

Understanding Cultures and Societies through Soccer in Japan, America and Mexico

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Abstract

Soccer is the most popularly practiced sport throughout the world, even in countries with no soccer tradition such as the United States and Japan. It is a sport that has a strong and deep influence in the lives of people. Soccer can be a reflection of societies, which can be appreciated through the actions and behavior of people who either watch it or practice it. The purpose of this research was to study the perception of soccer in the eyes of people from Japan, Mexico and the United States and analyze how it mirrors their attitudes in life. In order to thoroughly understand why people behave or perceive soccer the way they do, a survey in three languages was distributed among people from these nations. The results support the idea that people's culture deeply influences their views on the sport and their perspectives toward other people.

Introduction

About 200 years ago, in England, soccer, which can be called the most popular sport was born. And it spreads throughout the world. Currently there are over 209 soccer associations, furthermore as of 2006, there are 265 million players registered around the globe in comparison with the 242 million back in 2000. It has become a tool that connects societies and cultures together; it can be said that through soccer one can catch a glimpse of what each society and culture is like in reality.

1 . Significance of the study

I have had the opportunity to live in three different countries, Mexico, the United States and Japan. During my time living in such countries, I could observe the behavior of their people. But not only that, through soccer, I was able to somehow analyze the attitudes and behavior of some of them. I became interested in the influence of soccer and society, I believed that Japanese, Mexican and American way of perceiving the sport differed from each other. Thus, through this research I intend to find out how the cultures of the three countries have been influenced by soccer as well as the way people think.

2 . Research Questions

1. In what ways does soccer impacts the lives of young people in these three nations?
2. What contributes to the popularity of soccer in these three countries and how are they different?

3 . Research Background

3.1. History of soccer

The history of soccer is a long one, it has its birthplace in England. From there it began to spread to countries such as Japan, Mexico and the United States. In Japan, the first official league was established in 1965. It was launched under the name of JSL. However, the JSL would disappear after the end of World War II. 30 years later the J-League was created. In Mexico, the origins of soccer date back to 1902. Nevertheless, two years ago the league changed its format and its name. It is currently known as Liga MX. Finally, the first American Football Association was

created in 1884, but the MLS did not launch until 1996. That is the American professional soccer league.

3.2. Soccer and Education

Through this research it can be seen that the link between soccer and education is an important one. However, in all three countries there are factors that affect both. In these violent times soccer represents the only way for children and young people to make their dreams come true (Pereztrejo, 2014). That was the opinion of a player and it reflects the way Mexican society feels for the most part. In the United States, in order to help kids succeed through soccer, the government and several sponsors donate money in the form of scholarships. Nevertheless, those scholarships seem to be difficult to get.

3.3. Soccer and society

Soccer can be reflection of these societies, even in the stadiums, problems such as racism, violence, gambling among others are present. In Mexico, violence is a big problem, and in order to stop such violence, the government opted for the option of creating soccer fields for the youngsters (Althaus, 2011). Violence is also present in the United States, where American people say they won't tolerate such behavior neither in their society nor their stadiums (Goff, 2008). In Japan they have adopted a strict "no tolerance" stand against these issues, and harsh punishments are imposed on those who goes against it (FIFA.com).

3.4. Nationalism and Patriotism through soccer

Sports are a tool that can help create an individual, group, and even national

identity (Sasada, 2006). Soccer, particularly, has the power to do so since through soccer international rivalries have appeared, such as Mexico vs USA, and Japan vs South Korea among others (Yasaki, 2003).

3.5. Soccer and the roles of men and women

It was previously mentioned that soccer was born in England. In the beginning, it seemed as if soccer was a game only for men, however by 1895 the first game between teams composed of female players was held. Seeing women kicking a ball is not a horrible sight, especially when they removed those skirts and manage to move, they can actually play soccer (FIFA.com, 2014). Recently, female players have achieved great success, particularly the winners of the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup, Nadeshiko Japan and the runners up the American team became famous. However, they still face a lot of problems, which is known as sexism. In Mexico it is said that many people see female players and point at them, claiming that soccer is still a sport only for men (Reinares, 2011).

4. The research

4.1. Demographics

65 university students participated in this questionnaire. The breakdown is as follows, 22 Japanese participants, 20 American participants and 23 Mexican participants.

4.2. Research Method

Data was collected online through Japanese, Spanish and English surveys.

5. Research findings

5.1. Research Question 1: In what ways does soccer impacts the lives of young people in these three nations?

In order to obtain an answer to this question, I had to formulate several others that served as supporting material. First I decided to inquire about the age at which the participants began practicing or watching soccer. The results reflected that Mexican and American people began practicing very early in their lives, on the other hand Japanese people seem to begin practicing after the age of 5.

Then they were asked the reason why they practice or watch soccer, to which a variety of options to pick from were provided. Interestingly, most people replied that they practice or watch only for fun, but there was a large portion of Mexican people that indicated they did so because of the excitement the sport generates. While American people stated that it is a good option to exercise.

Parents usually have some influence on the decisions we make or in our behavior. Hence, the participants were asked to what degree their parents influenced their decision to practice this sport. The answers were unexpected, especially in regards to the father and his influence. Most Mexican participants expressed that their fathers have had a strong influence in their decisions. However, people in Japan and the United States seem to be more independent when it comes to decide in these matters.

Once they had been asked about their parents influence, another interesting factor regarding their upbringing was discussed. We all have dreams when we are

kids, and we all want to become something, the question here was if any of them ever wanted to become a professional soccer player. Here the answers were even more interesting since Japanese participants said they never thought about it. As opposed to 43% of Mexicans and 35% of Americans who answer to this question.

Those that answer positively to the previous question, also specified their reason to become professional players. Most agreed that it would be because of love for the sport and nothing more. As for the factor that influences the most whether someone becomes professional or not, people in Japan and the United States answer that talent/skills was the most influential factor, as opposed to Mexican people who picked connections as their main answer.

When asked if soccer was a tool to keep people away from drugs and other addictions, 61% of people in Mexico and 68% in the United States answer “strongly agree” but Japanese people did not agree. Out of the 22 Japanese participants, only 14% agreed with this statement.

The influence/impact soccer has in the lives of young people seem to be strong, thus I wanted to know what their perception of the sport was, and what it represented for them. Somehow they were asked to define soccer in one word. The answers completely represent what I have seen and experienced in these three nations. For the Japanese people, soccer can be define as “fair play,” for American participants it can be define as “personal satisfaction,” finally for Mexican people it is perceived as a “business.” Completely different perceptions in all three nations.

5.1.1 Research Question 1 Summary

In the United States and Mexico, kids begin to practice soccer at an early age.

Besides, Americans think of soccer as an exercise rather than any other thing. The influence of the father is stronger in Mexico than in the other two countries. In Japan and the United States, the main factor to become a professional player would be the person's skills, but for Mexicans it is more about the connections that person has. It was surprising to see that Japanese people do not perceive soccer as a tool to keep people away from bad substances or the like. Finally, the perception people has of soccer reflects how they perceive their society, "Fair play" for the Japanese, "Personal satisfaction" for Americans and "Business" for Mexicans.

5.2. Research Question 2: What contributes to the popularity of soccer in these countries and how are they different?

The approach to answer the second research question was similar, but more questions were asked regarding society and its current situation in each country. First their nationalism and patriotism was tested, I wanted to see if it was stronger in one country than the others. So domestic and foreign teams were compared, trying to find out why they would watch or follow one rather than the other. The answers were divided, some chose domestic teams while others chose international clubs. The main difference however, is that people who picked domestic teams did so having a more personal feeling toward that team, while foreign teams were chosen mostly for their high level and talented players. But when it came to the World Cup, the answers were a bit different. People supports their national team for the most part, but some do not have a problem supporting other teams, such was the case of the Japanese participants who stated they sometimes cheer for a team other than their own representative.

On the other hand, Americans are less inclined to do that. When asked about their reasons, most participants from all three countries said they would support their national team for “nationalism,” “patriotism,” “pride” among others.

Then, another matter was discussed, the roles of men and women in the world of soccer. First, I wanted to know whether or not the participants believe female players were as competitive as their male counterparts. To my surprise, Mexican and American people agreed, but Japanese people did not, 32% of the Japanese participants said they disagreed. Nevertheless, when asked if they believe soccer was a sport only for men, a large majority of the participants from all 3 countries disagreed. Which means Japanese people do not see female players as equals to men on the field, but they do not oppose their inclusion in the sport.

Since immigration is a very controversial issue these days, I also wanted to see the participant’s perspective on this matter by asking them about foreign players and their influence in each league. The answers were divided, with some people saying they contribute positively to the growth of their league, while others opposed to the idea saying they take away spots that could be taken by local players, especially in Mexico and the United States.

Societies have many other problems, such as racism, violence, sexism and gambling, among many others. I wanted to get the opinions of participants in regards of the frequency with which these problems are seen in their soccer leagues thinking that that the stadiums are a reflection of what can be seen in the streets of such nations.

The findings showed that racism is a big problem in the United States, while violence is a big one in Mexico. Japan does not seem to suffer from them as

frequently but it is not exempt. As for sexism, it is more often seen in America, while gambling is a bigger problem in Mexico, again Japan has its share of these problems although to a lesser degree.

5.2.1. Research Question 2 Summary

During the World Cup, people from all three nations strongly support their national representatives. Furthermore, it can be seen that female's soccer is necessary for the advancement of the sport. Although Japanese people still perceive women as less talented than men. According to the answers of American participants, racism seems to be a common occurrence in their nation, while violence is just as common in Mexican stadiums. Japanese people seem to have a better attitude toward foreigners than Mexican and Americans. Finally, in regards to the aforementioned issues, racism and sexism are common in the United States, while violence and gambling are common in Mexico, with Japan experiencing some of each once in a while.

6. Conclusion

The influence of the father on Japanese kids does not seem to be as strong. On the other hand, the paternal figure in Mexican society seems to have a strong influence on children. Furthermore, because of the corruption within the Mexican government, many people think that skills are not enough to make it into the world of soccer, but instead connections are needed. It is a problem that is not prevalent in either Japan or the U.S. In Mexico and the United States soccer is perceived as a possible solution to the problem of drug addiction and others. "Personal satisfaction" reflects the individualistic way of thinking in the United States. "Fair play"

represent an ideal to which Japanese society is aiming, one where good conduct is prevalent everywhere. Unfortunately, problems such as racism, violence, sexism and gambling have not disappear and they do not seem to be going away soon.

7. Limitations of the study and future study

The study was conducted among university students only, which limits the variety of results, and generalizing is never possible or a good thing. Conducting the survey among another age group would definitely provide me with a more in-depth analysis and a more insightful view at each society.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my advisors, Dr. Shigeko Sekine and Dr. Yoshiko Saito-Abbott because of all the help and guidance they provided me with. I also want to thank my family, friends and classmates for their support. Without your help it would not have been possible for me to graduate. Sincerely, thank you all!

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