Why Women Don't Watch Women's Sport: A Qualitative Analysis

Annemarie Farrell, Ithaca College

Sport consumption can be judged by multiple criteria spanning various economic sectors. One key aspect of sport consumption is spectator attendance. While sport represents a significant industry, the nation's obsession with it can best be exemplified by stadiums and arenas filled with screaming fans. Sport spectating and coverage can be seen as relating a value to a particular sport or a particular gender (Tuggle and Owen, 1999; Messner, Duncan and Jensen, 2001).

The passage of Title IX ushered in a more inclusive era of sport. A new generation of women became committed to participating in and consuming sport with the same devotion as their brothers and fathers. New female professional sporting leagues sprouted up alongside millions more high school female athletes. While some have had short-lived success like the Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA) and American Basketball League (ABL), a handful, including the Women's National Basketball League (WNBA), has survived its initial years and will share the spotlight with other female leagues such as roller derby, softball and football.

Much of the prevailing images of the 1999 Women's Soccer World Cup final were young girls in ponytails, faces painted red, white and blue, wearing the jersey of their hero, Mia Hamm, cheering on the National team in a packed Rose Bowl. While the World Cup may have served as the pinnacle of spectatorship of women's team sport, the current snapshot of spectatorship of women's sport tells a different story. While women are increasingly becoming vested fans of men's football, baseball, basketball and NASCAR, the perceived barriers, both psychological and practical, to watching women's sports still appear formidable for many female fans (Yerak, 2000). Women are flocking to men's sports while women's sports suffer from lack of viewership (Nascar Brand Study, 2002; Sports Business Journal, Jan 15-21, 2001, Women Sports Foundation, 2001).

The purpose of this study was to investigate female consumption of women's sport through the voices and perspectives of female fans of men's basketball who do not attend women's events. The focus of this investigation sought an understanding of how their attitudes and disinterest may be related to gendered media portrayals, socialization and distinct spectator motives. However, given sporting leagues' focus on capturing the female spectator (Sandomir, 2006), it was deemed important to understand female fans of men's sports and their disinterest in attending women's sports.

While there is considerable research detailing consumer motivation and purchasing decisions, there exists a significant void of research describing female spectator disinterest in women's sport. To obtain a robust understanding of why female fans of men's sport would choose not to attend women's sport several research questions were developed and explored. The study sought to (1) give a voice to female fans of men's sport to reflect and speak candidly about their lack of consumption of women's sport, (2) uncover the perceptions and attitudes existing among non-spectators regarding women's sport, (3) determine how these attitudes and perceptions impact their consumer decisions, and (4) find out what factors, both psychological and social, shape their current perceptions of women's sport.

To explore these aspects, a qualitative methodology was employed, as it allowed for the flow of participant feelings, perceptions and attitudes. A diverse group of women who attend men's college basketball games with no recent attendance history at women's college basketball games were asked to share their experiences as spectators and fans in semi-structured interviews. Interview questions were created from literature across a spectrum of studies (sport management, gender studies, marketing, etc.) and checked by a panel of experts for breadth, clarity and consistency. Interviews with the researcher were taped and later transcribed in detail. The transcripts were entered into QSR N6 for coding and analysis. Several trustworthiness checks were employed to ensure transparency and rigor. The data and themes were reviewed by a peer researcher for robustness and external reflection. Participants reviewed transcripts for accuracy while negative case analysis was used to explore contradictory cases in-depth. The central goal of data saturation was achieved after 12 interviews. The findings were presented utilizing Erickson's system of evidentiary warrants, articulating themes through systematic reporting using participants' own voices to convey themes in rich detail.

From participant stories, experiences and perspectives captured in the interviews, several robust themes were discovered. These themes presented themselves across participants of different ages, ethnicities, economic status, sexual orientation and educational level. Individuals articulated their sport spectator decisions are chiefly influenced by men in their lives, including husbands, boyfriends, brothers, sons and fathers. This vital influence spanned generations, as the men in their lives served as...
their access to the sporting world, dictating what sports were consumed and ultimately valued. Since these men chose to consume men's sport, participants were strongly socialized towards men's sport and provided less access to women's sport.

While the influence of men served as an important factor in their disinterest, results of the study yielded several other important themes. For example, participants felt that women's college basketball was a virtual unknown commodity. Individuals lacked both an awareness of logistical elements (how to purchase tickets, game location, ticket prices) and more team characteristics (who the players are, human interest stories, rivalries). These unknowns made it difficult for study participants to feel a desire to invest their time and resources in attending games. These themes and others derived from the study will be explained fully, tied to extant related literature, and utilized to build upon existing theory as well as provide practical applications for the marketing of women's sport.

In conclusion, this presentation offers results of an investigation into why women who are sports fans do not watch women's sports. It serves as an initial examination into an aspect of gendered motives that has yet to be explored within spectator literature.