Female Fans of Men's Sport: Does Their Interest Carry Over to Women's Sport?

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As ESPNW prepares to take to the air, there is no doubt about the network’s ability to provide a powerful platform for women’s sports and female athletes. But there are doubts hovering around one obvious—and integral—question: Who, exactly, will be tuning in? While many believe that female sport fans will be a key demographic to a women’s sport network, limited research exists regarding attitudes of women who regularly watch and consume sport. A keen understanding of highly involved female sport fans may prove vital to emerging women’s sport enterprises, teams, and media outlets.

Though data on sport viewing shows that women are becoming vested fans of men’s sport, a far more limited number of women watch women’s sport (Dalberg, 2009, McCarthy, 2008, Vogt, 2002). Perhaps this should not be surprising given the hegemonic masculinity embedded in sport. Messner (2002) described sport as a “historically formed, entrenched system of rules, conventions, allocations of resources and opportunities, and hierarchical authority and status systems, much of which resists progressive action toward equity” (p. 65). Many argue that sport serves to mold and propagate stereotypical gender roles that limit women’s opportunities even beyond sport (e.g., Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, McDoagh & Pappano, 2008). Thus, while women have entered this “contested terrain” of sport, “…greater presence does not always result in greater acceptance and/or equivalence, and the positioning of women in sport remains contested and problematic” (Meán & Kassing, 2008, p. 126). Thus, perhaps the hegemonic masculinity perpetuated through sport also serves to influence female sport fans.

Farrell, Fink, and Fields (in press) examined this contention using qualitative methodology to investigate why 12 female sport fans choose to consume men’s basketball but not women’s basketball. The data suggested a sharp male influence narrowed the focus of female fan interests to men’s sport at the exclusion of spectating women’s athletics. They found this male influence was generationally ingrained and began in childhood but extended to their current spectating habits. Additionally, participants suggested that men as attempted to serve as “gatekeepers” of sports knowledge. Further, participants noted that a lack of media attention surrounding women’s sport contributed to their lack of interest. And, while none of the participants had ever attended a women’s basketball game, they indicated men’s basketball was more exciting and male players more athletic than female players.

The current study sought to extend Farrell et al.’s (in press) work. We utilized the themes found in their work to administer a survey to determine whether these perceptions were held by a broader base of female fans of the National Basketball Association (NBA). Additionally, we sought to determine whether such influences impacted their perceptions of women’s sport, particularly the WNBA.

We constructed a questionnaire to assess the five main themes found in Farrell et al.’s (in press) work. Each theme was measured by 3 items on a 7 point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree; 7 = strongly disagree): male generational influence (e.g., “as I think back about who influenced my sport spectator habits, it was a male in my life”), current male influence (e.g., “I watch NBA games primarily with my male friends or relatives”), male gatekeeping (e.g., “I sometimes feel excluded from conversations about sports with men”), lack of media attention (e.g., “The media doesn’t seem to cover the WNBA to a great extent”), and comparison of the NBA and WNBA (e.g., “WNBA games just aren’t as exciting as NBA games”). Level of fan involvement with the NBA (e.g., “I consider myself to be a “real” fan of my favorite NBA team”) was assessed. Their interest in the WNBA was assessed with a one-item measure “How interested are you in the WNBA?”. The survey also included demographic items (age, race, marital status) and opportunities for open-ended responses.

Investigators collaborated with the National Basketball Association (NBA) to collect the data. An email was sent to female, NBA ticket purchasers who lived in crossover markets with a Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) team. Respondents were asked to participate in an online survey. A total of 621 females responded to the survey, however, after deleting surveys in which the majority of the questions were left unanswered, there were 451 usable surveys. Cronbach’s alphas indicated the scales for the themes were reliable and ranged from a high of .88 for comparison of the NBA and WNBA to a low of .70 for male gatekeeping.

Results indicated 53.7% of respondents were White, 29.2% African American, 8% Hispanic, 3.1% Asian, and 6% indicated “other”. Approximately 34% were married, 36% single, 13% divorced, and 10% indicated they were an unmarried couple living together while the other 7% indicated they were widowed or separated. Forty-six percent of respondents were 45 or older, only 9.5% were 18-24, and 39% were between 25-44. Analysis of the mean scores indicated the respondents were very involved NBA
fans ($M = 1.70, SD = 1.11$) but had very little interest in the WNBA ($M = 6.1, SD = .92$) Further analysis indicated that these female NBA fans were highly influenced in their sport fandom by males both generationally (male generational influence, $M = 2.70, SD = 1.10$) and currently (current male influence, $M = 2.90, SD = 1.22$). Additionally, participants indicated that the media paid very little attention to the WNBA (media attention, $M = 2.90, SD = 1.96$). Respondents also deemed the NBA and its athletes much more exciting and athletic than the WNBA and its athletes ($M = 1.19, SD = 1.58$). However, the mean for male gatekeeping ($M = 4.45, SD = 1.06$) indicated the participants did not feel excluded by men from conversations about sport.

To determine whether these factors influenced participants’ interest in the WNBA, a multiple regression was conducted with age, race, and marital status (all dummy coded) serving as the control variables. Male generational influence, current male influence, media attention, and gatekeeping were the independent variables, while interest in the WNBA was the dependent variable. Results of the regression indicated the controls did not contribute a significant amount of the variance ($p > .10$), but the independent variables combined to explain 14.1% of the variance in WNBA interest ($p < .001$) with current male influence (Beta = -.239, $p < .001$), media attention (Beta = 1.96, $p < .001$) and male generational influence (Beta = -.161, $p < .001$) showing significance. Thus, as current and generational male influence increased, interest in the WNBA decreased while increased media attention resulted in increased interest in the WNBA.

We conducted a second multiple regression with the same controls and independent variables to determine how these impacted the participants’ perceptions of the WNBA. Again, the control variables were not significant, but the independent variables combined to explain 17.1% of the variance with current male influence (Beta = .291, $p < .05$), media attention (Beta = -.242, $p < .001$) and male generational influence (Beta = .100, $p < .05$) being significant. As current male influence and generational male influence increased, interest in the WNBA decreased. However, increased media attention resulted in greater interest in the WNBA.

This presentation will offer an analysis of the results above as well as further insights generated from the open-ended survey responses relative to current literature and pertinent theory. Additionally, practical implications for industry professionals will be forwarded and suggestions for future research discussed.