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## **SPORTS FAN ENGAGEMENT IN THE MENA REGION – AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

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Synopsis:

The aim of this research paper is to analyze sport fan engagement in the MENA region and to illustrate differences between age, gender and ethnic groupings. The research explores cognitive and behavioral factors motivating fans to engage with sport.

Abstract:

**AIM OF ABSTRACT:**

With a population of more than 345 million people, the MENA region is attracting capital from all over the world due to its youthful population, natural resources, and geographic importance. GDP growth in the MENA region is expected to reach 3.5 percent in 2017 (World Bank, 2015). At the same time, sport is growing both in prominence and stature in this region, most potently symbolized by Qatar winning the right to stage the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The aim of this research paper is to analyze sport fan engagement in the MENA region and to illustrate differences between age, gender and ethnic groupings. The research explores cognitive and behavioral factors motivating fans to engage with sport.

**METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS:**

Using a qualitative design, 17 sports interested individuals originating from one of the MENA countries (participants from Oman, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Lybia, Morocco, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt) were interviewed, using a semi-structured format to investigate sport fan engagement. The interviews were transcribed and coded with qualitative data analysis software F4.

**RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSIONS:**

Our study supports the findings of Saez & Chahal (2011), revealing that football is by some distance both the highest spectator (59%) and participation (28%) sport in every MENA country followed by swimming. 57 % of the participants support a team rather than an individual star player. 50 % of the interviewees support a foreign team, while 25 % support both, a local and a foreign team.

Generally, interviewees rate sport as very important in their daily lives. In particular, young and male people are interested in sports.

The introduction to sports comes mainly from the family. Fathers, grandfathers, brothers and uncles guide most of the participants into the direction of their sport. Institutions and other socialization agents such as friends are less relevant, partially supporting the study of Funk & James (2001). Only 25 % follow their sport because of events (World Cup) or icons (Star Player). The analysis shows that the initial motivation is becoming less relevant over time for all interviewees. Nowadays, favorite teams motivate the fans followed by stars and the social atmosphere when consuming the sport. Similarly to Eccles & Harold (1991), gender differences are particularly striking - the impact of events and icons is stronger for female participants while socializing agents are more important for male participants.

Fans from the MENA region consume their sport mainly via TV and in the stadium. Less than half of the participants read mobile news and follow their team on social media, 75 % state that they regularly buy merchandising of their favorite clubs. Interestingly, several participants have favorite teams in every European league and buy merchandising articles for each team.

The impact of sport consumption on cognition and behavior differs between the participants. When consuming sport, they feel closer to the sport and feel connected to their players. Consuming sports makes all participants happy and increases their self-confidence. It also distracts them from other problems in their countries. Following their icons motivates some participants. While some participants state that consuming sport has no impact on their behavior, others describe that they want to play their sport right after consuming it. Most of the participants spend more money on sports and their life in general after consuming sport. Interestingly, a very high number of participants state that teasing other fans after a match is the most important reason for sport engagement. Thus, success plays a very important role. Most participants indicate that they are depressed, silent and angry when their favorite team loses.

According to a recent survey of Qatari citizens, 98 % think hosting the World Cup will develop a sport culture in Qatar (SESRI, 2015). Our study supports these results for other MENA countries. The attitude towards Qatar's focus on sport is very positive. Interviewees describe that they are "proud" and "jealous" and Qatar's activities will help the world to learn more about the MENA region. They hope that it will change many things in the attitude of MENA citizens, for instance improving gender equality. Only a minority criticizes that Qatar is acting "egoistic", having lots of money and a lack of vision, a low population and no supporters.

This study provides an insight into sport fan engagement in the MENA region, an area which is currently limited in terms of quantitative and qualitative analysis. By analyzing sport consumption and differences in its impact on cognition and behavior, we help marketers to better understand sports fans from the MENA region and to develop effective strategies. These findings are exploratory in nature and the authors are already engaged in further

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interviewing and expect to report the findings of these at a later date.

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