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BIRKBECK SPORT BUSINESS CENTRE RESEARCH REPORT

MOTIVATIONS FOR ATTENDING THE FA WOMEN'S SUPER LEAGUE (WSL) GAMES



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Motivations For Attending The FA Women's Super League (WSL) Games

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women's football is an emerging market which is growing fast across the globe and especially in Europe. During the women's EURO 2022 hosted in England, the tournament welcomed the biggest women's EURO crowds, and the finals at Wembley recorded the highest attendance and set a new record not only for a women's international match in Europe, but also for a women's or men's EURO finals match. However, there is little understanding as to why people attend domestic leagues such as the Women's Super League (WSL). This report presents the findings from research that looked at the motivations for supporters attending the WSL. Drawing on survey research from 306 supporters the analysis showed that six motivational factors explained a significant proportion of variance in attendance of the WSL matches. These were: an interest in football; interest in the team; vicarious achievement; entertainment value; an interest in a player; and role model. Analysis also revealed that there is a difference in gender, age and attendance frequency when it comes to certain motivational factors.



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1. INTRODUCTION

When studying sports spectator behavior, knowing what motivates people to attend sporting events is one of the most important research areas in sports science. Understanding your audience provides a guide to managing and growing fan behavior (Wann, 1995). Different audiences have different motivations behind their decision to attend and participate in sporting events. Discovering these motivational factors is important for sports marketers to better understand their customers (Kim et al. 2019). Sports marketers must delve into the personalities, experiences, and sociocultural contexts of sports audiences to find these answers (Funk et al. 2012).

One of the spectator audiences that sport marketers need to start targeting more are the women's football supporters as the strength of the sport grows. FIFA (2020) reported that more than 13 million girls and women played organized football in 2019 worldwide, and women's football has been considered as the fastest growing sport in England (Williams, 2003). Women's football matches around the world have been drawing the audiences to the stadiums and smashing records in the past 3 years – in March 2022, Barcelona played Real Madrid in the UEFA Women's Champions League quarter-finals and broke the world attendance record in a women's football match with 91, 553 crowd at Camp Nou; Wembley Stadium hosted 77,785 supporters at England vs Germany game; Atlético Madrid vs Barcelona recorded 60,739 attendances in 2019 at Wanda Metropolitano (FourFourTwo, 2021a); 40,942 attended the latest Vitality Women's FA Cup Final at the Wembley Stadium between Chelsea and Arsenal (The FA, 2021).

These numbers represent a milestone for women's football, but with average attendance across the league so low, it seems like these represent a one event each season. For example, the Primera Iberdrola (Spanish women's first division league) has an average matchday attendance of around 700 (AS, 2020), while the Women's Super League (English women's first division league) averages 2,282 supporters (Forbes, 2021). One of the factors behind the aforementioned attendance records could be that the matches were played in men's stadiums. Men's stadiums are better equipped, offer a better fan experience, are usually closer and have stories to tell behind their rich histories (Fielding-Lloyd et al. 2018). But how can we be sure this is the reason and only reason behind these milestones? For this very reason, this report seeks to explore the motivations for attending women's football matches, what drives fans to go there, and when getting the answers, how can clubs and their marketing departments work to capture more audiences with working around their motivations.

This report focuses on exploring the motivational factors behind going to the FA's Women's Super League (WSL), the highest women's football league in England. The aim is to understand what drives supporters to attend the WSL matches, to find out if different motivational factors drive women and men to attend, if different age groups have different motivations for attending, or if attendance frequency has a different set of motivational factors behind it. Specifically, the study will try to find the answers to the following questions:

- Which motivational factors drive people to go to Women's Super League (WSL) matches?
- Is there a difference in motivational factors between gender?
- Is there a difference in motivational factors between different age groups?
- Is there a difference in motivational factors depending on the attendance frequency?

2. SPECTATOR MOTIVATIONS AND WOMEN'S SPORTS

There are a few studies that have focused on women's sports spectators to examine various factors such as fan satisfaction (Madrigal, 1995), involvement (Kerstetter & Kovich, 1997), and commitment (Weiller & Higgs, 1997). However, these studies have primarily relied on men's sports and sports in general to develop the theories around women's sport and not many focused on examining if there are motivational factors unique to women's sports. Different motivational factors have been discovered as drivers to attend women's sport events (Choi et al. 2011; Lough & Kim, 2004; Funk et al. 2000; Armstrong, 1999; Weiller & Higgs, 1997; Wann, 1995). For instance, Wann (1995) reported that for women the motivation to attend the college women's basketball game was to see particular players, while for men it was the entertainment value and the experience that the game could bring for the whole family. Motivations such as achievement seeking, and entertainment influenced supporters to attend the American Girls Professional Baseball League (AGPBL) (Weiller & Higgs, 1997). Attendance of professional women's basketball games in the American Basketball League (ABL) has been driven by entertainment, support of the women's league, the quality of play, the opportunity to see role models, and the players (Armstrong, 1999). Support for competitive opportunities for women in sport, players serving as role models, the traditional style of play, the wholesome environment, and the entertainment value of games were the most prominent attendance motives among supporters of a Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) league (Funk et al. 2000). Another study of WNBA spectators discovered that team identification was the most important motive behind attending the games (Choi et al. 2011). The most influential factor for attending a women's basketball game in Korea was the entertainment value (Lough & Kim, 2004). The motives that were discovered in studies of women's sports are more connected to utilitarian concepts than hedonic concepts i.e., besides being motivated by motivational factors based on providing individual pleasure (e.g., stress release), spectators of women's sports were also motivated by the utility of the sports (e.g., providing and seeing role models for youth and promoting equal rights in sports) (Funk et al. 2000; Armstrong, 1999; Weiller & Higgs, 1997).

However, as previously stated, all of these studies have relied on men's sports and sports in general to produce theories and there are only few studies which focused solely on discovering the uniqueness of the women's sports spectators' motivations. Funk et al. (2001) were the pioneers of researching motivational factors unique to women's sports and developed the Sport Interest Inventory (SII) scale based on previous research on sports spectators' motivations and adapted it to the context of women's sport event. The first version of the SII that was used in assessing the motivations behind attending the 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup, consisted of ten motivational factors: (1) drama, (2) vicarious achievement, (3) aesthetics, (4) interest in team, (5) interest in player, (6) interest in football, (7) national pride, (8) excitement, (9) social opportunities, (10) support for women's opportunities. Funk et al. (2001) revealed that the interest in attending the 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup was driven by (1) interest in football, (2) interest in team, (3) excitement, (4) support for women's opportunities, (5) aesthetics and (6) vicarious achievement – 35% of the variance in the interest of this sport event was explained by these motivational factors.

Due to the qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions from Funk et al. (2001) research, four additional motivational factors have emerged, such as: (1) players as role models, (2) entertainment value, (3) bonding with family, (4) wholesome environment. Funk, Mahony & Ridinger (2002) extended the Sport Interest Inventory (SII) with adding these four new motivational factors to try to understand drivers behind the continued interest in the U.S. Women's soccer team after the 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup. By examining the drivers behind attending the 1999 U.S. Nike Cup where USA women's national team competed, they revealed that five motivational factors lie behind that support: (1) sport interest, (2) team interest, (3) vicarious achievement, (4) role modelling, and (5) entertainment value – 54% of the variance in the interest in women's professional football was explained by these motivational factors (Funk et al. 2002). With this study they have also contributed by providing a more complete scale for examining motivations of women's sports spectators.

Ridinger & Funk (2006) used SII to explore motivational factors behind attending matches of the university women's basketball team. The study discovered that supporters were driven by the aesthetics of the game, particular players, excitement built around the games, wholesome atmosphere, opportunity to bond with family and friends, to also meet and interact with fellow supporters, the perception that players represent good role models, interest in team, vicarious achievement and the opportunity to support women and women's sports.

Some differences have been noticed between motives of men's and women's sport supporters, where motives relating to affordability, the influence of friends and family, and supporting a cause such as gender equality and women's opportunities appeared more prominent in women's sport compared to men's sport, which could suggest that supporters of women's sports are looking forward to different type of sport experience (Delia, 2019). Another study which compared the motives of a men's sport team (the England men's national football team, the Three Lions) and women's sport team supporters (the England women's national football team, the Lionesses), showed that supporters of the Lionesses were highly motivated by the physical skill, on-field performance of the players and feminism, while the supporters of the Three Lions were mostly motivated by the achievement (Clarke et al. 2022). Study that compared supporters of a university women's basketball team, discovered that female supporters were more likely to appreciate the aesthetics such as skills and quality of the game and players, and to go to the matches to support women's opportunities, than male supporters who were more motivated by certain players to attend the matches (Ridinger & Funk, 2006).

One of the most recent studies organized in-depth interviews with supporters of England and USA women's national football teams, who attended matches of the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup, to examine the motivations behind being supporters and attending these matches. The study recorded those connections to players, family, and friends, appreciation of athletic talent, a commitment to gender equality, entertainment, and the inclusivity of fan cultures were the main motivations for supporting these national teams and attending their matches (Allison & Pope, 2022).

These studies aside, there has not been much research done on the topic of supporters of women's sport in general, and accordingly, not much has been researched about women's football. There is no study specifically related to the Women's Super League (WSL), therefore the findings of this report will provide new understanding regarding motivations related to women's football supporters and WSL supporters especially.

3. METHODS

This study explored the motivational factors behind attending the WSL match(es), gender and age differences in motivations, differences in motivations depending on the match attendance frequency. The Sport Interest Inventory (SII) (Funk et al. 2002) was used to examine the motivational factors and included 39 from 42 items measuring 13 from 14 motivational factors (3 items per factor), as factor "national pride" was removed from the survey because it is not in line with the nature of the study. The wording of the SII items have been adapted to the context of the WSL (e.g., the items were altered to include the name of the league) and to the British English language (e.g., changing the word "soccer" into "football"). All used SII factors and their items are presented in the appendix.

Additionally, behavioral items were asked to capture respondent's relationship with football and particularly with the WSL (e.g., is football their favourite sport, how long have they been following it, how many WSL matches have they attended, how would they rate their knowledge of football, etc) and demographic questions regarding age, gender, ethnicity were asked to develop a general profile of the respondents and to answer the research questions related to gender, age and attendance frequency differences in motivations. To measure the attendance of the WSL matches the respondents were asked to rate on the five-point Likert scale how likely are they to attend the WSL matches in the future.

Spectators who are 18 years old and over, and who have been to at least one WSL match were surveyed. The survey was programmed and distributed via an online survey platform "Qualtrics". The survey was distributed through different social media channels, but mostly via Twitter, by contacting the existing clubs' fan bases, organizations that have connections to women's football and the WSL. In the invitation e-mail/message and at the beginning of the survey the respondents were made aware of the nature, anonymity of the study and their right to withdraw from it at any given moment. It took approximately 10 minutes for respondents to fill in the survey. A sample of 451 received the survey, 410 were returned which shows the respondent rate of 91%. From 410 returned surveys, 306 were usable, for a final response rate of 68%.

Descriptive statistics were used to develop a behavioral profile of respondents' characteristics. Multiple linear regression was utilized to explore the relationship between motivational factors and the WSL match attendance. A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to examine if there were gender, age and attendance frequency differences for motivational factors. The statistical significance level was set at $p < .05$.



4. RESULTS

4.1. Behavioral Profile

The sample was dominantly female (61.8%), with the mean age of all respondents 31 years of age, 29 years being the mean age of female respondents, while 35 years is the mean age of male respondents. The modal value indicated that most respondents were of younger age. The sample was predominantly from a white British background (76.1%). A large majority stated that football is their favourite sport (93.1%) and that they have been following it for more than 3 years (92.5%). Around half of respondents (51.3%) play football, and most of them have been playing it recreationally (96.2%) for longer than 3 years (87.2%).

Sixty-six percent of respondents (65.7%) attended more than 5 Women's Super League (WSL) games, approximately up to 5 games per season (50.0%). The respondents usually go to the WSL games with their family (31.7%), friends (28.4%) or alone (26.5%). A majority were not members of a WSL club (63.7%). A large number of respondents see themselves as having a very good knowledge of football (64.4%) and they also rate themselves as being highly familiar with the rules of the game (62.1%). Many respondents showed interest in women's football (85.6%), however not even half of the respondents claim to know the structure of the WSL, its clubs and players (45.8%).

4.2. Motivational Factors and WSL Match Attendance

Simultaneous regression analysis was employed to examine the predictive ability of the 13 SII motivational factors for the attendance of the WSL matches. The mean response for the WSL match attendance was 4.80 (SD = .77) on a 5-point Likert scale and the internal reliability measure of $\alpha = .82$. Means for motivational factors ranged from 2.29 for PLAYER to 4.69 for FOOTBALL, while the internal reliability measures ranged from .80 for EXCITEMENT to .83 for PLAYER which shows that there are no factors below the desired .70 benchmark (Cortina, 1993). Standard deviations ranged from .60 to 1.1. Motivational factors FOOTBALL, ENTERTAINMENT VALUE AND ROLE are rated as the top three most important motivational factors. Means, standard deviations and Cronbach Alphas for both motivational factors and the WSL match attendance are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Means, standard deviations and Cronbach Alphas for both motivational factors and the WSL match attendance (N=306)

	M	SD	α
WSL Match Attendance	4.80	.77	.82
Motivational Factors			
FOOTBALL (Interest in football)	4.69	.60	.82
ENTV (Entertainment value)	4.68	.52	.81
ROLE (Role model)	4.64	.62	.80
EXC (Excitement)	4.47	.68	.80
TEAM (Interest in team)	4.41	.82	.81
AESTH (Aesthetics)	4.38	.59	.81
SWOS (Supporting women's opportunity in sport)	4.35	.75	.80
WHOENV (Wholesome environment)	4.20	.79	.81
DRAMA (Drama)	4.08	.71	.83
VIC (Vicarious achievement)	4.05	.85	.81
BON (Family bonding)	3.45	1.01	.82
SOCIAL (Social opportunities)	3.39	1.01	.81
PLAYER (Interest in player)	2.29	1.1	.83

Table 2 Correlation Matrix of Involvement Antecedents from Standardized Phi Matrix (N = 306)

	FOOTBALL	VIC	EXC	TEAM	SWOS	AESTH	SOCIAL	DRAMA	PLAYER	ROLE	ENTV	WHOENV	BON
FOOTBALL	1.00												
VIC	.20	1.00											
EXC	.15	.37	1.00										
TEAM	.26	.36	.69	1.00									
SWOS	.18	.31	.63	.45	1.00								
AESTH	.33	.36	.32	.23	.34	1.00							
SOCIAL	.16	.36	.49	.38	.35	.28	1.00						
DRAMA	.20	.11	.08	-.04	.22	.20	.18	1.00					
PLAYER	-.04	.17	.18	-.03	.26	.14	.24	.17	1.00				
ROLE	.22	.29	.57	.36	.55	.29	.32	.19	.16	1.00			
ENTV	.14	.22	.54	.39	.45	.32	.23	.16	.13	.58	1.00		
WHOENV	.07	.16	.47	.21	.48	.28	.22	.12	.28	.53	.50	1.00	
BON	.15	.32	.34	.19	.30	.26	.29	.21	.22	.34	.20	.32	1.00

FOOTBALL = Interest in football, VIC = Vicarious achievement, EXC = Excitement, TEAM = Interest in team, SWOS = Supporting women's opportunity in sport, AESTH = Aesthetics, SOCIAL = Social opportunities, DRAMA = Drama, PLAYER = Interest in player, ROLE = Role model, ENTV = Entertainment value, WHOENV = Wholesome environment, BON = Family bonding.

Correlation matrix was computed and presented in Table 2. The provided results show that the SII constructs are distinct from each other as all correlation coefficients are below $r < .85$ (Kline, 1998). The correlation matrix shows weak to moderate discrimination validity between 13 factors.

The regression analysis is presented in Table 3, and it suggests that 44% ($R^2 = .44$) of the variance in the WSL match attendance was explained by FOOTBALL, TEAM, VIC, ENTV, PLAYER, and ROLE ($F = 17.50$, $df = 13$, $p < .05$). Analysis of Beta coefficients showed that FOOTBALL ($B = .56$) was the most influential factor to the WSL match attendance, followed by TEAM ($B = .25$), ENTV ($B = .24$), VIC ($B = -.21$), ROLE ($B = .18$) and PLAYER ($B = .10$). The negative sign associated with vicarious achievement (VIC) suggests that this factor is negatively related to the WSL match attendance.

Table 3 Regression on WSL Match Attendance on SII Motivational Factors (N = 306)

	B	Std.Error (SE)	Beta (β)
FOOTBALL	.56	.06	.44*
TEAM	.25	.06	.26*
VIC	-.21	.05	-.24*
ENTV	.24	.09	.16*
PLAYER	.10	.03	.15*
ROLE	.18	.08	.15*
WHOENV	-.09	.06	-.09
SWOS	.06	.06	.06
DRAMA	-.05	.05	-.05
AESTH	-.06	.07	-.05
EXC	.05	.09	.04
SOCIAL	-.02	.04	-.03
BON	-.01	.04	-.01

Full Model: $R^2 = .44$; Adjusted $R^2 = .41$; $F = 17.50$, $df = 13$, $*p < .05$. FOOTBALL = Interest in football, VIC = Vicarious achievement, EXC = Excitement, TEAM = Interest in team, SWOS = Supporting women's opportunity in sport, AESTH = Aesthetics, SOCIAL = Social opportunities, DRAMA = Drama, PLAYER = Interest in player, ROLE = Role model, ENTV = Entertainment value, WHOENV = Wholesome environment, BON = Family bonding.

4.3. Gender, Age and Attendance differences

The multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to examine gender, age and attendance frequency differences for the SII motivational factors. When it comes to gender, the MANOVA analysis showed gender differences for following eight SII motivational factors: vicarious achievement (VIC), excitement (EXC), interest in team (TEAM), supporting women's opportunity in sport (SWOS), social opportunities (SOC), interest in player (PLAYER), role model (ROLE), entertainment value (ENTV) ($F = 5.66$, $p < .05$). Female respondents were more likely to choose that their motivation for attending the WSL matches was driven by these eight factors in comparison to male respondents. The MANOVA results for gender differences are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 MANOVA results for Gender for SII Motivational Factors (N = 306)

		M	SD
FOOTBALL	Man	4.74	.58
	Woman	4.66	.62
VIC	Man	3.91	.87
	Woman	4.14*	.83
EXC	Man	4.17	.86
	Woman	4.65*	.45
TEAM	Man	4.20	.94
	Woman	4.54*	.70
SWOS	Man	4.03	.88
	Woman	4.55*	.58
AESTH	Man	4.31	.69
	Woman	4.41	.51
SOCIAL	Man	3.23	1.07
	Woman	3.49*	.97
DRAMA	Man	4.04	.78
	Woman	4.10	.66
PLAYER	Man	2.01	1.08
	Woman	2.46*	1.09
ROLE	Man	4.53	.76
	Woman	4.71*	.51
ENTV	Man	4.57	.68
	Woman	4.75*	.37
WHOENV	Man	4.10	.85
	Woman	4.26	.75
BON	Man	3.38	1.09
	Woman	3.49	.96

*Gender difference $p < .05$. FOOTBALL = Interest in football, VIC = Vicarious achievement, EXC = Excitement, TEAM = Interest in team, SWOS = Supporting women's opportunity in sport, AESTH = Aesthetics, SOCIAL = Social opportunities, DRAMA = Drama, PLAYER = Interest in player, ROLE = Role model, ENTV = Entertainment value, WHOENV = Wholesome environment, BON = Family bonding.

Age differences were also found for some motivational factors. Motivational factors such as, vicarious achievement (VIC), excitement (EXC), supporting women's opportunity in sport (SWOS), aesthetics (AESTH), drama (DRAMA), role model (ROLE) and entertainment value (ENTV) indicated significant differences among all three age groups (18-24 years old group, 25-34 years old group, and 35-64 years old group) ($F = 2.15, p < 0.5$). The youngest groups of 18-24 year old respondents seemed to be more likely to agree that these motivational factors influenced their attendance at the WSL matches than other two age groups. The MANOVA results for age differences are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 MANOVA results for Age Groups for SII Motivational Factors (N = 306)

		M	SD			M	SD
FOOTBALL	18-24	4.74	.50	DRAMA	18-24	4.27*	.63
	25-34	4.73	.56		25-34	3.98	.69
	35-64	4.60	.73		35-64	3.97	.77
VIC	18-24	4.21*	.75	PLAYER	18-24	2.39	1.16
	25-34	4.05	.83		25-34	2.21	1.01
	35-64	3.88	.95		35-64	2.27	1.14
EXC	18-24	4.58*	.58	ROLE	18-24	4.76*	.48
	25-34	4.50	.60		25-34	4.59	.62
	35-64	4.31	.82		35-64	4.56	.75
TEAM	18-24	4.48	.69	ENTV	18-24	4.78*	.33
	25-34	4.48	.76		25-34	4.69	.44
	35-64	4.26	.99		35-64	4.56	.71
SWOS	18-24	4.54*	.60	WHOENV	18-24	4.20	.77
	25-34	4.37	.73		25-34	4.17	.83
	35-64	4.13	.86		35-64	4.24	.79
AESTH	18-24	4.50*	.49	BON	18-24	3.49	.99
	25-34	4.38	.56		25-34	3.30	.97
	35-64	4.23	.68		35-64	3.57	1.07
SOCIAL	18-24	3.51	.98				
	25-34	3.39	1.01				
	35-64	3.26	1.05				

*Age difference $p < .05$. FOOTBALL = Interest in football, VIC = Vicarious achievement, EXC = Excitement, TEAM = Interest in team, SWOS = Supporting women's opportunity in sport, AESTH = Aesthetics, SOCIAL = Social opportunities, DRAMA = Drama, PLAYER = Interest in player, ROLE = Role model, ENTV = Entertainment value, WHOENV = Wholesome environment, BON = Family bonding.

Taking into consideration the number of attended matches per season, the MANOVA analysis revealed an attendance frequency difference for six motivational factors: interest in football (FOOTBALL), excitement (EXC), interest in team (TEAM), supporting women's opportunity in sport (SWOS), social opportunities (SOC), family bonding (BON) ($F = 5.58, p < .05$). Respondents who attended more than 5 matches per season were more likely to be stimulated by these motives to attend the WSL matches. The MANOVA results for attendance frequency differences are presented in Table 6.

Table 6 MANOVA results for Attendance Frequency for SII Motivational Factors (N = 306)

		M	SD
FOOTBALL	Up to 5 matches	4.61	.73
	More than 5 matches	4.78*	.42
VIC	Up to 5 matches	4.02	.92
	More than 5 matches	4.09	.78
EXC	Up to 5 matches	4.30	.78
	More than 5 matches	4.64*	.51
TEAM	Up to 5 matches	4.10	.95
	More than 5 matches	4.71*	.50
SWOS	Up to 5 matches	4.24	.84
	More than 5 matches	4.46*	.63
AESTH	Up to 5 matches	4.36	.60
	More than 5 matches	4.40	.58
SOCIAL	Up to 5 matches	3.19	.96
	More than 5 matches	3.60*	1.03
DRAMA	Up to 5 matches	4.07	.68
	More than 5 matches	4.09	.74
PLAYER	Up to 5 matches	2.22	1.06
	More than 5 matches	2.36	1.15
ROLE	Up to 5 matches	4.60	.71
	More than 5 matches	4.69	.53
ENTV	Up to 5 matches	4.68	.60
	More than 5 matches	4.69	.43
WHOENV	Up to 5 matches	4.20	.78
	More than 5 matches	4.20	.81
BON	Up to 5 matches	3.34	1.01
	More than 5 matches	3.56*	1.00

*Attendance frequency difference $p < .05$. FOOTBALL = Interest in football, VIC = Vicarious achievement, EXC = Excitement, TEAM = Interest in team, SWOS = Supporting women's opportunity in sport, AESTH = Aesthetics, SOCIAL = Social opportunities, DRAMA = Drama, PLAYER = Interest in player, ROLE = Role model, ENTV = Entertainment value, WHOENV = Wholesome environment, BON = Family bonding

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Motivational Factors behind Attending the WSL matches

The first question that this study wanted to find answers to is that of which motivational factors drive people to go to the Women's Super League (WSL) games. The findings revealed that interest in football, entertainment value and players as role models are rated as the top three most important motivational factors by the WSL supporters (FOOTBALL = 4.69; ENTV = 4.68; ROLE = 4.64). While interest in football represents one of the traditional motives used in research of both men's and women's sport settings, entertainment value and players as role models represent motivational factors that emerged from previous studies on women's sport. Rating these two new factors as one of the most important ones is in line with the previous research where players as role models has been chosen as the most important factor for attending a women's professional football event (1999 U.S. Nike Cup) and entertainment value being in the top five important motivational factors (Funk et al. 2002). Even though the differences of mean scores between the motives are not that high, the present study confirmed the importance of new factors of the SII in this new research setting as was in the previous research, but it also revealed that supporters of the WSL are mostly driven by their interest in football.

The regression analysis indicated that motivational factors interest in football, interest in team, vicarious achievement, entertainment value, interest in player and role model explained 44% of variance in interest in attending the WSL matches. The findings of the current study are mostly consistent with the previous studies that explored motivational factors of women's sport spectators (Allison & Pope, 2022; Clarke et al. 2022; Delia, 2019; Lough & Kim, 2004; Funk et al. 2002; Funk al. 2001; Funk et al. 2000; Armstrong, 1999; Weiller & Higgs, 1997; Wann, 1995), and also with some of the studies of men's sport spectators (Won & Kitamura, 2007; Swanson et al. 2003; Mahony et al. 1999). Interest in football was the most influential factor for attending the WSL match, and its emergence is in line with results of the previous studies done by Funk et al. (2001) and Funk, Mahony, & Ridinger (2002) on spectators of 1999 USA Nike Cup.

One of the explanations as having interest in football as the most important motivation for attending the WSL matches could be that football is the most popular sport in England whether we are talking about being a spectator or a participant (Sport England, 2022). For example, if we compare this insight to the previous study of women's sport event spectators, where interest in football was the sixth most important motivational factor (Funk et al. 2002), one of the reasons for the lower importance rate of this factor could be that in the USA football is at the fourth place on the sport popularity list behind baseball, basketball and American football at the top (Daily Mail, 2021). The influence of interest in football can be the case of many factors, such as the current popularity of the England Lionesses, of their journey in the Women's EURO 2022 tournament which was hosted in England, and many supporters would likely go to watch the heroes who brought football home playing for their club teams in the following season. Respondents' knowledge, interest, experience of women's football and football in general also have an impact on attending the WSL matches, as those who highly possess these attributes are more likely to attend the matches. As said before, even though women's football is not as popular as the men's i.e., WSL is not as popular as the PL, England is still one of the biggest footballing countries that is greatly interested in the game.

Interest in team is consistent with results of previous studies of both female and male sport events, which underlined the importance of team identification for attending the games of the supporters' favourite teams (Choi et al. 2011; Won & Kitamura, 2007) and it is one of the motivational factors that helps increase spectators' life satisfaction which can be explained by spectators' need to belong. Also, team identification is one of the factors that best facilitates higher attendances at sport events (Theodorakis et al. 2001). Sport organizations could use this sentiment to establish stronger and long-term relationships with the supporters, build trust between them and the team, as increasing team identification leads to higher patronage intention (Wu et al. 2012). For example, one of the ways for sport marketers to increase team identification is to use the power of women's team parent brand i.e., the men's team. In most cases, present and potential supporters of the women's team have already established a certain bond with the men's team, they are already familiar with the parent brand. To build their own brand equity and relationships with the supporters, the women's team can use functional benefits of the men's team, such as logo, kit design and colours but also the symbolism and history behind them. Not only will this help sport marketers build the women's team brand, but it would organically attract the supporters already familiar with the club's ethos with which they identify with. On top of using the parent brand benefits, the women's team should add their own historical chapters as it is not a plain copy of its parent brand, but a part of the bigger story of the club. The studies also revealed that when using the benefits of the parent brand, people showed a positive attitude towards brand extensions and reversely the parent brand also benefited from the extension (Deloitte, 2021; Aaker & Keller, 1990).

Vicarious achievement has been one of the most frequent spectators' motives for attending both male and female sport events, and this study has also recorded its influence (Won & Kitamura, 2007; Funk et al. 2002; Funk et al. 2001; Mahony et al. 1999). This factor is important for self-definition of spectators as it serves as a medium for boosting life satisfaction through spectating in-person sport events, which in contrast is not something that has been achieved through viewing sport media (Kim & James, 2022). Vicarious achievement is felt by being a supporter i.e., when supporter's favourite team succeeds, they feel it as a personal achievement which increases their self-esteem and consequently boosts their life satisfaction (Kimble & Cooper, 1992). Vicarious achievement also has a positive effect on team identification (Trail et al. 2003; Fink et al. 2002). Additionally, some studies showed that vicarious achievement has a positive effect on player identification, as supporters are attracted to players who perform better, and they identify with them - the better the performance of the players is, the more fans identify with the players and the bigger fulfillment of vicarious achievement they feel (Robinson et al. 2004). Accordingly, vicarious achievement can be attained by increasing team or player identification. It was already mentioned in the previous paragraph how team identification can be increased; thus, the increase of player identification will be explained in the following text.

The current study discovered that interest in players was one of the motivational factors that drives supporters to the WSL matches, as it was in some of the previous motivational studies on women's sports (Allison & Pope, 2022; Clarke et al. 2022; Armstrong, 1999; Wann, 1995). This finding connects nicely to the previously explained importance of the vicarious achievement which could be attained by player identification. Compared to the men's game, one of the differentiating attributes that have been perceived about the women's game, is that the female players and teams seem to have a more special, closer bond with the supporters than male players (Dunn & Welford, 2015). One of the ways for sport marketers to increase interest in players, and with that player identification which further increases vicarious achievement, is to use personal selling strategies. Social media has been one of the most effective means to connect with supporters, and it is also one of the cheapest and instant options of

communication which erases geographical distances between supporters and the club. Giving more platforms for players to introduce themselves and to chat with supporters e.g., even organizing a 10-minute social media live for a quick Q&A can bring a good response from the supporters and show that the players care about them, and they can also use that opportunity to remind them to come to the match and how much their support is needed and appreciated. Another off-field activity that could help boost the interest in players and enhance the bond between the supporters and the players is promoting the participation of girls in football. This is something that has been in focus for UEFA, FIFA and many football clubs, and having players as examples and messengers of what their future could be showed to be the best way (The FA, 2020; FIFA, 2020). Having players go to schools and grassroots clubs, not just to promote the actual game, but to promote positive values and for children to see who they can look up to and be inspired, will organically awake the desire to tell their teachers or parents to bring them to the game and one day also to bring them to practice. In addition, seeing the players go to communities and participate in off-field activities makes the players look more approachable and human to the supporters. Organizing off-field activities represent the opportunity for players and the team to interact more with the supporters. Despite the fact that their main job is to play football, they represent more than that to the society, especially female players.

As in the previous studies of women's sport events (Funk et al. 2002; Funk et al. 2000; Armstrong, 1999), the importance of role models as the motivational factor has been also confirmed in the present study. Even though the title of the "role model" has been attached many times to male footballers and men's football teams, it seems that it has a different kind of weight and meaning when it comes to female footballers and women's football teams. Women have been, and still are in many clubs, sports, jobs and countries, deprived of participating in certain activities, as is the case with football (Dunn & Welford, 2015). Men and boys have had many decades to watch the men's game and be inspired by footballers to participate or follow football, while for women's football it has been only recently where they got more opportunities to become visible to bigger audiences. This could explain the importance that the motivational factor role model has for the WSL match audience, especially ones that come with their daughters. Having role models is an important asset for young girls in order for them to see the potential and heights they could reach not just in sport but in life also. For many areas in life, girls have not had the chance to see other girls and women do things that could unlock the visions of their own potential or simply know that there is the possibility to do something if they ever choose to do it. FIFA, The FA and the media recognizes the importance of role models and have been campaigning and promoting this asset through tournaments, workshops, conferences, reports, etc (The FA, 2020; FIFA, 2020). Having players as role models as one of the top three most important motivational factors shows how crucial it is to regularly give opportunities for exposure of the players and the women's game. As mentioned, when talking about increasing interest in players, organizing off-field activities is the opportunity to show the audience and particularly young girls who the players are, what their journey was, to promote the game, spread positive values and inspire others.

The WSL spectators see entertainment value as really important, as has been the case in previous studies of women's sport also (Delia, 2019; Lough & Kim, 2004; Funk et al. 2002; Funk et al. 2000; Wann, 1995), which confirms the uniqueness of the WSL as the ticket prices are astronomically cheaper compared to the men's events, where the majority of the WSL adult tickets cost less than £10, with £12 being the most expensive ticket for Arsenal matches (FourFourTwo, 2021b), while the Premier League (PL) charge £63 per average, with Tottenham Hotspur having the most expensive match ticket for adults in the country of £98 (Mirror, 2021). This is something that sport marketers can use to point out as an advantage for potential

audiences to choose to go to the WSL matches over other sport events. In addition, as the study discovered, most of WSL spectators go to matches with their family (31.7%) and friends (28.4%) - e.g., a bundle of five tickets for the Arsenal which has the most expensive tickets in the WSL is still cheaper than one average priced PL ticket, which makes a good point for the advertising strategy.

5.2. Gender, Age, Attendance Differences

The second question this study wanted to research was to find out if there are gender differences in motivational factors behind attending the WSL matches. The MANOVA analysis recorded gender differences for the following eight motivational factors: vicarious achievement, excitement, interest in team, supporting women's opportunity in sport, social opportunities, interest in player, role model, and entertainment value. The analysis showed that female respondents were more likely to be motivated by these eight factors to attend WSL matches than male respondents. In comparison to previous studies that looked at gender differences in motivational factors, the current study confirmed the existence of group affiliation i.e., social opportunities, that was previously found in research of gender differences at male sport events (Swanson et al. 2003), and interest in players that was previously found in research of gender differences at female sport events (Wann, 1995).

The current study having female respondents as more likely to be driven to the WSL matched by certain motivational factors seems like a natural thing to happen. The majority of the WSL audience are women, and they represent consumers of a female product, in this case a women's football league. On the other hand, female footballers represent women in sport, and women in general, so it is easier for female supporters to connect, relate and be inspired by them. The significant existence of motivational factors such as interest in team, players and seeing players as role models as drivers among female supporters can be described by this opportunity for them to see the female representation in female footballers. Also, there are probably some female supporters that see certain players as their role models or think that the players are good role models for younger ones, especially girls. On top of that, female supporters recognize more the importance of going to the WSL matches as a good opportunity to support women as through history women were neglected and deprived of opportunities to develop not just in football but in many spheres of life. Female supporters empathize more with these situations and by going to the matches they try to support, show solidarity and in a way make a statement towards equal rights for women. As previously explained, vicarious achievement is closely connected to team and player identification. As female supporters are more likely to be motivated by the interest in their team and certain players, it makes sense for them to also be more driven by vicarious achievement because vicarious achievement can be attained by increasing team or player identification. Motivational factors such as supporting women's opportunities and having players as role models are one of the factors unique to women's sports that have only recently emerged in the studies of women's sports (Funk et al. 2003; Funk et al. 2002; Funk et al. 2001). These two unique motivational factors could be the key for designing the marketing strategies to promote the WSL and its clubs. The marketing strategies should emphasize more the concept of matches being the opportunity for the spectators to support women and the image of players being good role models, and these two messages should be targeted for women in particular.

When it comes to age differences among motivational factors for attending the WSL matches, motivational factors such as, vicarious achievement, excitement, supporting women's opportunity in sport, aesthetics, drama, role model and entertainment value, were more likely to be the drivers of the youngest groups of 18-24 year old respondents to attend at the WSL

matches compared to other two age groups. Compared to one found sport study that looked at age differences among motivational factors, and which showed that older supporters were less motivated by social aspect of sport events (Wann, 1995), the current study did not confirm this insight. Recent studies showed that younger generations are more likely to fight towards injustice, they are more tolerant, inclusive and open-minded towards variety of minorities, and are bigger advocates for gender equality (Jamaat & Keating, 2019, The Atlantic, 2013). Having a motivational factor such as support for women's opportunities as one of the key influences to attend the WSL match, therefore does not come as a surprise. Sport marketers should emphasize this factor when talking to younger supporters as they are not only the consumers of the product, but also the ones who will promote it without reservations and even unconsciously. Sport markets should take into account that younger generations are more likely to spend time on social media, and it is one of their main channels of communication, source of information and a platform to express themselves. They use these platforms on a daily basis, and it is easy for them to repost, save and share information to other users. Sport marketers should use these platforms to reach out to younger supporters to promote the matches and what the matches represent.

Looking at the attendance frequency differences among motivational factors, the current study found that supporters who went to more than five WSL matches per season are more likely to be driven by motivational factors such as interest in football, excitement, interest in team, supporting women's opportunity in sport, social opportunities, and family bonding. Using these factors as key messages of marketing strategies could motivate supporters to attend more WSL matches.



6. CONCLUSION

The present study examined motivational factors that drive supporters to the Women's Super League (WSL) matches and managed to extend our understanding of motivational factors in women's sports. In addition, the present study also researched a context that has not been researched before i.e., the WSL, adding it to the women's sports archive and bringing new insights to the academic literature. Hopefully, this study will be the first of many studies done on the WSL, and that it will expand to the professional leagues of other nations, as women's football is still neglected in many countries around the world. There is not enough research done on women's football, and women's sports in general, which makes it hard to compare, generalize and draw stronger conclusions. There are many undiscovered areas of women's sports that have unleashed potential to draw attention and be consumed.



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APPENDIX 1

The Sport Interest Inventory (SII) factors and their items

<p>Interest in football (FOOTBALL)</p> <p>First and foremost, I consider myself a fan of football. I love to follow the game of football. I am a huge fan of football in general.</p>
<p>Vicarious achievement (VIC)</p> <p>When my favorite team wins, I feel my status as a fan increase. I feel a sense of accomplishment when my team wins. When my team wins, I feel a personal sense of achievement.</p>
<p>Excitement (EXC)</p> <p>I find the Women's Super League (WSL) matches very exciting. I enjoy the excitement surrounding a Women's Super League (WSL) match. I enjoy the high level of excitement during the Women's Super League (WSL) competition.</p>
<p>Interest in team (TEAM)</p> <p>I consider myself to be a big fan of my favorite Women's Super League (WSL) team. Compared to how I feel about other sports teams, the Women's Super League (WSL) team is very important to me. I am a loyal fan of my favorite Women's Super League (WSL) team no matter if they are winning or losing.</p>
<p>Supporting women's opportunity in sport (SWOS)</p> <p>I attend the Women's Super League (WSL) games because I believe it is important to support women's sport. I see myself as a major supporter of women's sports. Attending the Women's Super League (WSL) game demonstrates my support for women's sport in general.</p>
<p>Aesthetics (AESTH)</p> <p>There is a certain natural beauty to the game of football. I enjoy the gracefulness associated with the sport of football. Successful plays and strategies performed by the players are an important component of the football game being enjoyable.</p>
<p>Social opportunities (SOCIAL)</p> <p>I like to talk with other people sitting near me at the Women's Super League (WSL) games. The Women's Super League (WSL) games give me a great opportunity to socialize with other people. I attend the Women's Super League (WSL) because of the opportunities to socialize.</p>
<p>Drama (DRAMA)</p> <p>I prefer watching a close game rather than a one-sided game, even when my favorite Women's Super League (WSL) team is playing. I like watching matches where the outcome is uncertain. A close match between two teams is more enjoyable than a blowout.</p>

Interest in player (PLAYER)

I tend to follow individual players more than the team.

I am more a fan of individual players than I am of the team.

The main reason I attend the Women's Super League (WSL) game is to cheer for my favorite player.

Role model (ROLE)

The Women's Super League (WSL) players provide inspiration for girls and boys.

I think the Women's Super League (WSL) players are good role models for young girls and boys.

The Women's Super League (WSL) players provide inspiration for children.

Entertainment value (ENTV)

The Women's Super League (WSL) is affordable entertainment.

The Women's Super League (WSL) is great entertainment for the price.

I attended the Women's Super League (WSL) game because it is an entertaining event for a reasonable price.

Wholesome environment (WHOENV)

I like attending the Women's Super League (WSL) games because it is good, clean fun.

There is a friendly, family atmosphere at the Women's Super League (WSL) games.

I value the wholesome environment evident at the Women's Super League (WSL) games.

Family bonding (BON)

I enjoy sharing the experience of attending the Women's Super League (WSL) games with family members.

Attending the Women's Super League (WSL) games gives me a chance to bond with my family.

An important reason why I attend the Women's Super League (WSL) games is to spend time with my family.

