Watch Me Work: The Impact of Twitter Broadcasts on Fan Engagement on WNBA Social Media Accounts

Nicholas Brown, University of San Francisco
Ann Pegoraro (Advisor), Laurentian University
Nola Agha (Advisor), University of San Francisco
David Berri (Advisor), Southern Utah University

Communication - Social Media (Professional Sport) Saturday, June 1, 2019
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) 2:20 PM
Room: Napoleon A1

The rising use of social networking sites (SNS) by fans and sport teams has driven scholars to examine the use of SNS as a tool for communication (Pegoraro, 2010) and fan relationship building (Santos, et al, 2018; Hearn, Foth, & Gray, 2009). More recent research has found that Fan Engagement (FE) on SNS has a positive effect on both online and offline behavioral intentions towards a team (Santos et al., 2018) indicating that understanding what factors drives FE is valuable information for sport marketers and researchers alike.

Initial attempts at quantifying FE focused on simply tabulating the number of “likes” and “comments” from fans on posts (Wallace et al., 2011, Evans, 2011) but there is limited understanding and empirical research into what factors beyond post content impact FE on SNS (Filo et al., 2015). To complicate our understanding of FE, SNS are highly dynamic products and recently added the ability to live stream events. Both Twitter (e.g. WNBA) and Facebook (e.g. MLB) have signed deals with leagues to broadcast live sport events through their platforms. The fact that fans can now watch sports live on SNS provides a new layer to FE and this study seeks to investigate the effect of this new broadcasting function on FE.

Currently, the WNBA broadcasts games on ESPN2, ESPN3, NBATV, Local TV, WNBA League Pass, and live on Twitter. Using individual game data during the 2016-2018 WNBA seasons, a model was created to determine which factors impact FE on the SNS Twitter. Using three measures of FE/post (total FE, FE per home team post, FE per away team post) as dependent variables, the model investigated the effect of broadcast platform on FE. Additional variables controlled for game quality (MVPs or All-Stars on the team, win percentage, championships) and market characteristics (new arena, new market, market population).

Preliminary results indicate being league champion in the previous season (p= 0.0243) and having the league MVP on the team (p=0.0033) impacts FE when the team is on the road, but interestingly not when they play at home. Another measure of team quality, all-stars on a team, increases FE for both home (p<0.0001) and away (p=0.0004) teams. Results also show that FE for the 2018 season (p<0.0001) to be higher than both the 2016 and 2017 seasons. When looking at broadcast medium, broadcasting the game on Twitter (p=0.0483) and on League Pass and local TV (p=0.0119) are associated with lower FE, but only for home teams.

These early results suggest that despite increased second screen interaction during traditional broadcasts (Voorveld & Viswanathan, 2015)), SNS broadcasts on Twitter receive less FE on Twitter. This intriguing result can be explained by users adapting to new methods of broadcasting or that Twitter broadcasting essentially is single screen viewing, thereby reducing engagement due to difficulty multitasking on a single device. Reduced FE on League Pass broadcasts suggests perhaps a limited number of fans subscribe to League Pass. Additional results and implications for marketers, teams, and broadcasters will be presented at the conference.