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The FIFA World Cup: Analyses and Interpretations of the World's Biggest Sporting Spectacle

Clifford J. Shultz

Loyola University Chicago, cshultz@luc.edu

Rodrigo Castilhos

Unisinos

Andres Alberto Barrios Fajardo

University of the Andes


Bruno Grbac

University of Rijeka

Andreas Chatzidakis

Royal Holloway, University of London

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Authors

Clifford J. Shultz, Rodrigo Castilhos, Andres Alberto Barrios Fajardo, Bruno Grbac, Andreas Chatzidakis, Alexander Nill, and Almir Pešek

Globalization, Developing Markets & Marketing Systems, Session III

The FIFA World Cup: Analyses and Interpretations of the World's Biggest Sporting Spectacle

Clifford J. Shultz, II, Loyola University Chicago, USA

Rodrigo Castilhos, Unisinos, Brazil

Andres Alberto Barrios Fajardo, University of the Andes, Colombia

Bruno Grbac, University of Rijeka, Croatia

Andreas Chatzidakis, Royal Holloway, University of London, UK

Alexander Nill, University of Nevada, USA

Almir Peštek, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Overview

This special session assembles scholars from various countries with keen interests in the marketing and societal dynamics of the world's most popular sporting spectacle, the FIFA World Cup. It builds on a stream of research in, for example, ethology (e.g., Morris 1981) economics (e.g., Kuper and Szymanski 2014) consumer behavior (e.g., Shultz 1998; Tavassoli, Shultz and Fitzimons 1995), marketing (e.g., Shultz et al. 2010) and macromarketing (Shultz and Burgess 2011) that explores the systemic complexities of this enormous, global extravaganza and the extent to which it benefits and/or harms myriad players, fans, local and global consumers, companies, governments, societies and the environment.

The FIFA World Cup is an almost incalculably valuable, powerful and influential brand/organization/event, protected by a trademark owned by the Fédération Internationale de Football (Soccer) Association (i.e., FIFA) and Swiss law. FIFA was founded in 1904 and is based in Zurich. It has 209 member associations representing 209 nations (FIFA 2015; Shultz 2011). Sepp Blatter serves as president. Mr. Blatter can make or humble the most powerful politicians and businesspersons. Companies pay hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollars to be official partners and sponsors, governments go to remarkable lengths courting FIFA with hopes – and often dubious instruments – that their country will be “the chosen one” to serve as host for the final matches. In 2014, that country was Brazil (see also Crouch and Corbett 2014).

If macromarketing explores the interactions among markets, marketing and society, then FIFA and its World Cup offer plentiful opportunities for research. This quadrennial spectacle is a global and systems-wide sporting bacchanal of media, marketing, policy and consumption in a hyper-real fantasy of entertainment, actual and vicarious achievement, tribal rituals and nationalism (cf. Morris; 1981 Shultz 1998; Buford 1993). During the final round of the tournament, Earth becomes “Planet Football,” as billions of consumers attend to soccer in stadia and/or via television, fan zones, pubs, social media, newspapers, magazines, streaming, radio, and conversations.

Consider the global reach and engagement for World Cup 2014. National teams from more than two hundred countries played a series of elimination matches over a span of two years, with the objective to qualify for the final round of 32 teams, which then gathered in Brazil to play a month-long tournament culminating in a champion. Germany incidentally was crowned champion, defeating hosts Brazil in the semi-finals and then Argentina in the championship match. Along the way, *billions* of people organized their lives around these matches; among the people and institutions affected: soccer players, grounds-keepers, spectators, pub-crawlers, diners, gamblers, soldiers, contractors, policy makers, hotels and airlines, sporting goods manufactures, beverage manufactures, distributors, all manner of service providers, including of course purveyors of the world's oldest profession. Indeed, one is hard-pressed to find someone or something not affected by the FIFA World Cup, albeit some more than others. Note but one posting following the opening match, June 12th, in Sao Paolo:

From slums to space, half the world's population watches the WC: From the stadium in Sao Paulo to sofas in Germany, from a pub in Nairobi to a cafe in Miami, from a Rio slum to outer space, nearly half the world's population was expected to tune in to the World Cup, soccer's premier event which kicked off Thursday in Brazil.

Even football-loving Pope Francis got a touch of World Cup fever. He sent a video message on Brazilian television before the match, saying the world's most popular sport can promote peace and solidarity. <http://www.myfoxphilly.com/story/25768080/from-slums-to-space-world-tunes-in-to-world-cup> (Associated Press 2014)

Clearly, there is much to like about the FIFA World Cup, which is why governments, corporations, consumers and even the Holy Father gravitate toward it. As suggested above, the tournament elicits the best in humanity: play, community, respect, cooperation, altruism, optimism, compassion, joy and even euphoria, and potentially, as the Holy Father urged, peace and solidarity. Unfortunately, it also spurs some of the worst: greed, corruption, exploitation, bullying, hubris, disenfranchisement, xenophobia, and sometimes violence. Soccer's World Cup is a reflection of sorts, for the human condition (see also Foer 2004; Goldblatt 2006; Kuper 2006; Zirin 2014).

Such a big event means big money and in fact vast sums are spent on infrastructure, marketing, salaries, equipment, travel, and so forth, which provide jobs, services and other benefits in the host country and around the world. The demand for the FIFA World Cup was and is huge, as evidenced by numerous measures and the fact that the next two Cups already are scheduled to be played in Russia and Qatar, in 2018 and 2022, respectively. *Homo Marketus* and *Homo Consumerus* love the FIFA World Cup, yet with success and excess should come thoughtful and concerned questions. Might all this time, effort and money be better allocated elsewhere? Perhaps schools and hospitals, rather than stadia and fan zones, should have been built. Some might counter that the investment and media attention focused on the World Cup spurred prosocial endeavors before, during and following the tournament. Those still languishing in poverty might disagree, but then poor countries and individuals are among the biggest fans. Is national pride in one's team a healthy reaction or does it mask a darker and more ominous xenophobia? Does the tournament reveal innocent sporting joy or bread and circus? Is FIFA a band of heavy-handed thugs or stewards of the "beautiful game"? Or is FIFA inevitably both? Are any benefits sustained and do the collective activities of the FIFA World Cup hinder or

contribute to sustainability? What about corruption and pervasive allegations related thereto? Who ultimately profits and benefits from what is arguably the most popular event on the planet, on what measures and for how long? Such questions and innumerable others hint at the systemic complexity – and the inherent macromarketing issues -- attached to the FIFA World Cup and explored by macromarketing scholars in this session.

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