



Impact of spectator motivation on long-term sustainability for women's basketball league

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Abstract

As the league prepares for its 20th season, the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) has experienced some highs and some lows. The purpose of this study was to understand spectator motivation and to assess new strategies that the league could use to better improve the overall product of the game itself. How can the WNBA expand its fan base to help generate enough revenue that can ensure the league can support itself financially? In order to better understand people's attitudes towards the WNBA, we conducted an online survey that we then submitted on social media for people to express their thoughts on what they liked about the league and what they would like to see implemented in the future. The results from our surveys (N=93) showed that the majority of our participants were satisfied with the overall product the WNBA has to offer (affordability and family-oriented atmosphere), yet, it still lacked a certain "excitement" factor that would make the participant want to personally watch or attend a game. We concluded that in order for the league to truly flourish and gain the recognition and financial success it deserves, league executives should consider incorporating new, innovative ideas that can breathe new life into the league for the next 20 years.

Keywords: Spectator; motives; motivation; sustainability.

1. Introduction

For the past 19 years, the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) has been a trailblazing beacon of "girl power" for the advocating of gender equity in the sports industry. When the league was approved by the NBA Board of Governors in April of 1996, the slogan "We Got Next" assured basketball fans that there would be more action during the summer months that the NBA was in offseason. The league that started with the "Original 8", which included New York Liberty, Los Angeles Sparks, Orlando Miracle, Cleveland Rockers, Miami Sol, Utah Jazz, Charlotte Sting and Houston Comets saw a lot of highs and lows. Within the first 10 years, four of the

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originals folded and/or relocated due to lack of investment interest, including the 3-time WNBA championship franchise Houston Comets. With the folding of these teams, the league was able to bring in some expansion teams in different NBA markets to keep with the brand extension identity of the league. Despite some of these financial issues, the WNBA is still the longest-running women's professional sports league in history. It is highly praised for their community involvement and the amount of role model type of players that it produces for young girls aspiring to play professional basketball.

The WNBA's problems are fairly obvious: It does not make enough revenue to support itself as a league. The real question is what is holding the league back from reaching its full potential? Besides the obvious gender bias that comes with women's sports, there has to be more than the "I don't want to watch women play sports" point of view. The league and women's basketball, in general, has been represented as synonymous with "lesbian" athletes or athletes that aren't very feminine; this could deter some people away. Also, more college players are choosing to forgo the WNBA in order to make more money overseas. All of these things lead to the biggest problem the league faces which is low attendance.

The purpose of this research is to identify the motivations consumers associate with WNBA. Further, this study intended to determine the relationship between these motivations and fan support of WNBA. A bettering understanding of the concerns for the league and consumers' characteristics will assist sport marketers to generate new strategies to bring in more fans and ultimately more revenue that can help the league to achieve financial independence from the NBA. The WNBA already has a wonderful product to offer its loyal fan base, but as much as they do not want to become something that they are not, the league must take into consideration that sports fans need more than just cost-effective, family entertainment to keep its' interest; fans want something to make them come back for more.

Each of the following four mainstream sports, the National Basketball Association, National Football League, Major League Baseball and the National Hockey League all have this "x-factor" that fans look forward to, even if they are watching two team who are not performing well. In the NBA, fans want to see the dunks, in the NFL, fans want to see the hits/tackles being made, in MLB, fans want to see home runs hit over the fence, and in the NHL, fans want to see fights occur. When it comes to the WNBA, the league does not necessarily have any x-factor. Moreover, little marketing research is done within women's sports; as a result, often women's teams are marketed in the same manner as men's teams despite spectators of men's sports and spectators of women's sports differ from one another (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002). This research can help to examine what fans want to see and giving the fans what they want could be the key to keeping the league afloat.

To help guide these purposes, two research questions were developed: we first want to ask why the WNBA does not receive the same attention or support from not only sports fans, but the media, as well. Next, we ask what the league can do to create a more loyal fan base and to generate more revenue. These questions go hand-in-hand with asking fans what they like and do not like about the league and what they want to see changed.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 WNBA as a niche sport

According to Miloch & Lambrecht (2006), a niche sport is identified as sports that are not mainstream and do not appeal to a mass audience; each of these products appeals to smaller, more focused audiences. There are four categories of niche sports: minor league sports (Minor League

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Baseball & NBA D-League), indoor alternatives to traditional outdoor sports (Arena Football League), emerging sports that represent the top level of their sports but doesn't receive same recognition as mainstream (Major League Soccer & Professional Bull Riding) and gender specific leagues (WNBA and LPGA). These sports properties, such as the WNBA face unique challenges that mainstream sports do not have to deal with, like not having the luxury of daily news coverage in the national market, as well as, their local market. As a result of this lack of exposure, niche sports must create and sustain their own publicity, market share and fan base in order to survive (Greenhalgh, Simmons, Hambrick & Greenwell, 2011).

In order to create an effective marketing strategy, niche sports properties should be focused on developing a competitive advantage through product differentiation. Pan and Baker (1999) expand on this by explaining that an understanding of product differentiation would allow for the creation and implementation of strategies that are best able to meet attributes consumers/fans associate with a given sport. Marketers should understand what makes their sport product unique and how they can differentiate their product from other sports.

Niche sports can provide fans with an experience that is not currently supplied by many mainstream sports properties. Niche sport marketers that can promote these unique attributes will be more successful in attracting and retaining fans. With women's sports, researchers found that they attract fans based on the provision of role models, perception of providing opportunity for women and providing wholesome family entertainment at a reasonable price. Not only should the WNBA capitalize on this product, but they should try to identify alternative means to reach more potential customers/fans (Greenhalgh, et. al., 2011).

2.2 Losing players to international market

It is no secret that the WNBA player salaries are way below the perception of what a "professional" athlete should make. People contribute this to the short season that they play (34 games), but there is more to it than that. The league average salary for a WNBA player in 2012 was \$72,000; the rookie minimum was just above \$35,000 and players with three or more years of experience earn at least \$51,000 with the top players on each team earning just above \$100,000 (Kaba, 2012). Ironically, the average salary of WNBA is the highest among women's professional sports in the US. Max salary for 2014 season for National Women's professional Soccer League (NWSL) is only \$30,000 (A Look at Male and Female Professional Athlete Salaries, 2014). The WNBA's monetary constraints have created a revolving door of American and international players deciding where or if they will play in the league based on personal and financial reasons.

Most recently, Phoenix Mercury superstar, Diana Taurasi, sat out the entire 2015 season at the request of her Russian team, known as the UMMC Ekaterinburg; and they definitely made it worth her while, reportedly paying her \$1.5 million in tax free money. This must have been a blow to the WNBA, as one of their stars has made a decision that many others may soon follow. The new Collective Bargaining Agreement that passed in 2014 contains a provision in which players can be fined if they miss games; this decision according to some agents and the players' union could force WNBA players to choose between playing overseas or in their league. Players can be fined up to 20 percent of their salary if they miss games while playing in a professional league overseas. Some people, like Pam Wheeler, have said that there is a chance some players may opt to play overseas and not in the WNBA because of this new fine structure (Mullen, 2014).

It is doubtful that the WNBA will ever offer enough money to close the door on players seeking overseas contracts; in 2014, only 5 out of the 12 teams generated a profit. Unless players are making enough money from endorsements such as Chicago Sky's Elena Delle Donne and Dallas Wings' Skylar Diggins, the WNBA just can't keep up with the pay that international professional teams can

offer, unless the WNBA can start to generate more revenue to go towards raising salaries (Evans, 2015).

2.3 Representation of female athletes

Scholars have largely argued that the lack of exposure for women's sports impedes its ability to gain a faithful audience. They also argue that sports are a place where gender roles are created, affirmed and contested based on social context. Journalists often frame female athletes in ways that emphasize their femininity as opposed to their athleticism. Butterworth (2008) contends that women are celebrated as athletic exemplars most commonly when they participate in "sex appropriate" sports, such as skating or gymnastics. This makes it not only harder for women to be accepted as athletes, but women who fall outside feminine expectations struggle to be accurately represented. Messener, Duncan and Cooky (2003) argue that female athletes who are not represented as sexually appealing often get framed as a joke in the media. Consequently, this mindset diminishes the importance of the women's game. Over the past decade, we have seen an increase in the quality of women's collegiate basketball, but national media attention tends to stop tacking players once they reach the professional rank. The fact that the women's game is not respected is indicative of this underlying gender bias problem (LaVelle, 2014).

2.4 Female Spectator Motivation for Women's Sports

Scholars have reported that some different motivation exist for women's sports. According to Funk, Ridinger, and Moorman (2003). the provisions of role models, opportunity for women, and family entertainment with a reasonable cost are the leading motivation to attract fans to women's sports. Comparing to male fans, Wann, Grieve, Zapalac, and Pease (2008) found that female fans had higher motivation for family but lower motivations for eustress, self-esteem, entertainment, and aesthetics. These differences could be due to the significant different than men's professional sports with respect to popularity, degree of physical contact, game attractiveness, and free offerings and in-game entertainment (Ferreira & Armstrong, 2004). While sport games/leagues have been compared or contrasted based on various product's environmental factors and fan's motives, there is still lack of empirical research about categories of dependent variables that potentially have a great impact on significant increase of interests for women's basketball league. Since little is known about the "x-factor" fans use to differentiate the WNBA from other major male sports, fans' attendance motivations clearly indicate what factors are appealing or what factors are not appealing to attend/watch to the WNBA. Furthermore, this study seeks to determine how the WNBA improves in order to gain more support from fans and spectators.

3. Methods

3.1 Research design

For this research, we chose to utilize a survey questionnaire design to gather information on participants' opinions and feelings towards the WNBA. The questions ranged from demographics to questions based on how important certain factors were to attending WNBA games. We created the questionnaire using the survey generator website SurveyNuts.com. On this site, we were able to create and edit the format, order, answer types and background theme for the survey; from there, a link to the final product was created and could be sent out to all participants.

3.2 Participants

For this study, participants were not selected at random; they were composed of contacts that were known to my partner and me. We sent out the link to our survey through text messaging, email, and social media. Together, we were able to gather ninety-three (93) total participants that completed the survey within a two-week period. Of the 93 participants, we had more females (57) than males (36). Our age ranges were divided into groups of 4 year intervals, except for our youngest age group (18-24) and our oldest age group (55 and older). Other demographics that we took into account was ethnicity; the majority of our participants were from African American descent.

3.3 Analysis

Through the SurveyNuts.com website, they were able to analyze all of the data from each of the 93 voter and record all of the statistics associated with each question. This made it easy to report data and table figures that were made through Microsoft Word table creator; these tables are found in the appendix section of this report.

4. Results and Findings

After evaluating the results of the questionnaires, we received an overall positive consensus of how people perceived the WNBA, yet it still didn't translate into people actually wanting to watch the games. Of course, the main reasoning that participants stated for lack of viewership was due to lack of excitement and that it was much slower than the NBA, with few fast breaks; and occasionally when there were fast breaks they resulted in some missed layups. These are all valid points in which we wanted to expand on this excitement factor and make certain suggestions to see if people would be willing to watch if certain changes were to be made. The following sections will break down the results we got from our questionnaire.

4.1 Demographics

Table 1

Demographics	Total (out of 93)	%	
Gender	Female	57	61,3
	Male	36	38,7
Age	18-24	12	12,9
	25-40	57	61,3
	41-55	17	18,3
	55+	7	7,5
Ethnicity	Caucasian	16	17,2
	African American	69	74,2
	Hispanic	4	4,3
	Native American	1	1,1
	Other/Mixed	3	3,2

We had a wide range of participants in regards to age and ethnicity. In Table 1, we break down the percentage of participants' ages. Our range was from 18 years of age to 55 and older and surprisingly, we had representatives in each of these groups, with the highest group percentage

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being the 25-29 range (33.33%). Table 1.2 shows the ethnic breakdown, in which the majority of our participants coming from an African American background (64.29%).

4.2 Important factors for attendance

Table 2:

	Mean (out of 5)	Std. Deviation
Entertainment	2,8929	1,3968
Game Time	3,2143	1,31535
Record	3,7143	1,60686
Promotions	2,6429	1,47106

For this set of questions, we asked participants to choose on a scale of 1 to 5 how important certain factors were to their decision on whether or not to attend a live WNBA game. These questions are significant to analyze the WNBA's marketing strategy that is already in place and well it was working. In table 2, the mean (average) of each of these factors were showcased. The median is 3.0, so if the mean was below 3 then it wasn't as important to the participants and if it was above 3 then participants did perceive these factors to be important in their decision. Only team records (success) and game time (schedule) received over 3.0 average which means that if a team is good and if the game time fits their schedule, participants would attend a game. In-game entertainment and promotions were just below 3.0 which means that it is not as important to participants but they do take these factors into consideration.

4.3 Women's basketball fans

Table 3

	Bball Fan	Watched/Attended Women's Bball Game	How often do you watch WNBA on TV?	% of participants
Yes	70,77	64,62	Never	32,14
No	29,23	35,38	Sometimes	53,57
			Always	14,29

The next few questions asked whether participants were fans of the game of basketball and how often they watched or attended women's basketball games with the data being explained in Table 3.1. The question about being a fan of basketball was significant because for the 29.29% that stated they were not fans of the game of basketball helped to understand why they aren't motivated to watch because they don't prefer the sport at all, whether men's or women's basketball.

The next question asked whether participants had ever attended a women's basketball game, whether collegiate or professional; we expanded this question to include collegiate level due to the fact that there are only 12 WNBA teams so participants may not be located near a professional team. This question was to get an idea of whether participants have given women's basketball a shot. The majority of participants (64.62%) stated that they had attended or watched a live women's basketball game.

The last question in this section asked how often participants watched WNBA games on television. This was significant because the results showed how the media's coverage, or lack thereof, affected their willingness to watch. According to Table 3.1, 53.57% of participants watch the WNBA occasionally, depending on who is playing. During the comments section, a lot of participants stated that they would like to watch more games but they never knew when games were being broadcast due to lack of media fanfare.

4.4 Suggestions for improvement

Table 4

	% of participants
Lower Goal Height	35,87
Uniforms	27,17
Season	15,05
More Teams	32,61
Other	32,61

The last question we asked was for participants to choose each of the suggestions they would like to see the league implement in order to make them want to watch more games. After having a discussion with a fellow colleague, we came up with four suggestions that we felt participants would agree: lowering the goal post 6 inches to allow for more players to be able to dunk, which would in return would bring more excitement, changing the uniforms and making them more form-fitting, change the season of play to coincide with the NBA season instead of summertime, and creating more teams in markets where women's college basketball is more prevalent. Finally, we gave the participants a chance to make their own suggestions. Table 4.1 recorded the percentage of votes for each, with lowering the goal height receiving 35.87% and adding more teams having 32.61%. From the suggestions we received, participants voiced their opinion of more marketing, advertising and publicity being the biggest factor that needed to be addressed.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The purpose of this research was to understand spectator motivation when it comes to the WNBA and to assess what the league could do to better improve the excitement of the game itself in order to garner more fans and ultimately generate more revenue in hopes that the league could become financially independent to support itself. Through the survey results, we can see that most of the fans are satisfied with the overall product that the WNBA produces, but they also realize that it could stand for more excitement during the game. The WNBA has always been, and will continue to be a league which young female basketball players can aspire to reach this level in their basketball careers. But we have also discussed how financially, it may not support these women as they would imagine. The WNBA can become an exciting league that can compete with the "boys" like it was intended to when it was established in 1996. Yet, in order for this league to truly flourish and gain the recognition and financial success it deserves, the executives at the league office need to understand that stepping out of the normal "comfort zone" of the women's game and incorporating more innovative ideas could be the key to breathing new life into this league. Based on the results we received from Table 4.1, it is evident that most participants did want to see the goal post lowered to allow for more players to dunk and possibly create more exciting fast breaks. Who wouldn't want to see Diana Taurasi throw an alley-oop to Britney Griner for a two-hand jam!? This height adjustment is not to demean the women's game, but rather to help fully showcase the true athleticism of the athletes.

There were some limitations with this research. The majority of participants were located in a city or state that was not near a WNBA team so some of the questions about attendance were more hypothetical. In addition, limited sample size and a convenient sampling may not represent the general perceptions regarding the WNBA. For future research, we would conduct interviews and give questionnaires to people who live in specific cities and markets where a WNBA team is located so that we can get their opinions on why they choose to attend WNBA games. Through this extra

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research, hopefully we can utilize both of these points of views (WNBA fans and non-WNBA fans) and come up with an effective marketing strategy for the league that will not only keep their loyal fans satisfied but will make new fans out of skeptics.

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