Can Professional Sport Leagues Successfully Market to LGBT Fans?

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In May 2014, the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) launched its Pride campaign and became the first professional sport league in the United States (US) to explicitly reach out to gay and lesbian fans. Although the WNBA has a large LGBT fan-base, the league had not publicly acknowledged their LGBT fan-base until 2014 (Meyer, 2014) due to the fear of alienating other fan segments and negative public reaction. With the change of political, legal, and social realms in the US in recent years, the WNBA created a targeted marketing campaign to appeal to their loyal LGBT fan segment. Despite public opinion towards homosexuality changing, marketers have continued to see targeting this population as risky. Lower purchase intentions (Bhat, Leigh, & Wardlow, 1998; Wilkie, 2007), and less favorable attitudes towards ads and brands featuring homosexual imagery (Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2005; Oakenfull, McCarthy, & Greenlee, 2008; Um, 2014) were two key findings reported in studies examining heterosexual consumer attitudes. In contrast, studies show gay consumers are more interested in brands and advertisements they can identify with (Jaffe, 1991; Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2005; Oakenfull, McCarthy, & Greenlee, 2008). As a result, it is not clear how to target heterosexual and LGBT consumers simultaneously. With shifting social attitudes, sport marketers need to understand how to reach both heterosexual and LGBT fans without alienating one or the other. Furthermore, with the lack of sport marketing campaigns targeting the LGBT community, a notable gap in our understanding has emerged, warranting research.

The purpose of this study was to investigate heterosexual and LGBT fans’ attitudes toward the WNBA’s Pride campaign, and the impact of fandom, attitude toward the Pride campaign and sexual orientation on consumption intentions. A total of 1323 individuals from the WNBA database participated in the study. Analyses were conducted with the data from 544 respondents who were aware of the WNBA’s Pride campaign. The majority of the participants were female (70.4%), Caucasian (54%), and 45 years old or older (78.6%). Respondents identified as heterosexual (43.3%) and lesbian/gay/bisexual (38.8%), with no responses for transgender. The instrument included the Sport Fandom Questionnaire (Wann, 2002), a 12-item semantic differential scale measuring attitudes toward the Pride campaign (Bruner, James, & Hensel, 2001), and four consumption intention items adapted from the literature (Dwyer, 2013; Mumcu, Lough, & Barnes, 2016). The study employed two separate one-way ANOVAs to examine the differences in attitudes toward the Pride campaign between heterosexual fans and LGBT fans, and heterosexual men and women. A one-way ANCOVA was performed to assess the moderating effect of WNBA fandom on the relationship between sexual orientation and attitude toward the Pride campaign. Finally, four hierarchical multiple linear regression analyses were conducted. Consumption intention items were regressed on WNBA fandom, sexual orientation (2-level dummy coded variable), attitude toward the Pride campaign, and an interaction term (sexual orientation*WNBA fandom) to determine the significant predictors of future consumption behaviors and their additive effect.

The first ANOVA result revealed a statistically significant difference between LGB fans’ and heterosexual fans’ attitudes toward the Pride campaign F (1, 445) = 10.58, p = .001. This result indicated that LGB fans (X = 5.69, SD = 1.86, n = 211) had more favorable attitudes toward the Pride campaign than the heterosexual fans (X = 5.09, SD = 2.01, n = 236). The second one-way ANOVA result indicated no statistically significant sex differences (p = .79) among heterosexual WNBA fans’ attitude toward the Pride campaign (men X = 5.14, SD = 1.91, n = 92; women X = 5.06, SD = 2.07, n = 144). The ANCOVA revealed a statistically significant main effect for sexual orientation, F (1, 444) = 10.78, p = .001, η2 = .024, and WNBA fandom, F (1, 444) = 6.81, p = .009, η2 = .015. Although the effect size was small (Cohen, 1992), attitude toward the Pride campaign was statistically higher for the LGB fans (estimated marginal M = 5.69) than the heterosexual fans (estimated marginal M = 5.09) after controlling for WNBA fandom. The interaction effect between sexual orientation and WNBA fandom was not statistically significant, indicating that WNBA fandom did not moderate the relationship between sexual orientation and attitude toward the Pride campaign.
The overall regression models predicting attendance, viewership, social media and web consumption were statistically significant (p < .001), and the variance explained by the regression models ranged from 42.5% for viewership to 14.1% for attendance. The addition of attitude toward the Pride campaign in the second block did not improve the regression models statistically for any of the future consumption behaviors. The addition of the interaction term (iFandom_c*SO) in the third block only contributed to the prediction of future viewership ($\Delta R^2 = .006, \Delta F = 4.45, p = .035$), and did not improve future attendance, social media or web consumption. Examination of the regression coefficients revealed that WNBA fandom was the only statistically significant predictor of future attendance, social media and web consumption. The regression analysis also revealed a statistically significant difference on future game viewership of heterosexual and LGB fans with heterosexual fans reporting higher viewership intentions.

The most important finding from this study was that the Pride campaign had no adverse effect on heterosexual consumers. Previous research represents the gay community as more interested in brands with which they can identify (Jaffe, 1991; Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2005; Oakenfull et al., 2008), yet in this study LGB fans did not report higher consumption intentions. Another important finding was WNBA fandom as the only predictor of consumption intentions. It could be said that the campaign had no adverse effect on the heterosexual fan base, thus a balance in appeal to fans was maintained. On the other hand, if the campaign was intended to demonstrate the WNBA’s recognition of LGBT fans (Weiner-Bronner, 2014), it was only marginally successful. With the majority of respondents regardless of their sex expressing progressive views of men and women, the league appears to have considerable space to explore options for marketing toward the LGBT fan base in the future.