Social Media Fan Engagement in Women's Professional Sport: A Longitudinal Analysis of Social Media Activity in the WNBA

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Problem and Purpose
Historically, there has been an underrepresentation of women’s professional sport in traditional media forms (Vann, 2014). However, women’s professional sport remains a viable product, with an increasing number of teams and leagues worldwide. An issue that persists with this growth is the ability to build and maintain relationships with fans. To do so, many professional sports teams have taken to social media, to engage in those relationship marketing activities. This is especially the case given the social climate of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mastromartino et al., 2020). However, little is known about the relationship marketing activities by women’s professional sport on social media, particularly in a longitudinal context. Therefore, the purpose of this project was to uncover the extent to which women’s professional sport teams are harnessing social media to connect with consumers and grow their base.

Literature Review
We draw on the work of Abeza (2017) and Achen (2018), specifically their advances in relationship marketing through social media in a professional sport context. Vann’s (2014) work will also be used to understand the historical underrepresentation of women’s professional sport and how data analysis of social media consumer engagement can provide insights to how the gap can be narrowed between men’s and women’s professional sport. We also drew on the work of Naraine et al. (2019), using their framework of social media fan engagement metrics and consumer platform usage.

Methodology
Data consisted of social media posts made by each Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) team from 2017-2019. All data were collected via MVPindex, a social media analytics site. Using a social media analytical approach (Filo et al., 2014) akin to, each team’s Facebook, Instagram and Twitter posts were analyzed for their impressions and engagements (i.e., likes, comments, and shares). Subsequently, data were aggregated by time and by month, and were analyzed using preliminary quantitative means to highlight trends and optimal time periods. While this analysis is ongoing, preliminary findings will be reported at the NASSM conference.

Results
A cursory overview of the findings found several results between in- and off-season social activity for WNBA teams. First, there is an overall higher activity level and rate of engagement rate the in-season months of May to October. Second, there is an overall higher average of consumer engagement on social media throughout the in-season than the off-season. However, it is interesting that the Association average of off-season impressions was larger than in-season.

Discussion, Conclusions & Contributions
This research highlights the deficient off-season activity by WNBA teams despite impressions being higher in those periods than in-season. Naturally, women’s sport fans want to comment on in-season play, but there are groups also desiring content with which to engage, emphasized by this off-season sentiment. Therefore, this research highlights that WBNA managers should reconsider their social strategies as they seek to build new or ongoing connections with fans through more effective strategies based upon temporal patterns.