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# The Motivational Factors that Influence Rugby Fandom in The United States

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# The Motivational Factors that Influence Rugby Fandom in The United States

## Abstract

The purpose of this research was to understand the different factors that affect varying levels of rugby fandom. Rugby is currently very popular worldwide but faces extreme competition in the United States, especially from football. This research is important because it will help marketers and sport managers better understand fan motivation in rugby. This will allow them to better market and grow the sport in the United States to compete with American sports.

A sample of 111 participants from a small private college in New York was surveyed for this study. The survey contained primarily quantitative questions, with one open ended quantitative question to end the survey. Participants were asked about the factors that motivate them to follow sport in general and what factors might lead them to follow rugby if they don't already. Socialization and excitement of the game were found to be the highest rated motivational factors. It was also found that there was a significant difference in how men rated violence and sport higher than women, implying that rugby may struggle generating a female fanbase because of its physical and violent nature.

In the analysis of the qualitative data one of the most common themes was that American sports fans compare rugby to football which reinforces the heavy competition from football in the United States. Many fans also commented on the physicality of the game, for some it was a turnoff to the sport and to others it made the sport more exciting. Other fans felt that, while expressing some interest in the sport, it was confusing and difficult to follow as well as hard to gain access to. These results show that the biggest challenge to rugby will likely be competition from other sports. As of right now there is no significant outlet for rugby in the US which makes it hard to find for potential fans. American audiences will need greater exposure to the sport in order to develop a better understanding of the game and generate fandom.

## Document Type

Undergraduate Project

## Professor's Name

Katharine Burakowski

## Subject Categories

Sports Management

The Motivational Factors that Influence Rugby Fandom in The United States

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### **Executive Summary**

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A sample of 111 participants from a small private college in New York was surveyed for this study. The survey contained primarily quantitative questions, with one open ended quantitative question to end the survey. Participants were asked about the factors that motivate them to follow sport in general and what factors might lead them to follow rugby if they don't already. Socialization and excitement of the game were found to be the highest rated motivational factors. It was also found that there was a significant difference in how men rated violence and sport higher than women, implying that rugby may struggle generating a female fanbase because of its physical and violent nature.

In the analysis of the qualitative data one of the most common themes was that American sports fans compare rugby to football which reinforces the heavy competition from football in the United States. Many fans also commented on the physicality of the game, for some it was a turnoff to the sport and to others it made the sport more exciting. Other fans felt that, while expressing some interest in the sport, it was confusing and difficult to follow as well as hard to gain access to. These results show that the biggest challenge to rugby will likely be competition from other sports. As of right now there is no significant outlet for rugby in the US

which makes it hard to find for potential fans. American audiences will need greater exposure to the sport in order to develop a better understanding of the game and generate fandom.

### **The Motivational Factors that Influence Rugby Fandom in The United States**

Rugby is currently one of the most popular sports in the world. It is played in all around the globe and has a history of nearly 200 years (Beneke, 2015). Despite enjoying widespread popularity on a global scale, rugby has yet to gain any major following in the United States. It has even been called nothing more than a “tiny blip on the football-obsessed American sports radar” (Birkner, 2016, p. 1). USA Rugby reports their nationwide membership at 115,000 participants (2016). If rugby is to gain any popularity in the United States, it needs to understand the market it is entering and the consumers it is trying to reach. This study aims to understand the motivations that drive sport consumption throughout the world and in the United States in an effort to better market the sport of rugby to the American sports fan.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Motivating Factors**

In evaluating fan motivation, a common tool used by researchers are the SPEED factors, which include the five motivational factors of socialization, performance, esteem, excitement and diversion (Funk, Beaton & Alexandris, 2012). Socialization, esteem, excitement and diversion all provide an intrinsic reward while performance is classified as more of an external factor, which will be discussed later. When a fan attends a sporting event they are typically looking for an intrinsic reward that falls within one or more of these categories. The first factor, and typically most prominent, is socialization. Fans often use sport or attendance at a sporting event as a way to interact with friends and family and if the sport does not provide that socialization they are less likely to consume it (Funk et al., 2012). In some way, the sport itself

may become secondary to the interactions with the people around you. Some fans claimed that they have become friends with other people who also regularly attend games, such as other season ticket holders who sit nearby (Alonso & O'Shea, 2014). A potential explanation for this social motivation is Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs which "proposes that there are five categories of human needs that account for much of human behavior, namely, physiological, safety, social, esteem and self-actualization" (Dhurup, 2010, p. 206). Human beings have a psychological need to socialize and be accepted into social groups. Sport is just one of the many channels that can provide that social fulfillment that Maslow suggests is necessary.

Socialization in sport goes a step beyond just spending time with friends and family at a game and can cause the development of a subculture, depending on the sport (Dwyer, Greenhalgh, & LeCrom, 2016). The development of these subcultures is most common in "niche sports" which Dwyer et al. define as "emerging sports that represent the top level of competition in their respective sports" (2016). Rugby is considered a niche sport by this definition. While rugby is played at the professional level in the United States, its currently small; growing numbers suggest that it could be emerging to be more popular (USA Rugby, 2016). Fans of niche sports use the uniqueness of the sport as a way to establish their own unique identity (Dwyer et al., 2016). Fans of these niche sports will socialize with similar fans within that niche who they view as like-minded in their unique preference of sport. These small pockets of fans who have a strong unique identity form strong and distinct social groups, which can be defined by the social identity theory that states, "people are defined by the groups in which they have membership" (Dwyer et al., 2016, p. 367). The findings of Dwyer, Greenhalgh and LeCrom (2016) align with the socialization aspect from the SPEED theory that was found to

be significant by previous studies (Funk et al., 2012). If sports fans are motivated by socialization, then the people who also consume that sport are important to them. As the findings on niche sport fans suggest, they desire a unique and distinct personality which would align them only with other people in the niche sport fandom.

A second SPEED factor that has been found to be prominent is diversion, which can be defined as a distraction or escape from normal life (Dhurup, 2010). In an interview conducted by researchers Alonso and O'Shea a participant stated that consuming the sport of rugby was "an opportunity to put aside the stresses and strains of everyday life. To yell, chant, sing, boo as a reaction to what's happening with my team. A way of 'letting off steam'" (2014, p. 49). Sport can act as an outlet for fans who are feeling pressure or stress that otherwise would not be released. It can also be a way to break the monotony of everyday life (Funk et al., 2012). Sport is not only a way to let off steam or distract a fan from stresses, it can be an escape from the responsibilities and routineness that come with everyday life. Going to a sporting event can be a sort of vacation from work or school from fans in attendance or just watching on TV.

A third prominent SPEED factor in many of the studies previously done is esteem. Esteem is also one of the five factors mentioned in Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs (Dhurup, 2010). Fans tie their personal identity and self-worth to the success and performance of the team. In a study conducted by Alonso & O'Shea, fans mentioned that a rugby game on a Friday night could shape their mood for the week (2014). If their team won, they would feel good and be happy for the rest of the week. If their team lost their mood would be significantly worse (Alonso & O'Shea, 2014). Esteem is more than just rooting for your team, it is the feeling that you are a part of their organization. When esteem is prominent factor there is often a



sense of achievement felt by a fan when their team does well (Dhurup, 2010). Identification with a winning team can often positively influence the self-concept, or an individual's thoughts and views of themselves (Gerber & Terblanche, 2012).

Many of the SPEED factors that have been mentioned can be achieved through activities other than sport such as going to a bar or restaurant or going to the movies with friends. There is however one SPEED factor that is unique to sport, and that is performance (Funk et al., 2012). Sports offer a unique attribute, and that is the athletic performance of the team or sport being consumed. Performance can be defined as the athletic skill demonstrated by the players or by the success of the team. In a study conducted by Garland, Macpherson & Haughey, the most influential factor in fan attendance was the on-field product itself (2004). Simply put, good rugby leads to greater attendance and greater fandom. A winning team is not the only indicator of performance. Some fans are highly motivated by the skill and performance of individual athletes. In a study conducted in South Africa, fans were found to greatly appreciate the skill and aesthetic quality of how the players perform and the way the game is played (Dhurup, 2010).

One final motivating factor that could be potentially significant is the facility that the sport is played in. Per the stadium mall concept, a state of the art facility that provides more than just the sport can be strong motivator for consumption (Dhurup, 2010). These stadiums will likely include amenities such as restaurants or bars, luxury areas or even live music. A complimentary theory to the stadium mall concept is the novelty effect, which is defined as the increased attendance that is expected when a team moves into a new stadium or facility (Love, Kavazis, Morse & Mayer, 2013). New designs, increased technology and the desire to simply

experience something fresh and new are some of the factors that Love et al. determined were driving the novelty effect (2013).

### **Fan Identification**

Fan identification can be defined as the extent to which a fan feels connected to a sport or a team (Miller & Benkwitz, 2016). Fan identification is important because fans who more highly identify with a team or a sport are far more likely to consume it and consume it more often (Gargone, 2016). This knowledge implies that if a sport wanted to gain popularity and increase fan consumption, it would need to focus on promoting fan identification. Four stages of fan identification have been identified and they are awareness, attraction, attachment and allegiance (Gargone, 2016). If a sport or team can push consumers through these four stages they could build up fan identification. There are many reasons that fans identify with teams and many ways to move fans through these phases. Firstly, a study conducted by Stevens and Rosenberger found that “following a sport was found to positively influence fan identification” (2012, p. 64). This means that fans who actively keep track of a sport and follow it in the news, on social media or on TV will identify more strongly as fans of the sport. Social media especially has become prominent in allowing fans to follow organizations. Using new technologies to communicate and engage with fans is highly effective at increasing fan identification (Gargone, 2016). Teams can interact with fans on social media to encourage them to follow the team and keep track of them, increasing identification.

Fans also identify with sports or teams because of specific players (Dhurup, 2011). Player attachment can be very influential when choosing a team or choosing whether to consume a sport or not. Athletes are often viewed as role models by fans, especially young

fans, and this motivates them to follow that team or athlete very closely (Davis & McGinnis, 2016). Fans feel a certain connectedness to their favorite athletes and can even experience a sense of “vicarious achievement” when that athlete does well, increasing identification with that player (Peden, Upright, Hey & Jordan, 2015, p. 39).

Fan identification can mean more than a connectedness to the sport or a team, it can sometimes mean a connectedness to what that sport or team represents. For example, fans of rugby in New Zealand do not simply identify with the All Blacks because they love the sport or the team, they do so because that team represents their country and their national identity (Davis & McGinnis, 2016). Identifying as a New Zealander means identifying as an All Blacks fan. Similar scenarios can be found in the UK regarding the sport of football (soccer). A study done among college students in the UK found that the strongest fan identification was with soccer because of how dominant the sport is within the culture (Parry, Jones & Wann, 2014). Events such as the World Cup and the Olympics can greatly influence fan identification with a team by increasing that sense of nationalism. During the World Cup of Hockey Canadians no longer root for their individual clubs, but come together to root for Team Canada. This is because they feel that hockey is their sport and it is part of their culture which causes them to strongly identify with Team Canada (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). Similarly, the Rugby World Cup is an event in which New Zealanders feel they can showcase to the world how to truly play their national sport (Davis & McGinnis, 2016). In short, nationalism and cultural identity can be wrapped up in fan identity.

An authentic and powerful fan identity can be difficult to cultivate and often takes a long time to develop. Miller and Benkwitz found that when studying European fans there were

three main tenets of an authentic fan identity; through thick and thin, actively realizing what fandom is, and being emotionally determined to identify and support an organization (2016). Through thick and thin simply means being a fan for a long time and through all the ups and downs (Miller & Benkwitz, 2016). Fans with an authentic identity often look down on those who have not been fans for very long or who do not remain loyal to the team during difficult times, otherwise known as bandwagoners. These authentic fans who are loyal to a team for long periods of time are the most important to an organization because not only do they support the team the most, but they will attend the most and purchase the most with the team (Foster & Hyatt, 2008).

Actively realizing what fandom is just means that these fans understand what it means to support a team and need a good reason to do so (Miller & Benkwitz, 2016). Participants in Miller and Benkwitz's study even claimed that they had stopped being fans of teams if they realized they had no reason to be (2016). Finally, emotional determination can be related to the esteem factor discussed in the previous section. It occurs when a fan's emotions are tied to performance of a team and is considered the most authentic, due to the irrational and basic nature of emotions (Miller & Benkwitz, 2016). As Alonso and O'Shea found in their study, the emotions of a fan and their entire mood can be affected by the team they identify with (2014). A participant of a study done at the Rugby World Cup in 2011 suggested that in New Zealand, when their team loses, it is like the whole country is in a bad mood (Bruce, 2013). These are some of the major motivations that exist for fans, however, opposition to fandom exists as well.

### **Obstacles to Consumption**

Given that rugby has been established as one of the world's most popular sport, one might question why it is not as popular in the United States. The SPEED factors listed above outline many of the reasons fans have for consuming a sport, there are barriers that need to be overcome if rugby is to gain widespread popularity in the United States. According to a study done by Toni Bruce a major obstacle is the perception of rugby as a violent game (as cited by Price, 2015). Even in New Zealand, where rugby is the national sport, there are detractors. Rugby has been criticized for "influence it has on domestic violence and the brute violence displayed on the field." (Bruce, as cited by Price, 2011, para. 6). Rugby is a full contact, extremely physical game. Due to the nature of the game it is clear why some people may construe the game play as violent or brutish. Even football in the United States has experienced a backlash by fans due to its link to concussions and other injuries. If football can be criticized in America, then no other sport is safe. The violence in the game can cause a problem when marketing the sport to certain groups. Families typically are less motivated to attend "aggressive type" sporting events because they do not want to expose younger children to the violence on the field (Wann, Grieve, Zapalac, & Pease, 2008). The implication that rugby influences and may even increase domestic violence is an even bigger image crisis for the sport, especially in America. The NFL (again comparing football to rugby due to the physical nature of both sports) has lost more and more support from women over the past two years because of their lax and seemingly irresponsible handling of domestic violence issues among their players (McCarthy, 2015). Some would argue that the violence is just part of the game of rugby, fans even claim "I think it has to be confrontational, gladiatorial. There has to be a bit of blood" (Davis & McGinnis, 2016). Despite these arguments, the violent stigma may still prove to be a

serious detriment to the games popularity. Even soccer, a sport not typically known for its physicality, was thought of as a dangerous sport when it was first introduced in the mainstream in America (Kiuchi, 2014).

Along with violence, there is a “hard masculinity” that is promoted by the game of rugby, especially in New Zealand (Price, 2015, para. 4). This masculinity described by Bruce promotes the notion that being a man and being masculine involves aggression and asserting yourself over your opponent (as cited by Price, 2015). It is part of the game and is demonstrated especially in New Zealand All Black games. Before each game the team performs the Haka, an ancient tribal war dance that poses a challenge to the opposing side (Davis & McGinnis, 2016). This masculine identity that is promoted by the sport furthers the brutish stereotype of rugby players and the sport in general. This masculinity is particularly a problem for female consumers and has affected the popularity of the game among that demographic (Bruce as cited by Price, 2015). Female consumers feel marginalized by this sense of masculinity that is displayed within the game of rugby, and as mentioned before are more conscious of the potentially violent effects of the game.

The growth of a sport in a new country is difficult to cultivate. When soccer was first becoming popular in America, it was because of its youth participation (Kiuchi, 2014). Soccer became part of the family as fathers would coach their children’s teams and moms became “soccer moms”. This huge growth in youth participation allowed the sport to gain some momentum in the United States. USA Rugby has approximately 10,000 youth rugby players (USA Rugby, 2016). This lack of youth participation will need to change if the sport is ever to increase in popularity. Another challenge soccer faced when entering the American market was

the lack of understanding, not only by the American people but by American sports professionals such as ESPN reporters and announcers. American commentators frequently misused soccer terminology and struggled to follow the game (Kiuchi, 2014). This is the challenge when assimilating a sport into a new culture. There will be misunderstandings and if the potential fans do not understand the sport they are not likely to consume the sport.

Fans can be motivated to watch a sport if they can relate or feel represented within that sport. This was found in a study done by Brown & Bennett (2015) based around the lack of African American consumption of baseball. One of the most common themes in the interviews that were conducted was the lack of player representation for African Americans in baseball, “There is no LeBron in the MLB” (Brown & Bennett, 2015, p. 300). The same can be said for soccer in America. Author Dolores Martinez said, “an American soccer hero in this mold, a home-grown talent who achieves international fame, could change the face of the game in the USA” (2014, p. 95). American players like Landon Donovan and Alex Morgan have made soccer more popular, but large numbers of Americans still fail to identify with the sport. This desire for representation is a cross cultural phenomenon. When asked why New Zealand fans identify so strongly with the All Blacks, many of them mentioned how they have players that are role models to them (Davis & McGinnis, 2016). There is no American rugby star in the spotlight or on the world stage. This lack of representation and lack of an American “role model” in rugby will affect consumer’s ability to identify with the sport.

Finally, competition from other sports is the biggest obstacle for a growing sport in the United States. In the American market the Big Four (MLB, NBA, NHL, NFL) dominate the sport industry leaving very little room for other sports to grow (Dwyer et al., 2016). The barriers to

entry in the sport market are very high. The demand for other sports is simply too high and less popular sports do not receive the same attention that baseball, basketball, and especially football receive. For example, TV stations were paying more in the 1960s for NFL games than ESPN currently pays for a soccer game (Kiuchi, 2014). Competing with these well-established, popular sports will be the biggest obstacle that rugby will face when attempting to gain popularity and become more than, as Birkner says, a “tiny blip on the radar” (2016).

## **Method**

### **Research Question**

Many studies have been conducted to uncover what motivates fans of rugby in many parts of the world such as South Africa or New Zealand (Dhurup, 2010; Davis & McGinnis, 2016; Alonso & O’Shea, 2014). These motivations can range from social interaction to a fans identification with a team or player. Despite rugby’s huge popularity around the world, however, it still faces the challenge of gaining popularity in the United States. Since no previous study has tried to uncover what motivations drive American fans this research aims to answer the following research question;

- In what ways do different motivational factors influence fandom of rugby in the United States?

### **General Research Descriptors**

The research that was conducted was applied because it can be used to help market the sport of rugby in the United States (Jones, 2015). In learning more about the motivations and behaviors of fans of rugby around the world and American fans, it can be better understood how rugby satisfies or does not satisfy those needs and motivations. This research was post



positivist and included a mix of both qualitative and quantitative data. Finally, this research was both descriptive and explanatory (Jones, 2015). It both described the motivations and behaviors of rugby fans as well as explored that fandom in the US, which had not been done before.

### **Sample Selection**

The participants taking part in the survey were all students at a small private college in Western New York. A convenience sample was used because all the participants were easily accessible through their school email addresses (Jones, 2015).

### **Variable Operationalization**

The nominal variables examined in this study were age, gender and fandom. Age was defined as how old the participant is. Gender was defined as whether the participant as male or female. Participants were asked what sports they are currently a fan of as well as if they enjoy or ever have watched rugby. These variables helped to build a profile of rugby fans as well as a profile of each participant. The ordinal variables being examined were the SPEED factors. Participants assessed how important each of the SPEED factors were to them by using a Likert scale (Gargone, 2016).

Variables regarding if a participant is a fan of other sports allow researchers to understand what sports pose the greatest competition to rugby. It is known that the NFL is the largest sport provider in the United States and it corners the market along with NBA, NHL and MLB (Dwyer, et al., 2016). External variables such as facilities can influence motivation. A brand-new facility that employs the stadium mall concept (Dhurup, 2010) may motivate fans to attend an event more than an older facility. Questions were asked to determine what factors might generate more interest in rugby. These variables included increased US involvement in

international play and the emergence of an American super star in the sport. Finally, a question was asked to determine if fans enjoy the physicality in sport since rugby is an extremely physical contact sport. The primarily quantitative data was supplemented by one final qualitative question that asked participants to briefly describe their current attitude towards rugby. This is the only open-ended question in the survey.

### **Data Collection Instrument**

A survey was created using the Qualtrics software. The survey asked 10 to 15 questions, containing a mix of both qualitative and quantitative data. Each survey began with a series of demographic questions, mentioned above, to build a profile of all respondents and identify any significant variables. The content questions covered the variables mentioned above; SPEED factors, facility factors, media exposure and level of fandom, and a qualitative short response was placed at the end of the survey and used to uncover the participant's current perceptions and attitudes towards rugby.

### **Data Collection Process**

To ensure the instrument was effective, free of errors and user friendly it was pilot tested with a small group of approximately 10 participants before mass distribution (Jones, 2015). After pilot testing and completion, the survey was distributed through the school's webmail and a deadline for completion was set. Participation in this survey was completely voluntary and sample size was based on the number of students who chose to complete the survey (Parry, Jones & Wann, 2014). A follow up email was sent to all non-respondents after an appropriate amount of time (Jones, 2015).

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative responses were collected and entered into an Excel spreadsheet. The data was then read through and coded based on common themes that emerged within the responses. The quantitative data was categorized and entered into SPSS for analysis. Mode was used to determine how many participants from each demographic category (age, gender, level of fan) are taking part in the study (Jones, 2015). Scales were used to determine the importance of SPEED aspects among participants. Means were used to determine which SPEED factor is the most or least important to participants as well as the average importance of the other variables (Jones, 2015).

Independent sample T-tests were used to determine if there was a significant difference between gender in the average importance of SPEED factors as well as the independent factors of violence, facility, friends, international play, American players.

## **Results**

### **Sample**

The sample for this study included 111 undergraduate students from a small private college in New York state. The sample consisted of 35.1% male (n=39) and 64.9% female (n=72) participants. Among all participants 68.5% were between the ages of 18-20, 27.9% were between the ages of 21-25, and 3.6% of participants were 26 years of age or older. This sample is representative of the target population, which was college age potential sports fans, in terms of age. However, the sample was not quite representative in terms of gender as there were far more females who participated in the study than males. Of the original 116 responses there were five data responses that were deleted before any statistical analysis was performed. Three of these responses did not consent to having their results be public and therefore did not

complete the survey. The final two responses were incomplete and did not provide enough information to be useful in statistical analysis, leaving the sample size at 111 participants.

### **Descriptive Statistics**

#### **SPEED Factors**

Participants were asked to rate the importance of the five SPEED factors using a Likert scale of 1-5, 1 being very important and 5 being not at all important. In the table below the mean ratings for all five factors are presented.

	<b>Socializing</b>	<b>Performance</b>	<b>Excitement</b>	<b>Esteem</b>	<b>Diversion</b>
<b>Mean</b>	2.01	2.26	1.82	3.15	2.95

On average, excitement was the most important factor with a mean rating of 1.82. Esteem was the least important factor with a mean rating of 3.15.

#### **Attendance**

Out of the 111 participants, 28 (25.2%) said that they had either watched or attended a rugby match in the past. Each of the 28 participants who had watched or attended a rugby game in the past said that they would attend or watch another rugby game if given the opportunity.

#### **Independent Factors**

Participants were asked about a number of other factors to determine how these factors might influence willingness to attend or watch rugby. These factors included how much the participant enjoys violence/contact in sport, if their friends were attending, if their

town/city built a new stadium for a rugby team, American emphasis on international play, and the emergence of an Americana rugby star. Once again, a Likert scale was used to determine importance of each factor and the average importance of each was calculated. The mean ratings for each factor are presented in the table below.

	<b>Enjoy Violence/Contact</b>	<b>Friend Attendance</b>	<b>New Facility</b>	<b>US Emphasis</b>	<b>American Star</b>
<b>Mean</b>	1.97	2.14	2.65	2.45	2.80

On average, participants rated their enjoyment of violence and contact in sports at a 1.97. With mean of 2.14, friend attendance was found to be the most influential factor on attendance of a rugby match.

### **Independent Samples T-Test**

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to find any significant differences between average ratings for the 10 variables with respect to gender. The alpha for each test was originally set at .05, the Bonferroni adjusted alpha after running all 10 tests was .005. The only variable in which there was a significant difference in the average rating of the variable with respect to gender was the enjoyment of violence/contact in sport. On average males rated their enjoyment of violence/contact (M=1.62) higher than females (M=2.17). This difference was significant,  $t(109)=.004$ ,  $p<.005$ .

### **Qualitative Analysis**

Five major themes were identified within the qualitative responses. These five themes were confusing play, lack of exposure/do not know about it, don't enjoy/negative connotation of violence, comparison to football, and exciting/positive connotation of violence. The violent nature of the sport was mentioned frequently, often in a negative way and often in a positive way. Therefore, violence was grouped with either enjoyment of the sport or dislike of the sport based on the positive or negative interpretation of the contact in the sport.

Many participants found that the sport was hard to follow even if they found it enjoyable because they did not understand the rules. One participant said, "I watched some of it in the Olympics and it looked cool, I just didn't understand everything going on" and another participant said, "I think rugby is very interesting, I just wish I knew more about the rules which would then facilitate my understanding of the game more."

Lack of exposure to the sport or a complete lack of knowledge about the sport was a very common theme found among the responses. Many participants seemed to be interested but were unable or unsure of how to gain access to and follow the sport. For example, one participant stated, "I think it is interesting, but I do not feel as though it is an easily accessible sport. I have no idea where I would go to watch it." Other participants stated that they were completely ignorant to the sport and had no perceptions about it due to lack of knowledge about rugby. One participant stated "Don't know much about rugby. I don't really care for rugby because of my ignorance towards the sport" while others simply said, "I don't know what it is."

Many participants seemed to hold a negative view of the sport based on its violent reputation. One participant to have a strong negative view of the sport saying, "Probably

shouldn't be a sport... Very dangerous and risk of brain injury is too high” and another stated that the game seemed “unnecessarily violent.”

Other participants enjoyed the physical and fast paced nature of the sport. This aspect of the game generated a sense of excitement for these participants. One response described rugby as “very exciting and a very ruthless interesting sport.” A participant claimed that it is “Awesome to watch, filled with nonstop action.” Other participants made no mention of the physicality but still seemed to find the sport exciting.

Finally, comparisons to football were very common. Some participants expressed a strong preference of football over rugby. According to one participant rugby is “a knock off of football, and since football is so popular, I don't think rugby stands much of a chance to be as big as it is in Europe” and another said that they do not care about rugby because it is “fake football”. For some participants, the comparison to football seemed to be the best way to describe a sport they were otherwise unfamiliar with. One participant said, “I don't know too much about it other than it is similar to football” and one described rugby as a “rough physical sport. Kind of like football?”

### **Discussion**

The goal of this study was to answer the question of what factors contributed to fandom of rugby in the United States. There were a number of variables found to be significant to motivation in rugby fandom among American sports fans. Looking first at the SPEED factors it was found that excitement was on average the most important factor when attending or following a sport. American fans will not watch a sporting event if they do not find the on-field

product exciting. This could imply that participants who have watched rugby but do not identify as fans find the sport to boring or not exciting enough to hold their attention.

The second most important SPEED factor on average was socialization. American fans in this sample do not consume sport in isolation, they prefer to be around friends or family. Participants in the study on average said that they would be likely to attend a sporting event simply because a group of their friends were attending. In order to increase popularity rugby needs to provide not only an exciting on field product, but an environment that is conducive to socialization and allows fans to be with friends and family while following the sport. Rugby's current lack of popularity could be in part due to the fact that fans who might follow the sport do not have friends or family members who would do the same. Without a social group to follow the sport with, potential fans may lose interest in rugby.

Participants in the study stated that performance was also important to their willingness and motivation to consume a sport. Currently in the United States there is very little elite competition for rugby. The United States is far from the epicenter of rugby and does not have very popular or competitive professional leagues. American fans are not exposed to the height of performance and competition in rugby like fans in Europe or New Zealand are. If the United States created more competitive professional leagues and improved the on-field product fans may be more motivated to attend because the performance during the games would be significantly better.

In relation to performance of American rugby, the United States is still not dominant in international play such as the Olympics or the World Cup. Participants in the study answered that they would be likely to pay more attention to rugby if there was an American star and even



more so if there the United States placed a greater emphasis on their international play. These variables relate directly to performance. If the United States performed better in international play more fans would be willing to watch and follow the sport.

One of the most significant variables that was analyzed was the enjoyment of violence in sport. On average, participants rated their enjoyment of violence and physicality in sport at a 1.97 out of 5 (1 being the highest rating of enjoyment). This should be a huge advantage for rugby because rugby is an extremely physical sport and even those who do not follow the sport know its reputation for contact and physicality. Men did rate their enjoyment of physicality and violence significantly higher than women, implying that they may be a more effective target market to reach. If men enjoy violence in sport more, then they would likely be easier to motivate to follow rugby.

Interestingly, every participant who said that they had attended a rugby game before said that they would do so again. This is a very promising statistic among American fans. This demonstrates that the sport can hold the interest of a fan at a live event and those fans would be willing to return. It can be assumed then, that each of these participants enjoyed the sport and if people were given the opportunity to attend a rugby match even just once it may be enough to motivate them to follow the sport significantly. A huge part of increasing rugby fandom in the United States may simply be to get potential fans to a live match just once in order to generate more interest.

The qualitative data that was gathered was extremely helpful in identifying common perceptions of the sport as well as potential reasons why it is not popular in the United States. Several participants mentioned that the game was confusing and hard to follow at times. It is

extremely difficult for fans to regularly follow and become attached to the sport because they do not understand it. If fans better understood the rules of the game, they would likely become more dedicated fans and would watch or attend more.

This relates to another common theme which was a lack of accessibility to the sport. Participants found that it was difficult to find the sport in the United States. Professional games are not advertised, international matches as well as domestic matches are not televised regularly, and the most easily accessible form of the sport is likely at the college level. Fans do not know where to go to find the sport. This relates to understanding because if the sport was more accessible, for example broadcasted on television regularly, fans could watch more frequently and gain a better understanding of the rules and how the game is played.

There was a division between participants on how the physical aspect of the game was perceived. Some fans found the physicality to be very exciting while others found it to be brutal and dangerous. Based on the success of the NFL, we know violent sports can be very successful. In order to make rugby more successful, the fans who view the physicality of the sport in a negative way need to see it in a more positive way. If fans found the physicality exciting and less dangerous they would be far more likely to watch the sport.

Finally, comparisons to football emerged quite often in the responses. This strongly demonstrates that one of rugby's biggest hurdles will be competition from established American sports, particularly football. If someone is already a fan of football, they are not likely to become a fan of rugby if they think it is the same or very similar because it may be redundant, or rugby may be viewed as a lesser version of football. Fans need to be shown that

rugby is very much its own sport and either separate its image from football or use it to generate more interest and potentially convert football fans.

Previous research uncovered similar results based on the variable of socialization. It was previously known that if a sport does not provide a social aspect then fans would be less likely to consume it (Funk et al., 2012). It was assumed that socialization would play a large role in fandom. According to a study conducted by Garland, Macpherson & Haughey in 2004, performance was found to be the most influential factor of fan motivation. While in this study it was not the most important factor, it was still identified as important by the participants.

Contrary to what was known before, esteem did not seem to be a very significant motivating factor in this study. It was previously found that identifying with a winning team could positively affect one's view and feelings towards themselves (Gerber & Terblanche, 2012). That was not the case in the research conducted here, as participants ranked esteem as the least important and influential of the SPEED factors.

Perhaps the most significant finding of this research is that men enjoyed violence and physicality in sport far more than women. This was an expected result going into this study based on the research conducted by Toni Bruce in New Zealand. Bruce found in 2011 that despite rugby's popularity in New Zealand it still faced an image problem because it promoted "brutish" violence on the field and potentially encouraged it off the field. Women in particular felt marginalized by the form of masculinity that rugby promotes, alienating them from male fans (as cited by Price, 2015). Given that this has been found to be significant in multiple studies, it can be assumed that rugby may have a potentially difficult time reaching a female fan base.

International play could strongly effect rugby's popularity in the United States as it has been found in previous studies that following national teams can help fans identify with a sport more strongly. In this study participants said that a greater emphasis on international play would motivate them to watch more. This is supported by a previous study conducted by Davis and McGinnis in 2016 surrounding fan identity. It was found in New Zealand that being a fan of their national rugby team, the All Blacks, was part of their national identity and in many ways tied to their sense of patriotism (Davis & McGinnis, 2016). If American fans felt a similar sense of national pride in their national rugby team it could greatly increase fan identification not only with the team but with the sport in general.

The largest obstacle to rugby's popularity will likely be competition from football and the qualitative responses from this study demonstrate that. In a previous study rugby was called a "tiny blip on the football-obsessed American sports radar" (Birkner, 2016, p. 1). Many of the participants who knew of rugby thought it was a form of European football, one even called it a "knockoff" of football. It was expected that football would be a huge threat to rugby given the somewhat similar nature of the two sports. It is clear that rugby's similarity to football is a common perception in America and that will be a problem going forward in the marketing of the sport.

Finally, qualitative responses in this study also revealed a general lack of understanding of the game as well as an inability to easily access it. Soccer faced a similar issue when it first came on the scene in the United States. Even professional sports analysts in the United States frequently misused soccer terms and rules when calling games early on in the history of American soccer (Kiuchi, 2014). New sports can be very difficult to grasp for unknowledgeable

fans and this lack of understanding can have a detrimental effect on fandom. Clearly, like soccer, rugby is a new game that first needs to be better understood by American fans in order to gain popularity. Future researchers may want to consider further conversation with fans to understand why they struggle to follow the sport as well as what would make it easier for them to do so.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

One delimitation to this study and the most significant one was the sample that was targeted to participate. The sample that was chosen was an easily accessible group of undergraduate students from a small college. While this sample did provide strong insights into the motivations behind younger sports fans, there is a large population of potential fans that fall outside the reach of this study.

One limitation of this study was time. The data collection window for this study was approximately 3 weeks. Given more time the sample size for this study likely would have been higher and more participants would have been reached. The reach of this study was limited to the students that were easily accessible through their school emails. While the sample size of 111 college students gives a good insight into the attitudes of this specific demographic, it does not necessarily represent the views of Americans as a whole. A national survey would be very beneficial to future research and would encompass the views and attitudes of all American sports consumers in greater depth.

### **Summary and Suggestions**

Clearly socialization is extremely important in motivating fans to attend and follow sports. Fans want to attend games with their friends and do not enjoy consuming a sport in

isolation. Rugby needs to be able to reach larger groups of people so that potential fans have the ability to attend or watch in groups and not feel that they have no one taking part in the sport with them. Perhaps similar to football, American rugby could develop a similar culture based around tailgating and viewing parties to increase the social aspect of the sport.

The United States should be looking to improve the performance of their national team in order to generate more interest in the sport. The more resources that are put into the American rugby team and the more success we have in the Olympics and World Cup, the more people will pay attention. Marketers should also place a higher emphasis on rugby during events like the Olympics. Promotions and advertisements for important rugby matches should be frequent during international play. This will help to link rugby with a national identity and encourage fans to watch and root for the American team. Future research into viewership of international rugby during the Olympics would provide further insight into how American fans are engaging with the sport. This could include TV ratings or even American fan attendance to live international events.

The violence off the sport needs to be addressed. American fans already struggle with the violence in their favorite sport, football, and that same violence will likely not be tolerated in a sport that is not as loved and popular. Rugby needs to be marketed as a safe sport and a sport that takes care of its players, otherwise they will have the same image problem that the NFL currently has. It may be beneficial in the future to hold focus groups or interviews with parents to see if they would allow their children to play or watch rugby. This research will also provide deeper insights into why people view the sport this way and provide more detail than a survey would. The physicality of the game, however, should be used to market its potential for

excitement. This was found to be a huge point of interest among many fans and will motivate many people to watch.

The main take away from this study is that rugby simply needs more exposure in the United States. In order to increase popularity, games should be regularly shown on television networks and local rugby teams should be funded and supported to create more outlets for fans to gain access to the sport. Increased access will solve a lot of rugby's problems. The more fans can watch, the more they will begin to understand the game. The more exposure the national team gets during international play, the more American fans will be able to watch them and strongly identify with them. Rugby simply needs American fans to become more knowledgeable about the sport and be given a chance to access it on a regular and frequent basis. Collecting data from TV networks to see how often they air rugby matches as well as taking fan attendance numbers from live rugby events would provide researchers in the future with a better understanding of the level of interaction that American fans have with the sport.

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