I join?"

The advertisements would feature players from the league, fans of the league, and influencers from Strategy #1. The ads would display the many aspects of MLS from player experience to fan experience along with the differences in each. For example, one fan may watch the game at home, while another is at the stadium. A player may be on the field training, or then may be engaged in some community event. All of it can encompass MLS. Each ad will end with the main person highlighted on the video saying, "this is MLS" with the hashtag appearing at the bottom of the screen and a URL which goes to the history of the MLS.

Tactic #1: The first set of commercials would focus on the various player perspectives. Four players will be selected that are racially diverse and each play on different teams across the league. Each player would record two perspectives: them engaging in the sport and them doing something outside of playing that aligns with MLS such as teaching at their club youth academy. There would be minimal speaking, but some voiceover from the player, and will always end with the phrase "This is MLS". This tactic helps build a relationship with fans and potential fans through the player.

Tactic #2: The second set of ads would focus on fan experiences. By taking some of the influencers from Strategy #1, their experiences as a fan at home and a fan in the stadium can be recorded that shows their entire journey before, during, and after the game. Each ad should show

different environments and climates to match the diversity of the MLS geographically. This tactic is aimed at giving fans and potential fans a vision of who they can be and what they can be a part of.

        <u>Tactic #3:</u> Create a dedicated landing page on the MLS website for the campaign which visual showcases the history of the league and how far it has come. This site would only be promoted through the ads and can serve as an indicator of the ads' effective, as well as help build awareness of MLS.

Evaluation

The evaluation of these strategies will be implemented through various stages that address all strategies. In order to evaluate the first strategy, beginning May 2024, during the 2024 MLS season, special codes will be created for each of the identified and interested influencers to promote along with the content they create and publish. In addition, specialized URLs will be created for each influencer to provide their audiences. This is to ensure that the marketing research and insights team is able track traffic produced from the individual influencers, as well as the number of sales that can be attributed to the said influencer. In addition, success will be evaluated via posts curated through the social media hashtag #ThisIsUs, as well as the engagement rates, user traffic, and pageviews.

Furthermore, social media campaigns around boosting awareness online engagement. This will be tracked through social listening via TalkWalker to understand audience sentiments, and Hootsuite to track engagement rates, reach, and impressions. These tracking services will also be used for any and all online advertising. This will be intentionally tracked from May 2024 until the end of the MLS season in November 2024. It would also be segmented based on the target audience of 18 to 30 year olds.

Lastly, traditional marketing and communication efforts will be evaluated using two focus groups, each comprising of individuals that align with the target profile and are between 18-30 years old. One focus group would occur before the launch of the campaign in May 2024. These will be used to test the developed videos, visuals, mockups and storyboards to ensure its effectiveness towards the intended audience. In December 2024, another focus group will be conducted, through the marketing research team gathering persons within the target profile who

interacted with the posted advertising collateral. The information gathered from this focus group would be used to compare to the prior focus group, in order to determine success.

Limitations

Although this research has many pieces of information that is a good indicator of consumer behavior, media consumption, and MLS brand perception, there are still some limitations with this study. Firstly, the sample size used for this study was not as representative of the MLS sample as possible since there were only 27 viable responses after data cleaning. Since MLS garners millions in audiences, such a small sample may not be as accurate of an indicator of the entire population.

Furthermore, in order to conduct such a massive campaign requires a large budget. This may not be possible for MLS to implement altogether to ensure proper effectiveness as anticipated. The strategies can be implemented independently; however, they are loosely reliant on each other for effectiveness in brand awareness over the 2024 season. Not to mention, these strategies and tactics would require a quick turnover time in order to launch according to the proposed schedule.

Conclusion

MLS is the top soccer league in the United States of America. In order to create longevity and grown to the levels of NBA and NFL then it must target a young adult audience that not only understands the league, but build an affinity to the teams and their players. Although there are larger sporting organizations overall, MLS has the potential to grow exponentially through reaching a young adult demographic that they have yet to fully engage. They are also one of the youngest leagues and can capitalize on this audience to ensure success. Currently there isn't a large interest in MLS, the teams, or most of the players. By implementing, a traditional

marketing campaign, influencer marketing, and online engagement strategies, MLS can boost their awareness of the MLS brand which can lead to sales, further connections with players and teams, and sales of matchday tickets and merchandise. A holistic approach with many touchpoints has the potential for greater success to not only raise brand awareness, but increase sales and match attendance.

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Appendix A: Survey + Responses

Are you between the age of 18-30? 34 ⓘ

Yes				
No				
0	10	20	30	

Are you between the age of 18-30? 34 ⓘ

Q2 - Are you between the age of 18-30?	Percentage	Count
Yes	100%	34
No	0%	0

Are you between the age of 18-30? 34 ⓘ

| Are you between the age of 18-30?	Average	Minimum	Maximum	Count
Yes	1.00	1.00	1.00	34
No	-	-	-	0

Do you have an interest in soccer (watching, play, engage in communities etc.)? 34 ⓘ
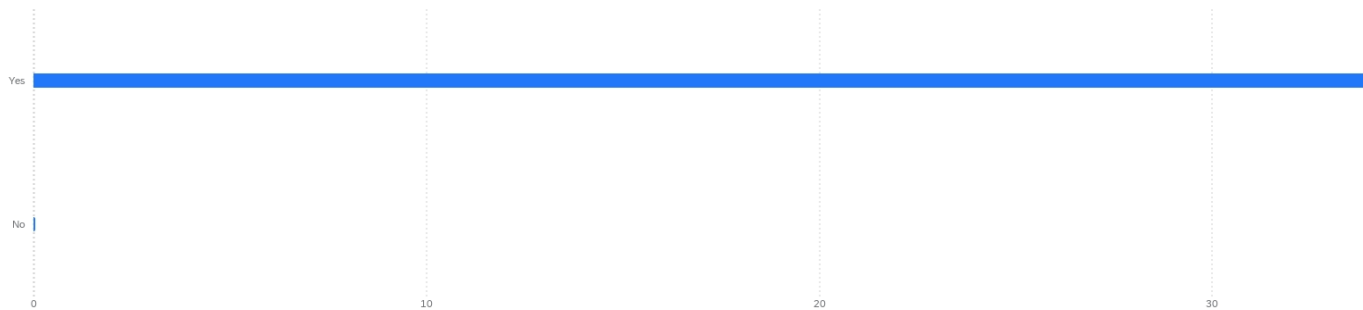
Do you have an interest in soccer (watching, play, engage in communities etc.)? 34 ⓘ

Q3 - Do you have an interest in soccer (watching, play, engage in communities etc.)?	Percentage	Count
Yes	100%	34
No	0%	0

Do you have an interest in soccer (watching, play, engage in communities etc.)? 34 ⓘ

Do you have an interest in soccer (watching, play, engage in communities et...	Average	Minimum	Maximum	Count
Yes	1.00	1.00	1.00	34
No	-	-	-	0

On a scale of 1 to 5, how interested are you in MLS? 29 ⓘ

On a scale of 1 to 5, how interested are you in MLS?	Average	Minimum	Maximum	Count
1=minimal interest; 5=extreme interest	2.41	1.00	5.00	29

What aspect of MLS are you most interested in? (Select all that apply) 29 ⓘ
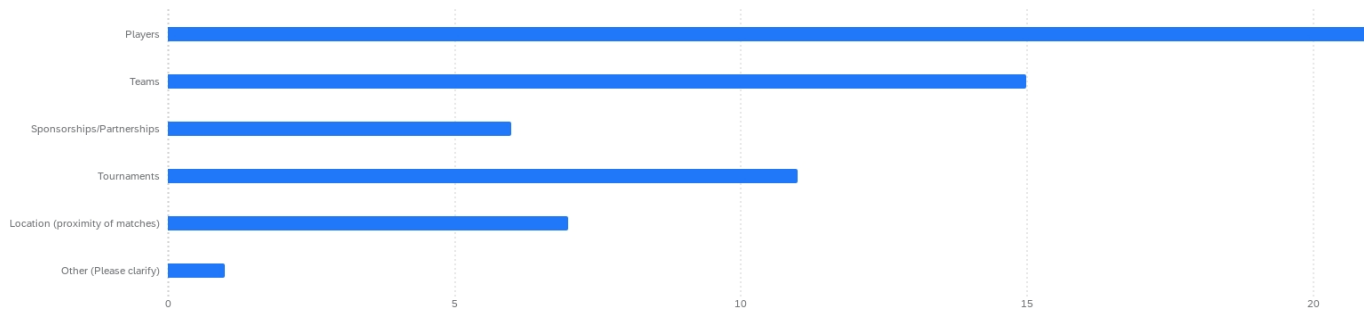

What aspect of MLS are you most interested in? (Select all that apply) 29 ⓘ

Q5 - What aspect of MLS are you most interested in? (Select all that apply) - Selected Choice	Percentage	Count
Players	72%	21
Teams	52%	15
Sponsorships/Partnerships	21%	6
Tournaments	38%	11
Location (proximity of matches)	24%	7
Other (Please clarify)	3%	1

What aspect of MLS are you most interested in? (Select all that apply): Other (Please clarify) ⓘ

Watch soccer games

How often do you watch MLS matches? 29 ⓘ
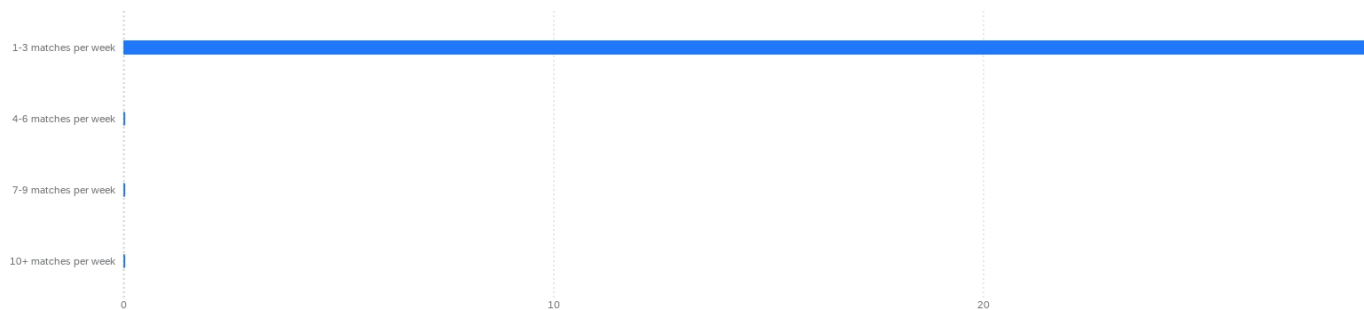
How often do you watch MLS matches? 29 ⓘ

Q6 - How often do you watch MLS matches?	Percentage	Count
1-3 matches per week	100%	29
4-6 matches per week	0%	0
7-9 matches per week	0%	0
10+ matches per week	0%	0

How often do you watch MLS matches? 29 ⓘ

| How often do you watch MLS matches?	Average	Minimum	Maximum	Count
1-3 matches per week	1.00	1.00	1.00	29
4-6 matches per week	-	-	-	0
7-9 matches per week	-	-	-	0
10+ matches per week	-	-	-	0

Are you an MLS Pass (on Apple TV) subscriber? 29 ⓘ
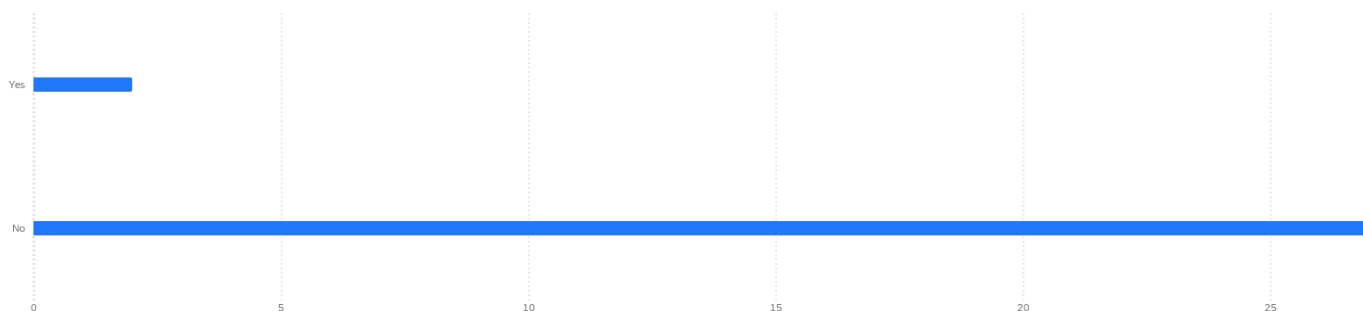
Are you an MLS Pass (on Apple TV) subscriber? 29 ⓘ

Q8 - Are you an MLS Pass (on Apple TV) subscriber?	Percentage	Count
Yes	7%	2
No	93%	27

Are you an MLS Pass (on Apple TV) subscriber? 29 ⓘ

| Are you an MLS Pass (on Apple TV) subscriber?	Average	Minimum	Maximum	Count
Yes	1.00	1.00	1.00	2
No	2.00	2.00	2.00	27

Have you ever attended a MLS match in-person? 29 ⓘ
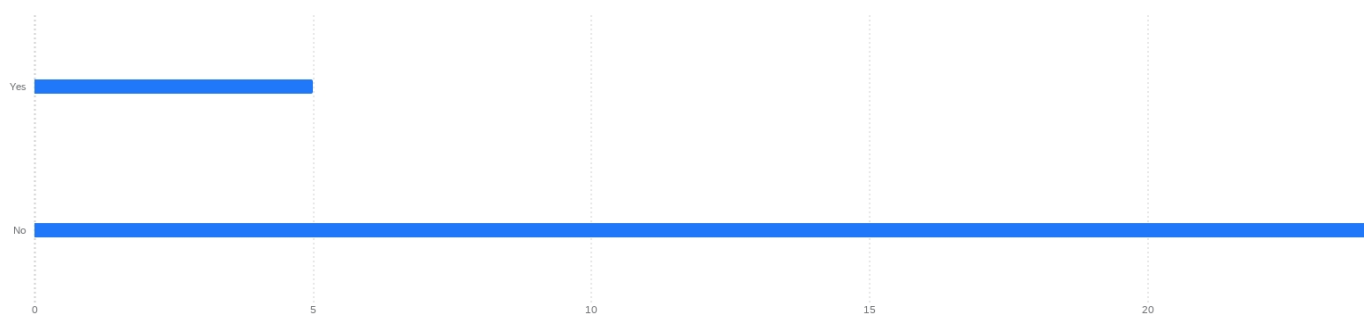
Have you ever attended a MLS match in-person? 29 ⓘ

Q9 - Have you ever attended a MLS match in-person?	Percentage	Count
Yes	17%	5
No	83%	24

Have you ever attended a MLS match in-person? 29 ⓘ

Have you ever attended a MLS match in-person?	Average	Minimum	Maximum	Count
Yes	1.00	1.00	1.00	5
No	2.00	2.00	2.00	24

What motivated you to attend the match? (Select all that apply) 5 ⓘ
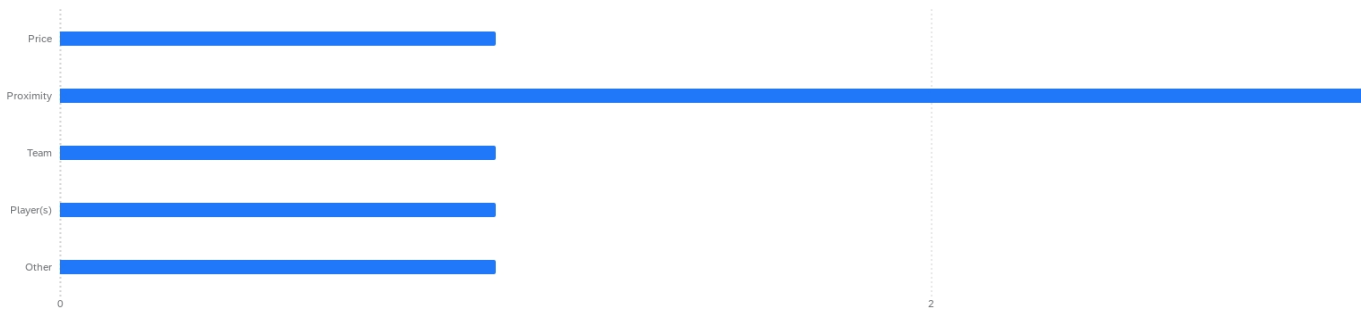
What motivated you to attend the match? (Select all that apply) 5 ⓘ

Q10 - What motivated you to attend the match? (Select all that apply) - Selected Choice	Percentage	Count
Price	20%	1
Proximity	60%	3
Team	20%	1
Player(s)	20%	1
Other	20%	1

What motivated you to attend the match? (Select all that apply): Other ⓘ

Friends

How likely are you to attend an MLS match in the coming year? 28 ⓘ
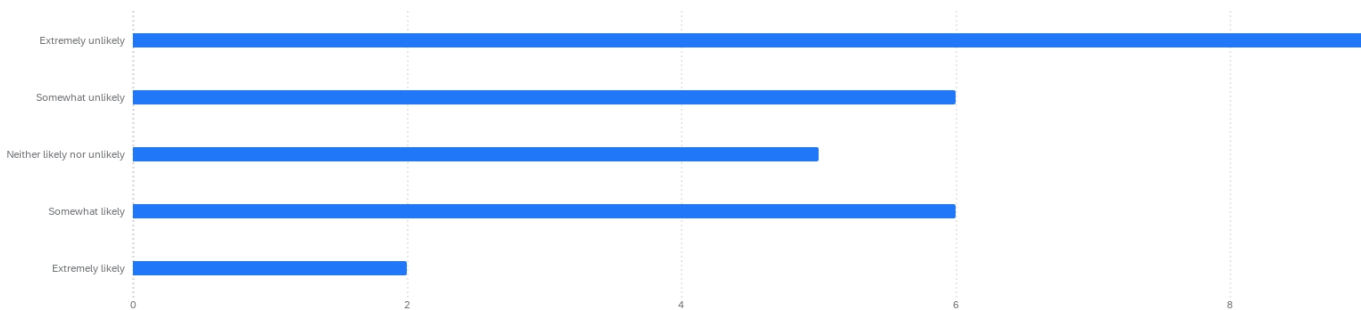
How likely are you to attend an MLS match in the coming year? 28 ⓘ

Q11 - How likely are you to attend an MLS match in the coming year?	Percentage	Count
Extremely unlikely	32%	9
Somewhat unlikely	21%	6
Neither likely nor unlikely	18%	5
Somewhat likely	21%	6
Extremely likely	7%	2

How likely are you to attend an MLS match in the coming year? 28 ⓘ

How likely are you to attend an MLS match in the coming year?	Average	Minimum	Maximum	Count
Extremely unlikely	1.00	1.00	1.00	9
Somewhat unlikely	2.00	2.00	2.00	6
Neither likely nor unlikely	3.00	3.00	3.00	5
Somewhat likely	4.00	4.00	4.00	6
Extremely likely	5.00	5.00	5.00	2

What would motivate you to attend the match? (Select all that apply) 28 ⓘ
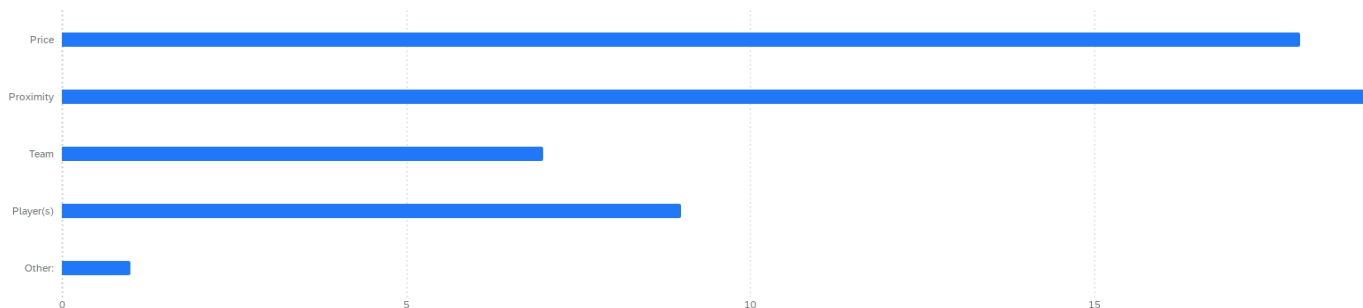
What would motivate you to attend the match? (Select all that apply) 28 ⓘ

| Q12 - What would motivate you to attend the match? (Select all that apply) - Selected Choice	Percentage	Count
Price	64%	18
Proximity	68%	19
Team	25%	7
Player(s)	32%	9
Other:	4%	1

What would motivate you to attend the match? (Select all that apply): Other: ⓘ

An opportunity to travel to the US

On a scale of 1 to 5, how aware are you of current players in MLS? 27 ⓘ

On a scale of 1 to 5, how aware are you of current players in MLS?	Average	Minimum	Maximum	Count
1 = little to no awareness; 5 = high awareness	2.37	1.00	5.00	27

Rank the following leagues by your level of awareness (1 = Most aware) 27 ⓘ
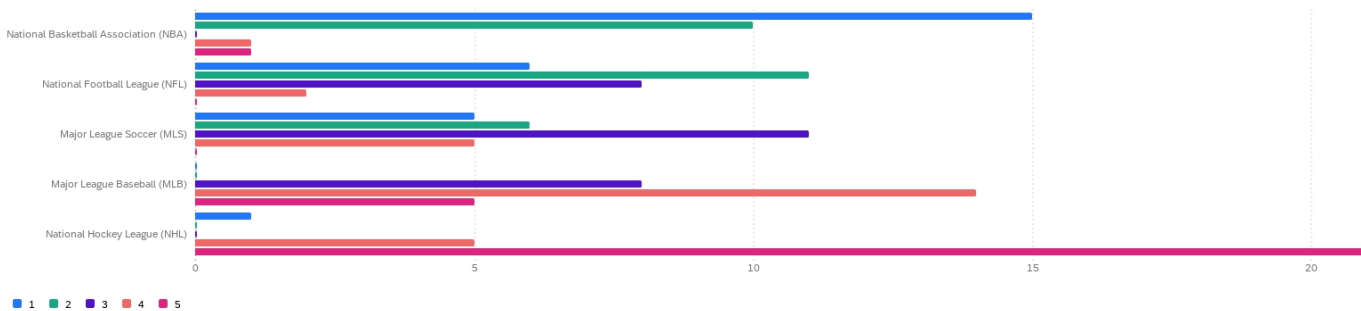

■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5

Rank the following leagues by your level of awareness (1 = Most aware) 27 ⓘ

Rank the following leagues by your level of awareness (1 = Most aware) ↑	1	2	3	4	5
National Basketball Association (NBA)	15	10	0	1	1
National Football League (NFL)	6	11	8	2	0
Major League Soccer (MLS)	5	6	11	5	0
Major League Baseball (MLB)	0	0	8	14	5
National Hockey League (NHL)	1	0	0	5	21

Would you consider purchasing MLS team(s) merchandise (t-shirts, banners etc.)? 27 ⓘ
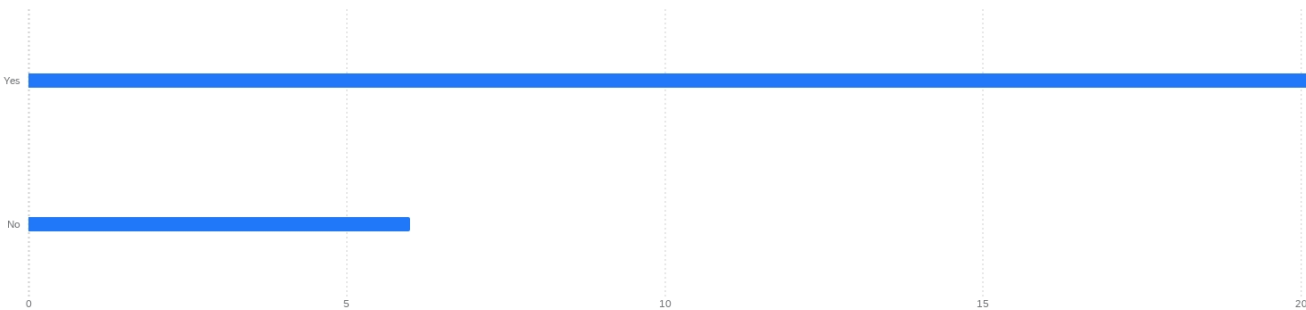

Would you consider purchasing MLS team(s) merchandise (t-shirts, banners etc.)? 27 ⓘ

Q15 - Would you consider purchasing MLS team(s) merchandise (t-shirts, banners etc.)?	Percentage	Count
Yes	78%	21
No	22%	6

Would you consider purchasing MLS team(s) merchandise (t-shirts, banners etc.)? 27 ⓘ

Would you consider purchasing MLS team(s) merchandise (t-shirts, banners et...	Average	Minimum	Maximum	Count
Yes	1.00	1.00	1.00	21
No	2.00	2.00	2.00	6

Do you currently follow any MLS teams on social media? 27 ⓘ
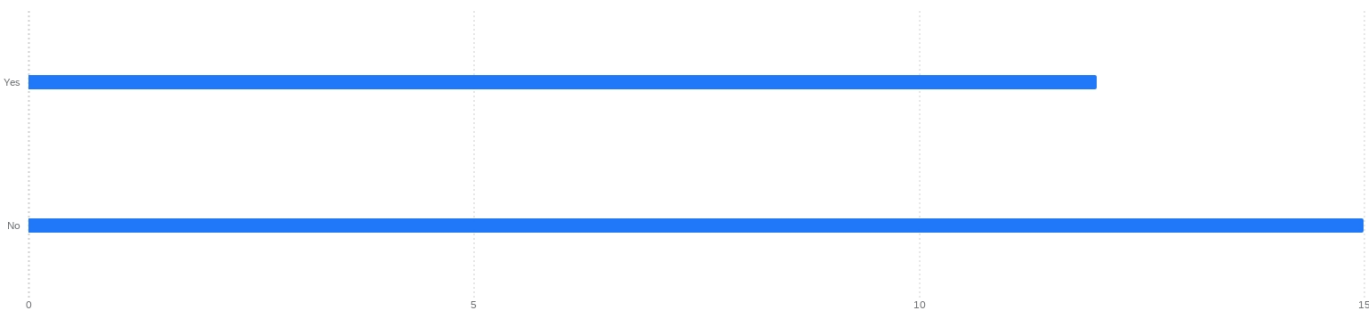
Do you currently follow any MLS teams on social media? 27 ⓘ

Q16 - Do you currently follow any MLS teams on social media?	Percentage	Count
Yes	44%	12
No	56%	15

Do you currently follow any MLS teams on social media? 27 ⓘ

Do you currently follow any MLS teams on social media?	Average	Minimum	Maximum	Count
Yes	1.00	1.00	1.00	12
No	2.00	2.00	2.00	15

Do you currently follow any MLS players on social media? 27 ⓘ

Do you currently follow any MLS players on social media? 27 ⓘ

Q17 - Do you currently follow any MLS players on social media?	Percentage	Count
Yes	56%	15
No	44%	12

Do you currently follow any MLS players on social media? 27 ⓘ

Do you currently follow any MLS players on social media?	Average	Minimum	Maximum	Count
Yes	1.00	1.00	1.00	15
No	2.00	2.00	2.00	12

How do you believe MLS can increase their appeal and visibility? (Select all that apply) 27 ⓘ
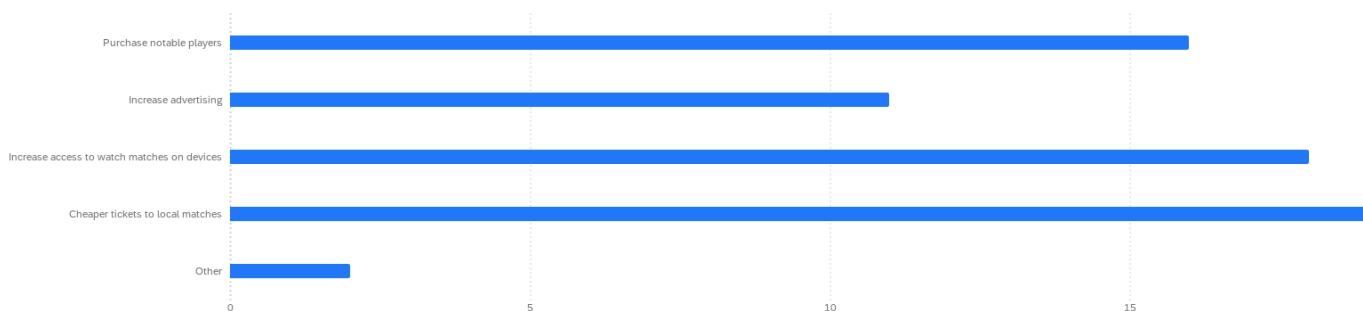
How do you believe MLS can increase their appeal and visibility? (Select all that apply) 27 ⓘ

Q18 - How do you believe MLS can increase their appeal and visibility? (Select all that apply) - Selected Choice	Percentage	Count
Purchase notable players	59%	16
Increase advertising	41%	11
Increase access to watch matches on devices	67%	18
Cheaper tickets to local matches	70%	19
Other	7%	2

How do you believe MLS can increase their appeal and visibility? (Select all that apply): Other ⓘ

Play good football, celebrity endorsements

Having good and very competitive teams

What platforms do you use to consumer soccer content? 27 ⓘ
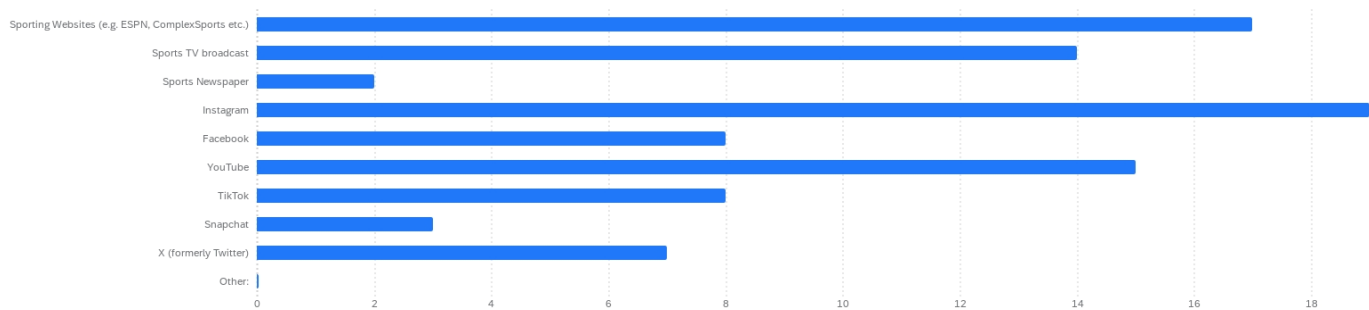
What platforms do you use to consumer soccer content? 27 ⓘ

Q19 - What platforms do you use to consumer soccer content? - Selected Choice	Percentage	Count
Sporting Websites (e.g. ESPN, ComplexSports etc.)	63%	17
Sports TV broadcast	52%	14
Sports Newspaper	7%	2
Instagram	70%	19
Facebook	30%	8
YouTube	56%	15
TikTok	30%	8

What platforms do you use to consumer soccer content?: Other: ⓘ

No data found - your filters may be too exclusive!

Please Identify your gender: 27 ⓘ
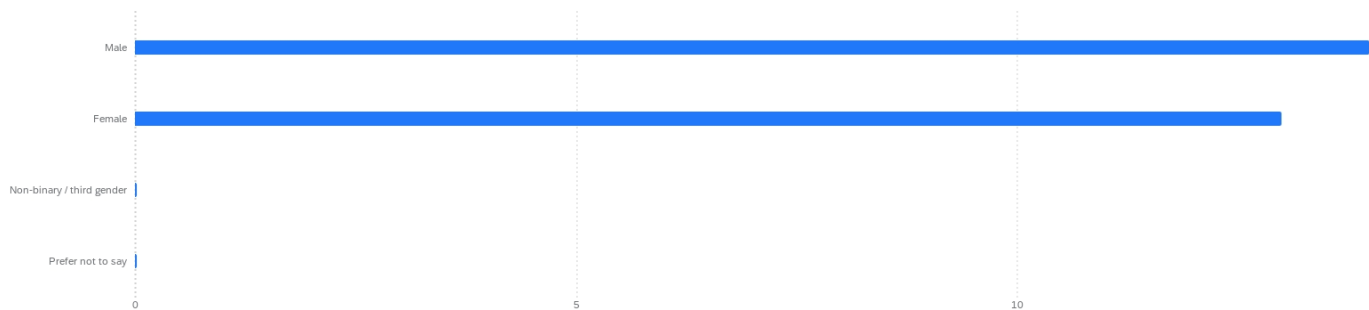
Please Identify your gender: 27 ⓘ

Q20 - Please Identify your gender:	Percentage	Count
Male	52%	14
Female	48%	13
Non-binary / third gender	0%	0
Prefer not to say	0%	0

Please Identify your gender: 27 ⓘ

Please Identify your gender:	Average	Minimum	Maximum	Count
Male	1.00	1.00	1.00	14
Female	2.00	2.00	2.00	13
Non-binary / third gender	-	-	-	0
Prefer not to say	-	-	-	0

Which social media platforms do you commonly use 27 ⓘ
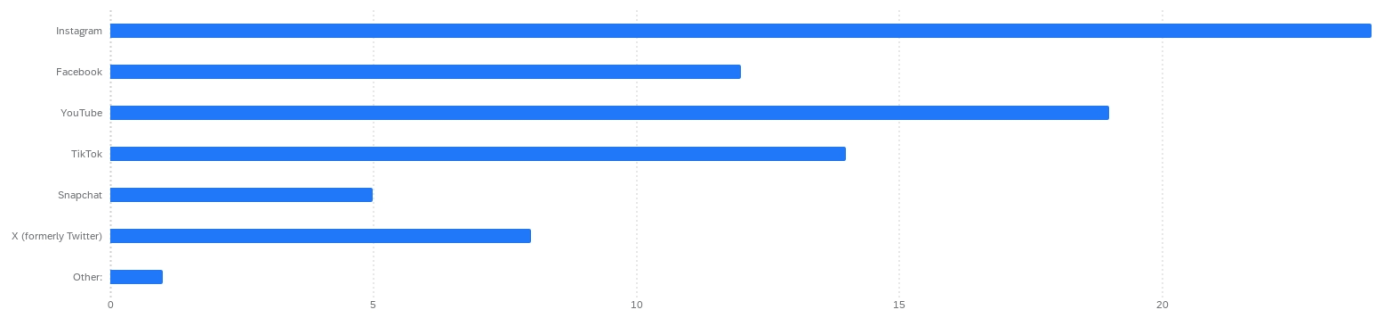
Which social media platforms do you commonly use 27 ⓘ

Q21 - Which social media platforms do you commonly use - Selected Choice	Percentage	Count
Instagram	89%	24
Facebook	44%	12
YouTube	70%	19
TikTok	52%	14
Snapchat	19%	5
X (formerly Twitter)	30%	8
Other:	4%	1

Which social media platforms do you commonly use: Other: ⓘ

Reddit

Student Bio

Born and raised in the twin-island Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, Zion Sealy moved to the U.S. to pursue his passions in Digital Marketing. He began his journey at Florida International University (FIU) in 2018 and graduated Magna Cum Laude in 2021 with a Bachelor of Business Administration in Marketing, specializing in Marketing Research and Analytics. Throughout his time at FIU, Zion was quite involved on campus. He rose to be the president of an active faith-based student organization with over 100 members attending weekly meetings and leading the group through the COVID-19 pandemic. He was also one of the first members of FIU's Miami Innovators Association – a student-led organization dedicated to fostering innovation and professional development workshops for young creators and innovators at FIU. There, he led Marketing and Communication efforts for the organization during his freshman and sophomore year. He also earned multiple certifications in Google Marketing Platform tools and social media/social listening software while working as a part-time marketing/communication intern in the FIU College of Communication, Architecture + The Arts (CARTA) from freshman year to his graduation.

Post-graduation, Zion transitioned to becoming a full-time staff member as the Junior Account Manager at the FIU CARTA, where he played a pivotal role in shaping and promoting CARTA's "Creative Forces At Work" brand and executing strategic marketing and communication initiatives. He oversaw a team of interns who, together with the Director and Content Strategist, grew CARTA's presence in traditional and digital media locally, nationally and internationally. Notably, he spearheaded efforts to utilize emerging immersive technology in new forms of storytelling with FIU CARTA's Lee Caplin Immersive Studio for Altered Reality – using augmented reality, extended reality and virtual reality. He also gained widespread

experience in media/public relations, creative direction, content creation, community engagement, ad management and internal and external strategic communications.

Currently, Zion returned to FIU as a full-time graduate student to earn his Master of Science in Mass Communication/Media Studies, focusing on Global Strategic Communications – Management and he continues to work within CARTA part-time. His long-term goal is to further strengthen relations between South Florida and Caribbean economies through Digital Marketing. In his free time, enjoys reading and learning about developments in the technology industry and pop culture. He also enjoys watching and playing soccer frequently. He hopes to one day be a leading voice in using new age technology for digital storytelling in these areas.