Factors Affecting Women’s Attendance at and Consumption of Professional Sporting Events

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Introduction
While there is a great deal of past attendance and consumption research in the sport management literature, very little work explains women’s attendance and consumption specifically. This is somewhat surprising, given that women represent approximately 40% of professional sports fans in the U.S. What’s more, women tend to make most household purchasing decisions and will control two-thirds of consumer wealth in the U.S. over the next 10 years (Nielsen, 2013). Clearly, this consumer segment has important revenue and profitability implications for professional teams and leagues.

But in order to successfully market to women, we need a better understanding of the female sport consumer across various market segments (Harvard, Eddy, & Ryan, 2016; Mumcu, Lough, & Barnes, 2016; Stirling & Mackay, 2014; Wakefield, 2016). While a few recent studies investigate women’s consumption of intercollegiate athletics (Harvard et al., 2016) and women’s sports (Mumcu et al., 2016), we add to this literature by examining women’s attendance at and consumption of professional sporting events more broadly (i.e., both men’s and women’s sport). Past research also suggests studying various levels of fan identification (Harvard et al., 2016; Wakefield, 2016), so researchers and practitioners can distinguish between fans and predict consumer behavior more accurately (Fillis & Mackay, 2016).

Indeed, DeSarbo and Madrigal (2011, pp. 92-93) emphasize that “researchers and practitioners must be very guarded about using such aggregate measures of fan avidity,” as “there are different pathways to fan avidity”; “as such there are revenue implications associated with these various consumer behaviors.” Accordingly, we also examine how women’s attendance and consumption differs among fans (e.g., casual vs. avid fans) (e.g., DeSarbo & Madrigal, 2011; Harvard, et al., 2016).

Methodology
To answer calls for more qualitative research, we examine women’s attendance at and consumption of professional sporting events using qualitative methods to gain a richer understanding of the factors that drive and constrain women’s consumer behavior (e.g., Farrell, Fink, & Fields, 2011; Harvard, et al., 2016; Mumcu et al., 2016). We apply grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967) to in-depth, semi-structured interview data gathered from self-identified female professional sport fans who originate from cities in the top 50 demographic market areas in the U.S. We distinguish between casual and avid fans using a four-item scale, which has been applied to professional sports in previous studies (Wakefield, 2016). Data analysis consisted of initial reading of the transcripts, coding, first-order analysis, and second-order analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Van Maanen, 1979).

Results
Data collection and analysis are ongoing, but preliminary results support and extend prior attendance and consumption research. Similar to minority attendance (Stadler Blank, Sweeney, & Fuller, 2014), alternative forms of commitment, atmosphere, comfort and convenience, cost, exposure and access to the sport, image and identity, performance and entertainment, social nature of sport, and value affect women’s attendance at and consumption of professional sporting events. However, in some cases, the meaning of these drivers and constraints is quite different. For example, for the social nature of sport, past research shows that family is important to women’s attendance (e.g., Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002; Wann, Waddill, & Dunham, 2004); however, we found that women often prefer to attend without their children, so they can pay more attention to the game. Likewise, several participants said they would prefer to attend or watch games alone rather than in big groups, which would distract them. (This was especially the case for avid fans.)
In addition to the aforementioned list, new drivers and constraints emerged. For example, familiarity with or understanding of the game was important to women (particularly avid fans). Women also paid more attention to storylines and notable events (e.g., championship games or international events) as well as match-ups or rivalries (particularly casual fans). Personal connections to players, teams, and leagues were also important to women, as participants frequently talked about their “bond” with a specific player, team, league, or sport.

Finally, as it relates to attendance at and consumption of women’s professional sports, we found that for the most part, participants preferred to attend and consume men’s sports. A few exceptions include notable events like the women’s World Cup and the Olympics. But for the most part, both casual and avid fans admitted that there’s a general lack of knowledge and interest in women’s sports. In some cases, women in markets that currently have women’s professional teams were completely unaware of their presence. While more marketing would help raise awareness of these teams, female fans cautioned that marketing athletes as sex symbols or based on their personality (as opposed to performance) was a major turnoff. This finding supports past research—which suggests that sex does not sell women’s sports—and reiterates the importance of marketing female athleticism and competence (Kane & Maxwell, 2011; Mumcu, et al., 2016). Related to this point, one potential bright spot for marketers is the fact that a number of participants (particularly casual fans) said that if they were choosing between a men’s and a women’s event to take their daughters to, they would choose the women’s event. Mothers want to expose their daughters to successful female athletes, which gets at the notion of image and identity (Stadler Blank et al., 2014). This finding suggests that sport marketers should consider focusing on casual female fans with girls, working to increase familiarity and understanding while simultaneously building identification within this group.

Conclusion
To summarize, we identify several factors affecting women’s attendance at and consumption of professional sporting events. While several of these factors map onto factors that drive minority attendance, there are nuances that differentiate our results as well as additional drivers and constraints. We believe this study contributes to both theory and practice by offering a more detailed understanding of the factors affecting women’s attendance and consumption, which should help sport marketers appeal to a broader, more diverse fan base.