

AI-Enabled Global Qualitative Research on Sports Fandom: The Future is Now



November 2024



sports poll
30 years of intelligence

The Challenge

To support the global expansion of our [Sports Poll tracking study](#), (30 years of syndicated US research on sports) the SSRS sports team was interested in conducting qualitative research to better understand what sports fandom means to people around the world, what opportunities there are for leagues to expand into new markets, and how leagues can expand fan bases within current core markets. We were particularly interested in hearing from sports fans who follow international leagues, teams, or players based outside of their country, to understand how they found out about the sport, what attracted them to it, and what it means to be a fan of a non-domestic league or team.

We were seeking a methodology that would allow us to easily gather a large amount of contextual stories from sports fans around the world. We wanted to use a centralized team of qualitative researchers rather than having to identify and train local moderators, which would have been time-consuming, costly, and might have led to a diffused understanding of our research goals. In addition to gathering written stories, we sought to capture participants' own voices through video recordings to help us encapsulate their enthusiasm as fans.

The Solution

To address this research need, SSRS conducted a series of online bulletin boards (OBB) with 300 participants from 15 countries, including Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Ghana, Japan, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, and UK. The main advantage of conducting this research using OBBs was that it allowed participants to log on at any time that was convenient for them and provided opportunities to use creative activities that would not be possible in a live interview. Each board was open for three days and participants were asked to log on each day to complete a range of activities designed to understand their fan behaviors, including uploading self-reflection videos about what it means to be a sports fan. SSRS researchers reviewed each participant's answers and asked follow-up probes to better understand fan behaviors and perspectives.

Our English-speaking team was able to moderate the sessions with participants in eight different languages, using a commercially-available platform that had an integrated AI-supported

SSRS recently conducted a novel qualitative study with sports fans in 15 countries and 8 languages to understand what it means to be a sports fan in different cultures and communities.

translation tool. This meant that participants could see and respond to the activities in their own language, but the moderator could read the responses and pose follow-up questions in English and have them automatically translated into the participant's native language. This allowed for seamless communication and understanding with a global audience.

The Findings

Sports Fandom

A number of common themes arose about what it means to be a sports fan around the world, including:

Family traditions of following a sport or league

My father is the person who made me love the club. He is a big fan Olympique de Marseille and since I was little, he talked to me about the history of the club, the great players, all that. (French male)

A way to socialize and spend time with friends

I like to get a group of friends together and watch games on the TV. It's always better to watch and share these moments with other people. We might go to a different house or even go out to watch these games at social locations. (British male)

A way of expressing local or national pride

Nelson Mandela was the president at that time and raised the trophy with our team. So it has a matter of cultural significance as well as political significance. For a lot of people, wearing green & gold means a significant amount. (South African female)

Playing the sport themselves or having children who play the sport

When I was 12 years old, I played basketball. I liked the sport and I trained there and that's when my interest began. (Mexican male)

Attending games, having game-day traditions, or wearing sports gear

As a fan of the Toronto Maple Leafs, I love our game-day rituals such as watching matches with friends and family. Whether it's attending live games, hosting watch parties, or discussing strategies and highlights, these activities enhance the overall experience. (Canadian female)

Being part of a fan community

Above all, you can tell that the Frankfurt fan community is really very euphoric, they are always really involved...I think that's what makes this fan cohesion. (German female)

Supporting a team whether they win or lose

I support the Mexican team, win or lose, because that's what being a fan is about, being in the worst and best moments. (Mexican female)

International Sports Fandom

An important part of this study was to understand opportunities and challenges for sports leagues to expand their fan base to both established and emerging markets around the world. Participants were asked to describe any international sports, leagues, teams or athletes that they follow, and how they came to be fans of those non-domestic sports. Key paths to fandom include:

Attending sporting events while traveling or living abroad

I like watching American football because I played the sport in high school when I was living in the United States. (Spanish male)

Following players from their home country who play in the league

NBA games have actually become popular in China very early. It was probably after Jordan came to China from Qiaojiao and Yao Ming promoted the NBA movement in China. (Chinese male)

Influences of family members' passion for the sport

My dad is a huge Messi fan so I also grew fond of him and although Messi changed teams, my love for Barca never changed. (South African Female)

Awareness of specific athletes or teams through the media or social media

I started with Real Madrid on Al Jazeera Sports Channels. It has become my passion since that period, and after that I started following all other leagues and sports through social media and the Internet in general. (Egyptian male)

Following high-profile events like the Olympics, the World Cup or the Superbowl.

I think the Superbowl is one of the moments in which Mexicans also attend a lot to watch this game and sometimes not so much because of the games, but because of who is at halftime... (Mexican female)

Barriers to International Sports Fandom

Participants also described several barriers to being a fan of non-domestic sports, including:

Time zones, if live games are aired in middle of the night

The biggest barrier to expanding interest in Major League Baseball in my town is that it's difficult to watch games on-time due to the time difference. (Japanese male)

Challenges to access, such as paywalls for watching the sport on TV, finding bars that air games, bandwidth issues to watch online

You can only access the NFL through paid cable TV or satellite TV. And this one is a big barrier because of the cost involved in watching the NFL. (Ghanaian male)

High cost of tickets or travel costs to attend live games

Watching international games live in the stadium is very expensive. (German male)

Unfamiliarity with the rules of the sport

Ninety percent of people may not even know what American football itself, the sport, because I believe that culture matters a lot in this issue of creating this barrier. (Brazilian female)

Lack of a local community of fans

I don't have anyone I know who follows basketball enough to share it. (Spanish female)

A strong preference for local sports reduces interest in international sports

Living in England, you are spoilt for choice when it comes to sport, and we have a lot of high performing teams, athletes & sports in our own country. (British male)

Opportunities for International Sports Fandom

When asked about opportunities for American leagues such as the NFL, NBA, or MLB to expand in their communities, participants offered a number of actionable suggestions.

Community engagement, such as investing in grassroots programs to teach the sport to youth, building playing fields for the sport, and hosting live games

My advice would be to foster community engagement, sponsor local tournaments, collaborate with schools and ensure accessibility. (British male)

Improving media exposure, social media engagement, and removing paywalls for access to television coverage

I don't think you can always watch regular baseball games freely. I think that what's getting in the way of increasing people's interest in MLB in my city is that it's not being broadcast on TV. We should give more media coverage to this sport. I think the shortest route is to have it broadcast on TV. (Japanese male)

Hosting exhibition games, and improving access to watch the sport through local venues

The advice I would give to the NBA is to play 12 games here in Germany, for example, and simply come here with the teams. This is how fan communities can easily emerge. So just like the NFL did now in Frankfurt, the NBA could also do that in Frankfurt or in other cities in Germany. (German male)

Leveraging high-profile athletes and local players who play in American leagues as connection points

If there are Ghanaian players within the NFL, that would definitely be helpful because that's empowering. I mean, that's how Premier League took off because there are a lot of Ghanaian players in different European teams. So people started following and it became aspirational, and people could talk about it as water cooler stuff. (Ghanaian male)

Implications

This innovative qualitative study helped us to discover important insights into the diversity of sports fandom on a global scale, highlighting both common and unique pathways to becoming a fan and the meaningful connections that fans form with sports across cultural and national boundaries.

By using online bulletin boards with built-in AI translation support, we were able to capture the experiences and stories directly from sports fans across 15 countries, allowing us to explore rich dimensions of sports fandom.

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Our findings highlight both opportunities and challenges in engaging with international fans who support leagues, teams, and players from outside their home countries. Our findings can help guide strategic decisions for global sports leagues as they look to expand their fan bases and deepen engagement in both established and emerging markets.

Finally, this methodology also demonstrates an effective model for global qualitative research that can be applied in future studies, offering a scalable, centralized approach to interacting with participants in their own voices across the world.



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