

A DIGITALIZATION OF SPORTS FAN'S EXPERIENCE:
A CASE STUDY OF THE WNBA

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ABSTRACT

The external shock of COVID-19 forced many professional sport organizations to cancel live sporting events, requiring sport organizations to engage consumers primarily through social media. This research uses the Sports Experience Design (SX) framework to explore how social media influenced the WNBA fan experiences in the 2020 season. In addition, principles of a relationship marketing approach were integrated into the SX to guide this investigation. To understand how the WNBA's social media content fits into the SX framework the research examined engagement rates and how that impacts the user's experience and organization's strategy and off-season opportunities for the organization or players to remain relevant to their consumer base.

Keywords – Digital sports marketing: fan engagement, WNBA, social media

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) has a marketing problem. When asked in an interview how the league planned to combat the marketing problem, WNBA Commissioner Cathy Engelbert said that their main issue was not following the National Basketball Association's economic model (Hahm, 2020). The NBA relies on massive media agreements and sponsorships while the WNBA relies on a grassroots marketing strategy dependent upon fan engagement on social media platforms. League fans know where the pressure points are, however, and they advocate for better coverage in their comments on social media posts. While this has led to the creation of female specific pages that center their content around women's sports, more needs to be done.

Broadcast partnerships with ESPN and CBS have played a role in the significant increase in viewership from the start of the 2019 season with ratings up nearly 64 % compared to the start of the 2018 season (Underwood, 2019). Nielsen Sports, a leader in industry insights, noted that there are an estimated 72 million women's basketball fans worldwide. This is an underserved portion of the market that the WNBA could leverage to grow its fandom.

New streaming services have provided the WNBA with more options, but it comes as no surprise that women's sports coverage is overshadowed by their male counterparts. When comparing the two leagues, Cooky et al.'s (2015) 25-year longitudinal study showed discrepancies in the quality of content, number of cameras, and overall production value, with the NBA receiving far better treatment. Therefore, the

WNBA must find ways to market their brand, and this is where technology comes into the picture. Technology can only help improve the production value and quality content. As social media's diversity and inclusion extends, so will the WNBA's coverage.

The Deloitte (2020) Sports Industry Outlook predicted that the rise of women's sports is the number one trend that will dominate and disrupt the sports industry in the coming years. Their assessment is that women's sport organizations would embrace the unique aspects of their sport and fans needs to engage fans in innovative ways. The WNBA understands that social media presence is vital for success and therefore it is necessary to capitalize on these reports with engaging content in the digital space to continue audience growth. Because women's leagues receive limited coverage from traditional media outlets, where most of the money is found, they must break new ground and try anything that can bring in money for the league (Nielsen Sports, 2018).

The Background

Along with the lack of media coverage, the disruption COVID-19 caused for live events in 2020 created a problem for the WNBA. On March 11, 2020, basketball fans were watching a game between the Dallas Mavericks and the Denver Nuggets when the news broke that the NBA and WNBA would suspend the rest of their season indefinitely due to the pandemic. The moment this was announced, the cameras focused in on the Dallas Maverick's owner, Mark Cuban, who was just as shocked as the rest of the sports world. He was immediately interviewed about the suspension, and stated, "This is crazy. This can't be true... It seemed more like a movie than reality" (ESPN, 2020). This new reality facing the sports world stopped live sport competitions almost instantly, and leagues, teams, and players across sports were essentially forced into an off-season mode.

The pandemic soon became the biggest crisis to affect the sports world since WWII, postponing or outright canceling events from high school games to the NCAA Final Four March Madness Championship, professional leagues, and the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. It is estimated that over 867.5 million USD was lost in TV and marketing rights for March Madness, 450 million USD was lost in NBA gate revenue, and potentially 1.25 billion USD of advertising revenue was lost for the Olympics (Gough, 2020). Organizations scrambled to fill gaps in programming, with the understanding that to keeping sponsors happy and to satisfying the needs of the fans and players was top priority.

The external impact of COVID-19 forced the industry to consider what to do when the game stops unexpectedly. One approach taken by many sport organizations was to turn to technology and the digital space. Most already utilized a digital media plan for the off-season or for out-of-venue experiences, but with the swift emergence of COVID-19, their digital platforms became their primary way of engaging fans who were just as disappointed by the disruption of the season. Ultimately the ability to keep fans engaged in unique ways not only while attending games but outside the arena as well helps an organization remain relevant. This also gives the organization time to focus on maintaining and developing their fan base by reinventing or refining creative ways to engage fans into their existing strategies. During that outage of play from March 2020 to July 2020 organizations refined their digital operating models which allowed them to have an effective strategy when not playing live games such as the offseason, or in the event of future stoppages from environmental means or other unforeseen variables.

The WNBA was scheduled to have their draft on April 10, 2020, and start the season on May 24, 2020; however, with the COVID-19 restrictions, both events were put

on hold. Ultimately, the league and players agreed on a virtual draft and a shortened 22-game season with all 12 teams co-located in Florida with a limited staff and without fans. As such, fans had to rely on technology to share the 2020 season's experience. WNBA leaders were forced to integrate technology into all aspects of the season to stay relevant and drive the fan's intake. The 2020 season was planned and executed completely following COVID-19 safety guidelines, which is why the league is the ideal professional sports organization to examine the digitization of the sports fans' experience.

Purpose of the Research

The intent of this research is to investigate how the WNBA improved its use of social media as a response to the pandemic's disruption of live events. This research will further investigate how social media integrates marketing and fan development experientially. The use of social media turns what was once a passive fan involvement into an interactive one creating a constructive feedback loop. Comments and reposts communicate fans' desires, and the WNBA can meet consumer and sponsor expectations. This research will apply Funk's (2017) Sports Experience Design (SX) as a theoretical framework to answer "where" and "how" social media fits into the existing understanding. I will further augment the SX by integrating relationship marketing principles to design messages that organizations can apply to their social media campaigns. Answering the question of how organizations should approach the digitalization of the sports fans' experience on the back end will improve the user experience. The research study was chosen because the WNBA had to pivot to online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Significance of the Research

This research will validate the SX framework as it relates to the role and influence of social media content in the WNBA. This understanding will help shape the strategies for sport organizations to exploit the trends in the sport industry. A panel of sport management scholars identified seven trends, five of which will be directly impacted by the current research: (1) technology, (2) internationalization and globalization, (3) sport consumer experiences, (4) individualization and personalization, and (5) commercialization (Funk, 2017). With social media, fan experiences are not limited to geographical boundaries, allowing organizations to reach a much broader audience instantly. With smart settings, organizations can personalize consumer experiences for a truly individual product for its fanbase and create unique opportunities to monetize content with relevant ads, even during the off-season or when a disruption occurs. Building on the sport experience design framework this research will show how a relationship marketing approach can be effectively integrated into a social media strategy during and through the season or in the off-season or a time of disruption. The WNBA's off-season is different from other professional sports in the United States because many of its players have additional jobs in broadcasting or work for other teams. Additionally, the WNBA's off-season takes place during the NBA and college basketball season, giving unique opportunities for engagement with a similar audience. A majority of the research on this topic has not included or focused on out of season experience; this research will, however, use the COVID-19 disruption as an example of engagement without live games.

Context: Timeline of Significant Events

To understand where the WNBA is going, we must first understand how it came to be the longest lasting women's team sports league in the United States. Below in Figure 1, is a timeline of significant events in women's basketball as they relate to the WNBA and to this research from the first collegiate game played in 1896 to significant multimedia events prior to the 2020 COVID-19 impacted season.

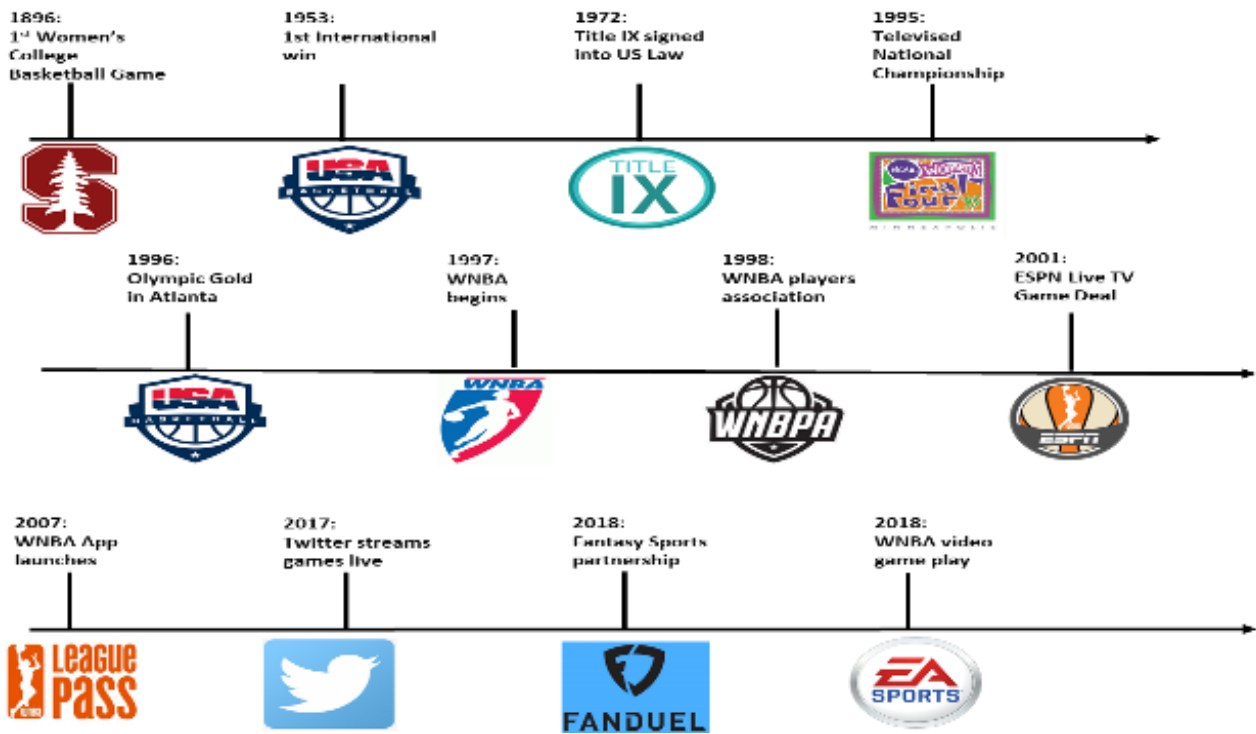


Figure 1. Timeline of Women's Basketball in the United States

Global Pandemic: The WNBA's Reaction

On March 12, 2020, the WNBA announced that it would monitor and consult with experts on how to prepare for their upcoming season, scheduled to begin in May, to

follow the guidelines implemented by the COVID-19 pandemic. On April 3, 2020, the WNBA Commissioner released an official statement postponing the 2020 WNBA season indefinitely. The WNBA stated that they would still hold the draft, not knowing if the rookie class, whose members' college careers were ended abruptly, would play in their first professional season. Finally, on June 15, 2020, the WNBA announced that they would have a shortened 2020 season beginning in July (Chiari, 2020). Between April 3 and June 15, however, as COVID outbreaks surged, the league, the teams and the players were unsure whether new a season would take place. The only consensus was that there would be no fans in the stands, and any fan experiences of the season would be digital.

The most notable way the WNBA started their COVID-19 digital strategy was by holding the first ever all virtual draft of any major sports league on April 17, 2020. The event was considered a success across the sports community (Negley, 2020); it was the most watched WNBA draft in the past 16 years and the second most watched overall across all platforms. Viewership was up over 123% from 2019 and made a significant impact across the WNBA's social media platforms. Across the official WNBA social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube), there were over 6.5 million views, up 165% from 2019's draft, and 1.3 million minutes of watched content, up 237%. Additionally, on draft day, the WNBA's Instagram page had its greatest number of single-day interactions with over 3.8 million views (Lewis, 2020). Immediately following the draft, ESPN capitalized on the increased viewership and re-broadcast the 2019 WNBA championship game between Connecticut and Washington to fans who tuned in to the draft. The draft set a template for other U.S. sports leagues to conduct their events in a similar manner.

Next, the WNBA developed a plan for how to conduct the season while taking into consideration player health, finances, the fan experience, and, of course, actual game play. First, the season was reduced from its original 36 games per team to 22. Although the WNBA and its Board of Governors ultimately agreed on paying the players their full wages and benefits, they originally offered the players only 60% of their salaries to play in the shortened season (Chiari, 2020). The WNBA then partnered with IMG Academy in Bradenton, Florida, to create a closed environment where the 12 teams and a small group of employees would live and play. At the IMG Academy, health protocols would be put in place to monitor and test for COVID-19. On social media and in press conferences the players nicknamed the IMG Academy the “Wubble,” a combination of “women” or “WNBA” and “bubble.”

Next, the WNBA had to plan on how to share their games to fans across the world. The WNBA announced a 30-day free trial for their digital subscription app, League Pass, to incentivize new subscriptions (WNBA, 2020). The app, which saw a 39% increase of subscribers from 2018-2019 (Glass, 2018), allowed fans to stream historical games, watch highlights, and learn more about the WNBA players via personalized content. The WNBA continued their TV partnerships and renewed their previous deal with Twitter to air live games for the fourth consecutive season (Impey, 2020).

Prior to their arrival at the IMG Academy, many of the twenty-two teams held digital events using social media to engage with fans. For example, the Los Angeles Sparks’ head athletic trainer Courtney Watson uploaded daily video workouts for the players using their home equipment. Watson also sent specialized workout bags to the

players, which included resistance bands and jump ropes (Swanson, 2020). The team participated in home workout challenges and shared them on social media, connecting with their fans who were also attempting to do their own gym routines at home.

While the season was in limbo, players used their personal social media accounts to interact with fans and share personal information with followers. 2019 Rookie of the Year Player W8 started a book club with her 80 thousand followers Player W16¹ and her sister Player W17², with over 153 thousand Instagram followers, posted daily workouts to do from home, which other athletes and fans completed and shared on their own pages. WNBA players' association president Player W18 created a food blog to share her love of cooking with 140 thousand social media followers. She later became one of the vocal leaders for the WNBA's reaction to the social unrest such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the pandemic, facing the nation³. Many other players followed her lead and used their social media platforms to advocate for social reform.

The Seattle Storm's Player W11⁴, along with her partner, a U.S. soccer star⁵, began broadcasting an Instagram live show with some of their friends in the sports world called "A Touch More" to their 3 million combined followers. They would propose toasts over drinks, ask viewers questions, and tell stories of their experiences traveling the world playing sports. This was an unfiltered view into the private lives of elite athletes, broadcasting to several thousand viewers live and many more after it was uploaded to YouTube. Their digital branding produced new marketing campaign for them and

¹ <https://www.instagram.com/katielou33/>

² <https://www.instagram.com/karliesamuelson/>

³ <https://www.instagram.com/nnekaogwumike/>

⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/sbird10/>

⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/mrapinoe/>

Symetra insurance company, which filmed multiple ads discussing how their plans changed due to COVID-19 (Symetra, 2020).

2020 WNBA Season: The Wubble (from 25 July 2020)

Immediate reactions to the WNBA's COVID-19 crisis plan were overwhelmingly positive. The pandemic accelerated the WNBA's integration of technology, specifically social media, as well as innovation in all aspects of the 2020 season, on and off the court, to stay relevant and to drive the fan's consumption. This research will go deeper into studying the impact and lessons learned by analyzing key points, successes, and ways to improve their virtual content, engagement, and opportunities for future seasons.

The WNBA reported that ESPN's coverage of the championship was up 34% year over year, and the entire finals series up 15% over the 2019 season (Sports Media Watch, 2020). This is especially notable given that, their male counterparts had less viewers than previous seasons, NBA finals viewership was down 49%. Average viewership of all WNBA games increased 68% in the 2020 season. This was in part because of more nationally televised games than previous seasons with 87 of 132 games airing on national television.

The WNBA added a "tap to cheer" button to their app and website to increase fan engagement while games were played that they shared across their social media. After logging on, fans could "tap" their favorite team's logo to root for them. It was resoundingly successful: After each team played their first game, the app registered a total of over 4 million "cheers" (Telescope, 2020). The teams with the top two cheer totals in the 22-game regular season were the Las Vegas Aces with 22,573,268 and the Seattle Storm with 20,380,107, which were also the two teams that competed in the 2020

championship with the Storm winning. That championship game alone registered 1,126,289 cheers for the Las Vegas Aces and 1,365,129 cheers for the Seattle Storm with the combined total of 2,491,418⁶ taps.

⁶ <https://www.wnba.com/>

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review begins by providing a broad overview of social media, defining terms and platforms, and exploring social media's role in how businesses engage with consumers. Next, how social media impacts sport organizations and consumers is studied. This is followed by women and WNBA literature and examples. Finally, this section of the literature reviews identifies gaps in understanding and what research is needed to fill those gaps. Table 1 describes key terms and definitions used throughout the literature review.

Table 1
Key Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition	References
Co-creation	The creation and collaborative exchange of customer made content.	Abeza, G., O'Reilly, N., Finch, D., Séguin, B., & Nadeau, J. (2020)
Customer Engagement	Psychological state reflecting customer's interactive experiences with an organization that highlights the active role of the consumer.	De Vries, N.J & Carlson, J (2014)
Engagement Rate	Metric used to track how involved the audience is with content. Formula: Reactions plus Shares plus Comments plus Views divided by numbers of followers then multiplied by 100.	www.forbes.com
Net Generation	Generation of people that have been immersed in technology from birth.	Tapscott, D. (2009)
Social Media	New media technologies facilitating interactivity and co-creation allow for development and sharing of user generated content among and between organizations and individuals.	Filo, K., Lock, D. & Karg, A. (2015)
Sport Brand Ecosystem	Brands that are interconnected via their interaction with the sport environment.	Kunkel, T. & Biscaia, R (2020)
Vertical Content	Content intended for a niche market with specific goals.	Fink, J.S. (2013)
Virtual Fan Communities	Online platform for fans to interact and share information.	Walker, M, Hodge, C, & Bennett, G (2017)

Social Media

The internet has had a significant impact on the way people experience the world around them and social media has also disrupted our collective behaviors. Tiago and Veríssimo (2014) noted that real-world social relationships have migrated to the virtual world, allowing global communities to develop around shared interests.

Social media encompasses multiple platforms connecting individuals and groups, which are continually evolving as new technology emerges. The distinguishing characteristic of social media is the collaborative nature of the content, making it unlike other forms of communication. Williams and Chinn (2010) explained that social media “supports user participation on a massive, collective scale” (p.442). For these reasons, there has been a shift from one-way mass communication to an interactive digital environment (Hambrick & Kang, 2015).

Social Media Platforms

There are several emerging platforms that the Net generation uses. The five digital platforms this literature review focuses on are: (1) Facebook, (2) Instagram, (3) Twitter, (4) YouTube, and (5) TikTok. These are not the only options for social media; organizations can also create their own apps for niche content.

Facebook launched in 2004 as a way for college students to connect over the internet free of charge, eventually growing their user base to anyone with an internet connection. According to their website (Facebook, 2021) they “Build technologies that help people connect with friends and family, find communities, and grow businesses.” Individuals, community groups, and organizations can create pages to interact with one another. Users can follow other users so that their content and reactions appear on other

followers' pages. On Facebook, users can post texts, photos, videos, events, and links on their page. Other users can interact with the posts sharing it on their pages or by reacting with various types of "reactions." The reactions are different icons such as "like," "love," "care," "haha," "wow," "sad," or "angry." Users can also comment and react to other comments in the same way. Users are able to create events which allows the community to react with a digital RSVP that others can view. Users can direct message others with the messenger feature to have conversations privately.

Instagram was created in 2010 as a photo and video sharing site and has been owned by Facebook since 2012. Their website (Instagram, 2021) reads Instagram "fosters a safe and inclusive community where people can express themselves, feel closer to anyone they care about and turn a passion into a living." Instagram is similar to Facebook in that community members can follow and interact with one another with reactions, shares, and comments. Instagram content is more visual than text based. Users can post up to 10 photos or videos per post and can post short video clips. Instagram users can choose to "go live" which is a way to broadcast yourself in real time for anyone to see. Instagram and Facebook pages can be linked so that user posts can be displayed on both sites simultaneously.

Twitter was founded in 2006 as a short form blogging network. Their website (Twitter, 2021) describes their app as an "open service that's home to a world of diverse people, perspectives, ideas, and information." Much like other social media platforms, users can follow other users, groups, or organizations, and create content by tweeting. A tweet may contain photos, GIFs, videos, links, or up to 280 characters of text. Users can interact with content by liking, retweeting or sharing, or commenting on the content. The

Twitter app has a page of trending topics, and these trends can be divided by category or can be personalized. A user can click on the trend and see articles and tweets about the topic in real time.

YouTube was established in 2005 as an online video sharing platform and was purchased by Google in 2006. Their website states their mission is to “give everyone a voice and show them the world” because “everyone deserves to have a voice, and that the world is a better place when we listen, share and build community through our stories” (YouTube, 2021). YouTube offers recommended videos, news or trending videos, or a search tool for the user to find a video they want to watch. Users can interact by liking, sharing, or commenting on a video.

TikTok, the most recent of the five platforms began in 2016 and their About Us section on their website explains that they are the “leading destination for short-form mobile video” (TikTok, 2021). Users create short videos from 15 seconds to three minutes. The app provides several filters, editing tools and effects. Users can interact with others in the same way as the aforementioned social media sites with likes, shares, and comments. The main difference is that TikTok can “stich” or “duet” videos with other users. Stitching a video means that you can clip videos of other users to use in your content. The stitched video links back to the original user post. A duet video is a way for the user to use other videos side by side with their video, as long as the creator enables the feature, with their own in a similar manner as stitching. (TikTok, 2021)

Table 2 data comes from Statista (2021) and outlines U.S. users in the millions from 2019 and 2020. It should be noted that TikTok, the newest platform, had the largest growth by percentage between 2019 and 2020. The next column breaks out the

percentage of the users by age in each of the platforms. The average daily use on each platform was calculated using data from 18 and older accounts who used the platform at least once a month. The last column is from a Ring Digital (Ring Digital PR, 2020) report which conducted a survey asking: “Which social media apps do you use on a regular basis to watch sports highlights?” These results show that YouTube, the current leader for sports highlights, increased by 10 percentage points from the 2019 survey, whereas Facebook fell 18 points.

Social Media for Business

Given the number of users on each of the social media platforms, businesses must post content that engages users and creators in a two-way conversation in real time. The U.S. market for advertising on social media platforms in 2021 is estimated at \$56.7 billion which is almost 30% of all U.S. digital marketing (Statista, 2021a). Facebook, which owns Instagram, dominates that share at 70%. However, in China, where Facebook is blocked, TikTok boasts 60% of their social media advertising market. Twitter’s advertising was \$1.05 billion. Early in 2021 twitter worked to improve personalized to its users (Dang, 2021). This is depicted on the below table 2.

Table 2
Social Media Platform Statistics.

Platform	US users (Millions)	Age of Users	AVG time spent daily	Watch Sport Highlights
Facebook	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2019: 290.49 • 2020: 297.14 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13-17: 2.9% • 18-24: 18.1% • 25-34: 25.7% • 35-44: 18.1% • 45+: 35.1% 	33 minutes	45%
Instagram	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2019: 107.2 • 2020: 114.6 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13-17: 4.1% • 18-24: 25.7% • 25-34: 31.4% • 35-44: 18.2% • 45+: 20.6% 	28 minutes	30%
Twitter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2019: 77.95 • 2020: 93.54 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-29: 42% • 30-49: 27% • 50+: 25% 	31 minutes	14%
YouTube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2019: 191.81 • 2020: 205.89 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0-11: 11.9% • 12-34: 39.4% • 35+: 48.9% 	46 minutes	53%
TikTok	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2019: 35.6 • 2020: 65.9 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10-19: 25% • 20-29: 22.4% • 30-39: 21.7% • 40-49: 20.3% • 50+: 11% 	31 minutes	16%

There are multiple ways to monetize social media for a business aside from an awareness ad campaign to encourage consumers to make a purchase. Facebook and Instagram offer monetization tools on their site such as in-stream ads, branded content, and paid online events. Users who are eligible are either business pages or “verified” individuals who can prove they are a public figure and have at least 500 followers and are then approved by the company. Facebook caters to small or large business, agencies, and media or publishers (Facebook, 2021). Twitter offers a flight school to “help (users)

master advertising on (the Twitter) platform” (Twitter, 2021). Twitter offers similar monetization options to Facebook and Instagram. YouTube allows for in-streaming video ads, pinned ads under a video, or sponsored content. In order to advertise on YouTube, a business must go through the Google ads site (YouTube, 2021). TikTok allows for digital advertising, however, it is not widely used yet by the WNBA. This is possibly because of the nature of the site - organic posts made by fellow users tend to perform the best. Users on these sites which do not have to be directly associated with a business are able to monetize their content. TikTok offers training to their users on their site (TikTok, 2021).

Businesses are not the only ones capitalizing on the sites, individuals who monetize personal content are known as influencers. These influencers could already be famous, or they could become famous because they are on social media. Tiago and Veríssimo (2014) article also talk about how brands should partner with these influencers to develop digital relationships using promotional strategies between their brand, the influencer, and the influencer’s audience. Learning from one another so you can understand how to use the platform and how to market your brand to emerging audiences.

When users and brands work together the result is co-created content. There are several definitions of co-creation, and Sawhney et al. (2005) explain it as a customer being able to interact, communicate, and in certain cases cooperate to achieve experiences, services and offerings that serve the current customer as well as new customers better. This is also known as peer-to-peer communication (Brodie et al., 2013; Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Yan, 2011) which demonstrates that consumers themselves are becoming authors of brand stories (Gensler et al. 2013) by linking their experience with the brand.

An important factor in social media for businesses is consumer engagement, which can be defined as a psychological state reflecting customer's interactive, co-creative experiences with a firm which highlights the active role of the consumer (Brodie et al., 2011; Verleye et al., 2021). Consumer engagement is described by Vivek et al. (2012) as the intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organization's offerings. To measure this on social media an engagement rate is calculated. The simplest formula is: likes (L) plus shares (S) plus comments (C) plus views (V) divided by numbers of followers (N) then multiplied by 100 or $L+S+C+V / N * 100$. (Sauthier, 2020). For example, an Instagram post by Player W9 on June 10, 2021, had 17,104 likes, 95 comments, and 119,231 views, and she has 692,000 followers. The likes, comments, and views add up to 136,430 which is then divided by 692,000 followers. This comes to .197 which is then multiplied by 100 equaling a 19.7% engagement rate. Appendix A offers example posts from each platform using WNBA-related content.

Social Media in Sport

The opportunities to interact with business audiences on social media are ideal for sport organization fans. Pegoraro et al. (2021) noted that social media platforms allow fans to have a place to connect and exchange their personal brand related content. The attitude towards the brand is of significant value to a sport organization and as Keller (2009) points out, social media can be used to build brand perception with the consumers. Hoyer et al. (2010) explained that sport organizations, by creating a positive environment for their audience, may increase fans' motivation to invest time, energy, and value in promoting that brand with their personal network. Sport organizations understand that

virtual environments are becoming just as important as in person experiences (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Digital communications allow sport organizations to turn what was traditionally a passive experience watching a game from the sidelines into an interactive one of communicating directly with the organization or other fans (Wallace et al., 2011). An additional benefit of social media for a sport organization is that the platforms offer deeper insights into how successful the organization is with their brand and the fans as noted by Kunkel and Biscaia (2020). The athletes of these organizations can interact with fans in ways they never could before. Carlson and Donovan (2013) noted that athletes attract considerable interest from the public which can in turn be leveraged to build their own personal brands leading to unique sponsor or partnerships. The sport organization is also able to see how many followers each team or player has.

Another way that social media impacts sport consumers is that, in many cases, users are a part of the experience for the other fans and are co-producers of the product (Magnusen et al., 2012). Online sport consumption is evolving outside of the in person events which results in sport consumers gathering online and forming communities (Frederick et al., 2012). These communities are not confined by geography, are supportive of their members (Luedicke & Giesler, 2007) and unite through their shared and social experiences (Cova, 1997). This takes place online in “virtual fan communities” which are defined by Walker et al. (2017) as an online platform for fans to interact and share information. In this space consumers are becoming pivotal authors of the brand’s shared story (Gensler et al., 2013) which can draw people who were not previously consumers into customers. However, that often happens outside the organization’s control (Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009). This exchange of information between users

has been called peer-to- peer communication (Brodie et al., 2013) or co-creation, the latter by Abeza et al. (2020) as the “creation and collaborative exchange of customer made content” (p.474). Sawhney et al. (2005) argued that through co-creation the customer is able to interact, communicate, and in certain cases cooperate to achieve experiences that serve the community better. Libai (2010) asserted that consumers assign value to the organization based on their peer-to-peer bonds calling it a “linked value” even though the organization is not in complete control of that experience. The combination of co-creators, brands, and athlete sponsors help create the sport brand ecosystem which are interconnected via their interaction with the sport environment (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020).

Social Media in Women’s Sports and the WNBA

The objective of the following section explores social media and its niche topics, which supplements linear TV and can reach audiences without geographical obstacles. This section begins to show an overview of the WNBA and its player’s presence across social media.

The above literature has demonstrated the impacts of social media on consumers, how businesses can enhance their strategies by using social media, and why it is ideal for sport organizations. It can be argued that a comprehensive social media strategy is vital for the success of women’s sport organization today because they are a niche sport outside America’s “Big 4,” the NBA, the National Football League, Major League Baseball, and the National Hockey League. A niche sport appeals to a smaller, more focused audience. There are four categories of niche sports, (1) minor league sports, (2)

indoor alternatives to traditional sports (such as Arena Football), (3) emerging or newer sports, and (4) gender specific leagues (Jackson et al., 2017).

The WNBA has TV contracts to air games; however, it is nowhere near the NBA's contract financial amount. That is case for many women's sport activities, as demonstrated in a 25-year longitudinal study conducted by Cooky et al. (2015) on the way women's sports are televised. The study reveals that women's coverage is making up ground; however, compared to their male counterparts' women have nowhere near equal coverage. The study examined live events, print, online, social media, and television coverage finding consistently that a vast majority of coverage focuses on men (96%) when compared to women (4%). Bruce (2012) argued that sport coverage that is overwhelmingly male focused tends to produce coverage by, for, and about men. That type of coverage teaches the audience, both male and female, that stories about men are more important. In their research, Sveinson and Hoerber (2016) expanded on this phenomenon, stating that women are marginalized by sport fan culture for being women, as sport organizations do not expect them to be fans.

The lack in coverage and the new viewing options such as mobile apps or social media content, have impacted the way spectators consume content. Additionally there is an increase in consumers finding alternate media options (Pedersen, 2017) as they are shifting away from linear TV to digital platforms and streaming devices called non-linear TV (Verna, 2019). This combination of behaviors is disrupting the sport media industry (Turner, 2007). Consumers can choose what sport they want to watch and how they want to watch it, creating an opportunity for leagues like the WNBA to attract more viewers. Major TV partnerships are still important to the WNBA, but they are exploring new

ways, primarily through social media to reach their audience. The Twitter streaming deal includes highlights, features, and commentary from analysts who will also interact with fans. The head of Twitter's sports partnerships, TJ Adeshola, said, "The W(NBA) has been a top sports partner of ours for many years and we're pumped to offer live WNBA games with a Twitter twist, to basketball fans across the globe" (Impey, 2020).

The WNBA has twelve teams in the United States, but a vast majority of their athletes play overseas during the off season. They have a fanbase that they can merge with the WNBA, and vice versa, augmenting relationships the organizations build with their tech savvy fans globally (Abeza et al., 2017). The more geographically dispersed the fan bases are, the more they need to find a space to connect with one another and the organization. Social media is ideal because the digital environment does not have physical boundaries, creating new opportunities for sport organizations to seek out new revenue and international audiences (Cousens et al., 2001). Social media empowers the league and players to control their own content and engage the passion of their fans, creating communities of interest well beyond national boundaries (Bruce, 2012).

Table 3 shows statistics for WNBA's and its teams' accounts on each social media platform. This chart shows the number of followers along with the player on the team with the largest number of followers on that platform from a verified account. Players are labeled with their code PW#. YouTube was omitted due to the lack of consistent data across the teams. However, it should be noted that the WNBA's YouTube has almost 200K subscribers and over 70 million views. Their most watched video was of Player W7 explaining a highlight in August 2013, generating over 8.2 million views. If a team or player had under 1,000 followers, they were not included in the chart because

they are not considered verified on the platform. All data from this chart was compiled by visiting their corresponding social media sites and inputting the numbers. According to an Opendorse study, social media growth among WNBA athletes from 2019 to 2020 grew 37.06% across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (Weber, 2020), and the numbers below confirm this unprecedented growth.

When browsing the teams' accounts, a few interesting points stood out. First, every team had a Facebook page, but it was difficult to find active Facebook pages for individual players. It is likely that players have pages due to Facebook's requirement that individuals monetize their corresponding Instagram pages. Every team's Facebook page had streaming games and event reminders that can be added to user's calendars. Most Facebook content was duplicative of their Instagram and Twitter content. On Instagram, players have larger followings, and many of the top followed players had a larger following than their team or, in Player W7's case, than the league itself. On TikTok, neither of the teams nor all players had verified accounts. Several players who have hashtags have large followings, but apart from players who have been in the league less than three years, there is not a large WNBA TikTok presence. For example, as of early September 2021, the WNBA had over 825K subscribers on YouTube and 17.4 million likes on their TikTok page. Additionally, on TikTok the WNBA hashtag had nearly 753 million views in just under four years compared to YouTube's 70 million views in 16 years. The most watched video on the WNBA TikTok was a highlight featuring Player W9 walking into her first game in July 2020, with over 7.2 million views. This is particularly interesting considering Player W9's team does not have a TikTok account to maximize this opportunity.

Table 3
WNBA Social Media followers

Organization	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	TikTok
WNBA	1.15M	1.2M	718K	825.7K
Atlanta Dream	85K	44.1K PW1 (110K)	56.6K PW13 (13.9K)	40.2K Team
Chicago Sky	83K	110K PW2 (881K)	66.2K PW2 (363.6K)	9K Team
Connecticut Sun	30K	44.1K PW3 (131K)	41.3K PW3 (12.6K)	N/A PW3 (10.9K)
Dallas Wings	64K	77.3K PW4 (126K)	36.4K PW4 (39.4K)	N/A PW19 (21.4K)
Indiana Fever	84K	66.7K PW5 (315K)	55.1K PW5 (95.6K)	32.3K Team
Las Vegas Aces	36K	110K PW6 (773K)	55.3K PW14 (96.1K)	15.6K PW14 (10.4K)
Los Angeles Sparks	194K	29K PW7 (1.4M)	101K PW7 (123.8K)	317K PW7 (1.4M)
Minnesota Lynx	154K	105K PW8 (81.9K)	101K PW15 (33.8K)	2.5K Team
New York Liberty	107K	79.2K PW9 (691K)	65.9K PW9 (129K)	N/A PW9 (262.2K)
Phoenix Mercury	129K	114K PW10 (1M)	70.1K PW10 (572.2K)	11K Team
Seattle Storm	97K	127K PW11 (623K)	86.4K PW11 (169.9K)	5.7K PW16 (7K)
Washington Mystics	45K	81.6K PW12 (466K)	57.2K PW12 (269.3K)	1.8K PW12 (10.4K)

Note: As of SEP 2021

An example of posts on each of these platforms is shown in Appendix B with the engagement rates of those posts. Opendorse’s State of Sponsored Social Report found that athletes outperformed for their team or organization by over 3 times when

calculating engagement rates. The overall engagement rates across the global sport organizations that they studied were: 3.9% for athletes, 1.2% for teams, and 1% for leagues. However, WNBA statics are: 6.9% for athletes, 1.6% for teams, and 1.1% for the league which are all above average. In fact, their athletes outperformed athletes in all other leagues: NHL 6.5%, NFL 5.2%, MLB 3.7%, MLS 3.4%, and NBA 3%. Additionally, their teams outperformed all other teams in these leagues, and the league itself was tied for second with the MLS, the MLB leading at 2% (Weber, 2020). WNBA is effective in their engagement, but they are towards the bottom of the charts with the amount of content and number of fans.

Additionally, social media has impacted the WNBA through the creation of supplemental sites providing vertical content, or content intended for a niche market with specific goals, such as ESPN launching the ESPNW site in 2010 focusing on coverage of women's sports (Fink, 2013). These sites are not the only place for specific content: as mentioned earlier, co-creation provides space to many other WNBA and women's sport digital blogs and social media sites. For example, OvertimeWBB, a brand from the Overtime sports platform, has almost 500 thousand Instagram followers. As explained by their content manager Chloe Pavelech, "Women's sports have been underrepresented for a very long time, and Overtime saw it as a chance to give more coverage to girls and young women who really deserve it" (Kleen, 2020). Vertical marketing practices can also be seen in Just Women's Sport, WSLAM, WNBA Kicks, The Gist USA, and On Her Turf.

Recently, Togethxr was created by four female athletes, including WNBA player W11. They market themselves as a digital multidimensional media and commerce

platform working to uplift the next generation of women in sports. Cofounder and soccer star Alex Morgan explained, “It was important to give a space and platform to all girls and women who feel like sports are a part of their life, in a big way or small” (Betancourt, 2021).

Social Media Summary

The above literature demonstrates what social media is and how it impacts sports, specifically the WNBA. The key takeaway from this is that social media provides a medium that is optimal for the WNBA. Social media is not constrained to geography, is less expensive than linear TV, and provides a place for likeminded fans. Existing research has focused primarily on the organizations and not the players themselves. However, further research is needed to understand the impact of the individual player’s use of social media.

The literature is also incomplete because the offseason remains unexplored, which is a crucial element to understanding the WNBA’s organizational setup. When the WNBA was created in the late 1990s, teams played during the summer in the unoccupied NBA gyms. Val Ackerman was chosen to be the WNBA’s first president. She stated that part of the goal was to be “about year-round basketball, use of NBA infrastructure and arenas in the offseason, the possibility of overlapping fan bases, and connecting with women in a new way” (Lefton & Lombardo, 2016). Additionally, 63% of current WNBA players play overseas when the WNBA is in the offseason;⁷ another 5% of active players work as broadcasters,⁸ and other players work as coaches. This makes the WNBA unique and gives them the potential to be relevant to their followers year-round. Some research

⁷ <https://www.wnba.com/wnba-players-playing-overseas/>

⁸ <https://www.wnba.com/news/the-bosswomen-in-broadcasting-roles/>

has taken place on this topic because of the COVID-19 shutdowns, but more research is necessary for a complete understanding.

The next section, building on the research from Funk (2017), examines the fan experience on social media, using the Sport Experience Design (SX) framework. This framework explains the experience and the factors involved in creating and understanding the experience from a high level. Throughout this section, principles of Grönroos' (2004) relationship marketing approach will be integrated into the SX to explain the messages that organizations can apply to their social media strategies and experience management.

Sports Experience (SX) Design Framework

In this section, I examine the Sport Experience Design (SX) framework from a strategic perspective with a focus on the impact of social media technology. The three key elements of the framework, sport organization, sport user, sport context, are comprehensively examined. Examples from the WNBA are used throughout to reinforce the reader's understanding of the framework. The customer experience, as described by Funk (2017) is the outcome of a two-way interaction with the user and the product attributes throughout the journey. Building on the SX strategic overview, relationship marketing is then investigated as a tactical way for practitioners to create a two-way interactive plan to engage with their fans and stakeholders. The three principal categories of relationship marketing, interaction, value, and communication are investigated again with specific WNBA examples on how relationship marketing fits in the SX framework. I will conclude by describing how the research will apply the SX framework to examine the fan experience of the WNBA through social media.

Sports are unique in relation to most retail businesses because they sell much more than just tangible products; they sell an experience which is similar to a concert experience. The SX framework explains the design factors in the context that influence the user and organization interactions. The SX framework posits that two elements, the sport user, and the sport organization, have specific goals that unite the third group, sport context. When an organization designs and provides a desirable experience, the customer is satisfied. This framework suggests a comprehensive consumer-centered approach centering around cognitive, organizational, and physical design domains (Funk, 2017). The cognitive domain consists of the emotions that influence how the sport user interacts with the sport experience. The organizational domain is the structure created for the experience. The physical domain includes the activity requirements related to the design features (Funk, 2017). This interrelationship is depicted in Figure 2.

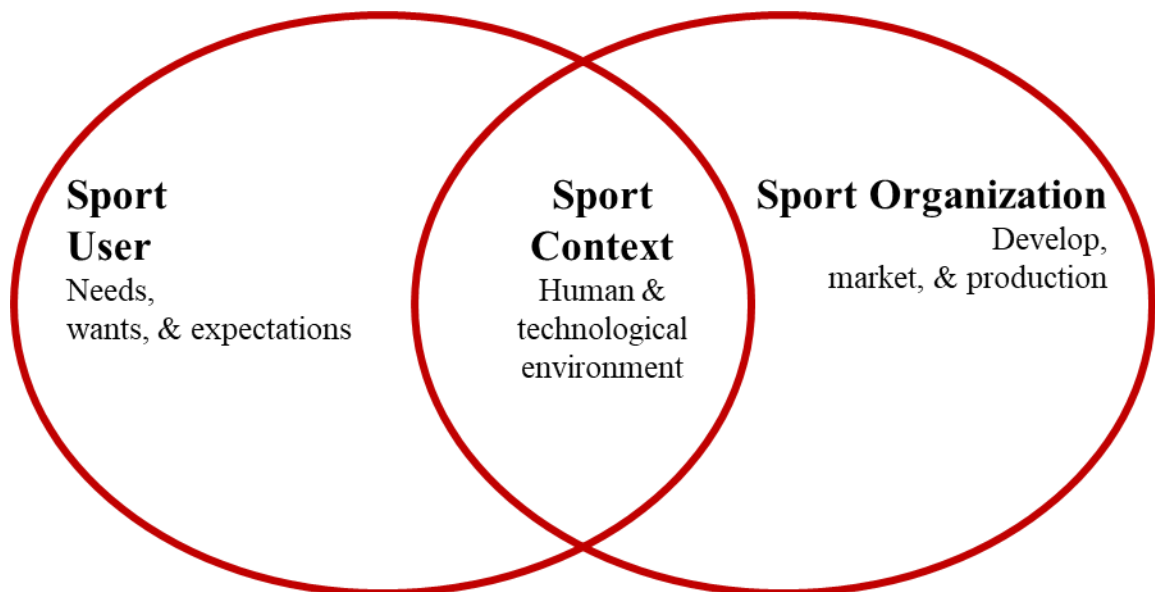


Figure 2. Sport Experience Design Framework

The sport organization builds a product or experience that takes into consideration both physical and cognitive features to ensure the sport user is satisfied. Not all sports are an organized event; for example, someone participating in a sport themselves. This is not to suggest that the organization is nonessential because the participant may have learned of it from an organization or purchased equipment from an organization, even though they conducted the activity on their own. The organization provides a product or system that is designed for the user to navigate through. This design has three key elements: usability, accessibility, and pleasure. Usability of the product is judged by the sport user on the ease of use, efficiency, comfort, learning, adaptability, durability and safety of the product or experience., although the organization does not own the social media platform, they must manage the content used on these sites. With this type of technology-driven experience, the organization must pay greater attention to the design elements (Funk, 2017). Accessibility is the design element that allows for inclusivity for all sport users, and is related to usability; however, it is much more expensive. An example of this are users that have a variety of language or cultural requirements, or disabilities. The sport organization can then create ways to expand its reach to sport users of all types of backgrounds and needs. Finally, the design element of pleasure is the way the sport organization can optimize the emotional reactions of the sport users. Pleasure is the subjective way the user assigns value to the experience from a personal point of view.

The sport organization is the larger, goal-seeking entity that creates and delivers the experience to the user. For the purpose of this research the sport organization is either the WNBA or a specific WNBA team. The WNBA develops and secures the necessary resources to be successful. The sport organization maintains the brand to which

consumers attach value, and, as noted by Parganas et al. (2015) a powerful sport brand has the power to turn casual fans into paying customers.

The sport user, on the other hand, is the consumer who is experiencing the sport or sport product through their interactive journey. In the case of the WNBA, the sport user could be either the fan, spectator, or consumer who watches the games or consumes the related content in some way. Through technology, the organization intuitively creates a more personalized experience for the user; this is gleaned from behavioral data and demographic information. This information can be further used to develop segmentation data and consumer profiles. The sport user has certain needs, wants and expectations that have shaped the decisions that the sport organization must make to achieve their goals (Funk, 2017). Thus, social media allows the user to have a personalized experience that brings pleasure while the organization is collecting information related to attitudes, motives, interests, and preferences a valuable product that the customer will return to time and again.

The sport context is the environment in which the sport user experiences the sport organization's product. The environment that the sport organization creates could be either human or technological interactions with the product, other fans, or the experience. These interactions are known as touchpoints. Funk (2017) defines them as a series of direct and indirect two-way interactions across all channels during a single sport experience episode. Touchpoints take place prior to a live event, during the event, and after, in or out of the arena. Purchasing the ticket, tailgating activities, watching game produced content on the jumbotron, interacting with other fans, or posting and tagging your location on your social media are all examples of touchpoints.

In the sport context environment, there are five situational factors that the sport organizations must consider for the user that impact how their behavior is influenced. The first is the physical surrounding, defined as the physical stimuli encountered during the experience. For the WNBA, this could be attending a live game or consuming content in a digital environment such as a mobile device or on a streaming service. Next is the social surroundings, the social interactions involved in the experience. For the WNBA, this would be sitting with other fans at the venue or communicating with each other about the game on social media. The third factor, temporal pressure, is the time needed for the experience. For the WNBA, this is when the game or content is being consumed. The next factor is the antecedent state defined as the sports users' preexisting mood. Simply put, this is the sport user's emotional state. Finally, the task definition factor is what needs to happen in order to achieve the experience. For the WNBA, this means acquiring tickets or downloading an app to stream the game (Pizzo et al., 2020). Because of technology, traditional boundaries have changed, and therefore it is imperative that research is conducted addressing these digital touchpoints throughout the user's journey.

The SX Framework provides both practitioners and researchers a broader understanding of design elements and environmental factors needed to achieve the goals of both the sport organization and sport user. However, due to established and developing technologies, organizations must plan holistically because they have less control over the way users choose to consume content. Social media creates a significant amount of content which impacts the user experience. What is selected to post on social media is an area that should be further researched by applying SX to include other producers of content such as interactions from content creators who are not directly aligned with the

organization. The WNBA's domain is limited to either the league or teams. However, social media information is produced and distributed by entities such as athletes, content creators, prominent fan communities or other influencers. These entities exist both dependently and independently from the organization. For example, players are employed by the organization and represent their brand which is why the SX has traditionally defined them as a part of the organization. However, in large part through social media, the players create their own brand image and content which can be independent from the organization. This emerging trend influences both the organization as well as the individual's unique brand. The two entities contribute to each other's goals while independent actions are occurring.

The SX framework provides a conceptual understanding of sport experiences; researchers use a four-step approach to examine the application of the SX design in an organization. First, the organization must identify the touchpoints along the customer's journey that are the most critical for achieving the organization's goal. Second, research evaluating the performance of activities should be conducted. Third, using the previous two steps the sport organization must adapt and refine their processes to support the findings. Finally, the organization should create a way to continually improve on these touchpoints and the customer journey (Funk, 2017).

The concept of relationship marketing provides practical, strategic applications. Blending these two frameworks allows sport organizations to have a robust understanding of their users. By using a relationship marketing approach, sport organizations can communicate, listen, address consumer needs and desires, and maintain and enhance their consumer base on a regular basis (Abeza et al., 2020). Relationship

marketing states that there is a mutual relationship which creates value for the customer as well as the provider. This gives the consumer a feeling of control and a sense of trust (Grönroos, 2004), and reinforces the need for the organizational domain to be expanded. Social media brand interactions which include the sport organization, player's personal brand, sponsors, etc. all contribute to the experience and should be understood. Second, limited research is done concerning out-of-season experiences. This can include the off-season, forced stoppage of play such as COVID-19, or while an athlete is injured. Thus, social media allows brands to stay relevant to their audience beyond live games or events.

Relationship Marketing

This portion of the literature defines relationship marketing and shows how it is used in sports through social media, and how it is interconnected with the SX framework. Relationship marketing is a holistic approach to marketing that focuses on the integration of all marketing activities towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Hill & Perry, 2002) with the purpose of retaining customers through long-term mutual satisfaction (Grönroos, 2004, 2017). The three tenants of relationship marketing are (1) interactions, (2) value, and (3) communication (Grönroos, 2004).

Interaction

Interaction between the organization and the consumer is at the core of a relationship marketing plan and can be defined as either small acts or larger planned communications all interrelated and with the purpose of developing trust and value between the organization and consumer. It is a two-way exchange of content (Abeza et al., 2017) that is mutually beneficial to both the organization and the consumer. This is

addressed in the SX, explaining that the consumer interacts with multiple design relevant factors of the sport event from deciding to purchase tickets to experiencing the venue and all the stimuli, as well as the actual sporting event. The sports context is distinctive because when fans experience the game, it is being produced, delivered, and consumed simultaneously. The fans are watching the game while the athletes are producing and delivering the game which results in fans taking in and reacting to the event. In many cases the fans are a part of the experience for the other fans, consumers not at the venue, and producers of the product (Magnusen et al., 2012).

In the social media environment, interactions are practically limitless. The sport user will interact with the organization, other users, external influencers, sponsors, the platform itself, and even the athletes. Social media is the technology that “facilitates interactivity and co-creation that allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between organizations and individuals” (Filo, 2015, p. 167). This means that the interactions are not limited to a certain fixed time, and can be on-going and personalized, giving the SX framework a potential to be updated to address more than the content produced by the WNBA or a certain team.

The internet has had a significant impact on the way people experience the world around them. Tapscott (2009) argued that the current generation is unique compared to previous ones due to their experience of digital technologies. These “digital natives” grew up under the influence of the internet and other modern information technologies, which has affected the way they think, learn, and understand the world around them. For this reason, he named them the “Net Generation” because they understand the world differently from people who were not immediately subjected technology. Social media

has also disrupted our collective behaviors. Tiago and Veríssimo (2014) noted that real-world social relationships have migrated to the virtual world, allowing global communities to develop around shared interests.

Building on that idea, O'Reilly (2012) created the term "Web 2.0," defined as "a collection of open-source, interactive and user-controlled online applications expanding the experiences, knowledge, and market power of the users as participants in business." Organizations seeking to capitalize on the Web 2.0 environment and connect with the Net Generation can use social media as a way to both share content as well as listen to consumers.

The nature of social media encourages interactivity with users and content creators. This research will seek to understand how the WNBA uses social media to interact with consumers and shape their experience as described in the SX. This will be done by asking research question 1: What is the nature and scope of the Indiana Fever team's consumer interactions and experiences with social media (organizational, users, and co-created)?

Value

Creating two-way communication and interaction delivers value to the customer as well as the sport organization, and this value is the second tenant of relationship marketing. The output of the creation of perceived values develops with the on-going process of both communication and interaction (Grönroos, 2004). In relationship marketing the objective is how the relationship itself functions and leads to value creation and satisfaction for the customer, with the value occurring over time, hence the term value generating process (Abeza et al., 2020; Grönroos, 2017). Value for the customer is

facilitated by the organization and with the interactions between the organization and consumers, creating mutual exchanges of benefits (Steinhoff et al., 2019). For the consumer, the speed and scope of communication and interactions between them and the organization in the digital environment creates value that leads to increased satisfaction (Abeza et al., 2017). All sports transactions involve some type of relationship some are explicit whereas some are unrecognized (Bee & Kahle, 2006) therefore shifting marketing toward practices that place importance on flexibility, specialization, and relationship management (Cousens et al., 2001) in sports is an effective strategic approach that can be accomplished in part by using social media .

For sport organizations, the foremost challenges are retaining a passionate fan base and enhancing fan loyalty (Abeza et al., 2017) which is why mutually beneficial value is vital to success. Relationship marketing's long-term value creates opportunities among sport organizations and various corporate partners (Cousens et al., 2001). The perceived value created using relationship marketing has been proven to improve financial performance and reduce costs (Achen, 2017). This value results in greater customer satisfaction and increased loyalty (Abeza et al., 2017, 2020), binding the consumer to the team. A relationship marketing approach allows the sport organization to better understand the needs and wants of their customers as well as address any customer service issues in real time, which ultimately leads to great value. The touchpoints experienced by the sport user that are mediated by the sport organization could take place through social media using a relationship marketing approach. Social media allows these touchpoints to have value and to occur at any time without physical constraints.

For the NBA, the years between 1981 and 1996 serve as a prime example of successful relationship marketing. Cousens et al. (2001) described the state of the NBA in 1981 as being in a financial and organizational crisis, with 23 of the teams losing \$15 to \$20 million during the season. Shortly after, David Stern was appointed the new commissioner and was charged with creating a culture of success across the league. He implemented a relationship marketing strategy between teams, sponsors, and fans focusing on long term partnerships. To strengthen relationships with sponsors and build the brand, the league spent quality time with customers to figure out what they wanted to accomplish through consumer feedback programs. He established business-to-business entertainment, promotions, and incentives. This was the era that brought big name shoe partnerships such as Nike and Michael Jordan to the forefront. Stern cultivated symbiotic relationships with various sponsors such as Coca-Cola, McDonalds, and Reebok, worth millions of dollars of marketing without having to spend their own money. The NBA delivered content off the court showcasing the athletes' lives, community involvement, and feel-good stories delivering entertainment beyond the game. Under Stern's leadership, the NBA transformed from disjointed competing teams with no collective purpose to the global leader in sports marketing with over \$1.2 billion in sales in 1996 (Cousens et al., 2001). This success directly led to the creation of the WNBA. And while all of this took place prior to the advent of social media, the lessons and approach can be applied today.

The research will identify the value of social media content from the point of view of the organization. Social media and other related technologies have enabled organizations to use data regarding customers preferences in order to maintain valuable

relationships with them (Cousens et al., 2001). Research question 2 asks: From an organizational perspective, how is value created for Indiana Fever team's consumers via social media? This will be answered primarily through interviews.

Communication

The communication process as defined by Grönroos (2004) is the act of transmitting content by an organization meant to inform the consuming public about their service. In the sports context there are significant themes that have been identified by Abeza et al. (2017) who conducted a netnographical study of key social media platforms as a relationship marketing tool in professional sports. They found that effective communication between sport organizations and sport users fell into one of seven categories (1) updating, (2) publicizing, (3) selling, (4) promoting, (5) appreciating, (6) spreading, and (7) servicing. Below are examples of each of these categories related to the WNBA. Social media screenshot examples of posts of each of these categories can be found in Appendix C.

Organizations used the theme of updating their audiences with relevant information surrounding the team or players. In the WNBA this can be updating consumers about injuries or starting lineups. For instance, teams use social media such as Twitter to highlight the five starting players of the game. The Chicago Sky use a graphic, include a hashtag, tag each player, and tag a related sponsor⁹. The Sky are the organization as defined by the SX and the players and sponsors other actors in the experience.

⁹ <https://twitter.com/chicagosky>

Publicizing events are based around image building activities to engender community support. An example of this is the former Seattle Storm's Player W19 who has led a toy drive for Seattle Children's hospital for the past six years and counting. The way that she advertises it is through her social media, the team's pages, and the hospital¹⁰. After she collects the gifts and donations, she takes it to the hospital where she, the team, the WNBA, the hospital, and local news share the good news story with their viewers (Feinberg, 2019).

The category of selling is encouraging consumer attitudes to result in purchasing a product or ticket. The WNBA created the "Orange Hoodie" campaign to garner enthusiasm for the 2020 season. The hoodie was made popular by the late Kobe Bryant who wore it to various women's basketball games. The campaign consisted of athletes in the NBA posting pictures of themselves wearing the hoodie on their social media then tagging the WNBA¹¹. The WNBA players wore their hoodies when they entered the stadium prior to the games as well. It soon became the top selling item on the Fanatics website which resulted in increased exposure for the WNBA (Kleen, 2020).

The theme of promoting focuses on contests, giveaways, or other activities again with the intent to sell a product or ticket. This can be seen with theme and giveaway nights highlighting a community, sponsor, or cause. The Indiana Fever combine their theme of the night with a related giveaway. An example of this is their "Breast Health Awareness" night where players wear pink uniforms that would later be auctioned off for

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/seattlestorm>

¹¹ <https://insidesportsjournal.com>

charity at the game. The Fever gave away themed tee-shirts to the fans as well. This was shown on their social media platforms as well as the night's sponsor's social media¹².

Sport organizations can build relationships with fans with appreciation content. This is when the organization recognizes the fans in unique ways. The Minnesota Lynx takes a two-way communication approach to their fan appreciation content. They have the fans vote for their favorite moments of the season with a survey that includes their name, email, and a few things they are interested to know more about. Then the fan is entered to win signed memorabilia from the team¹³. The winning fan then posts a video or picture of their win on their social media tagging the team to be reshared.

Spreading is a method of sharing relevant content from others in such a way that their reach expands to a larger audience. This can be thought of as using an influencer to tell your organization's story and expose those followers to your content. For instance, NBA players posting content about WNBA games or players such as this tweet by NBA star LeBron James¹⁴. The WNBA, team, and player can reshare the post furthering their audience. This brings greater audience exposure to the game.

Finally, servicing is a way that the organization's sponsors can publicly show their support resulting promotional opportunities of their products to the organization's fans. This can be seen with shoe, clothing, or fitness gear brands linking their products with the athletes using them in games, in practices, or in their day-to-day life influencing the fans to want the same products the elite athletes use. In the case of Player W2, she

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/indianafever>

¹³ <https://twitter.com/minnesotalynx>

¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/kingjames>

debuted her sponsored shoes, through a social media campaign across her pages in addition to TV and other digital marketing¹⁵.

Building relationships using the above categories is done by using the two-way communications model which has the aim of developing or strengthening the relationship rather than a one-way fixed message. The model in this case is described by Grunig (1992) as a set of values and a pattern of behavior that characterize the approach taken towards a campaign. Two-way asymmetric communication is a model that is also known as “scientific persuasion” which was developed by Grunig & Hunt (1984) where an organization uses social science methods to create a more persuasive communications strategy. This method relies heavily on feedback from the audience to communicate with the target audience rather than simply communicating to that audience, it is an exchange of information (Heino, 2006). Two-way asymmetrical model has the purpose of gaining a mutual understanding and has a balance between the organization and the audience (Grunig, 1992; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The development of new and easily accessible technology allows sport organizations to engage with their consumers in ways they could not have done previously. Relationship marketing has grown because of the use of technology, (Stavros & Westberg, 2009) specifically with social media. The sport organization can understand their consumers and deliver relevant content to their consumers and assess their value to the organization (Bee & Kahle, 2006; Cousens et al., 2001).

The research will use the seven categories as a baseline of codes when analyzing the collected data as well as discovering any additional emerging themes. This will be

¹⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/candaceparker>

done by describing each social media post. Research question 3 addresses this section asking: From an organizational perspective, how is social media planned and distributed to consumers by the Indiana Fever and their players?

Ultimately with the SX providing the conceptual framework and relationship marketing providing the strategic and tactical approach they work together creating value between the user and the organization. The SX is based on the design of the factors that influence interactions which contribute to the satisfaction or value for the user. The SX framework's application to research regarding emerging technologies states that the sport organization must assess how, when, and where sport interactions are co-created and why users respond differently (Funk, 2017). Relationship marketing demonstrates that through communication and interactions an organization can understand the values placed on the experience. Using relationship marketing tactics, organizations can understand their user needs, a crucial part of the SX framework. Organizations can then use this to improve their product and content, enhancing the value of the experience. Organizations can look beyond their mediated content to social media that they are not in direct control of to analyze the relationships taking place at various touchpoints in the experience. Relationship marketing uses communication and interaction between organizations and their users or stakeholders in a collaborative manner (Grönroos, 2004). Touchpoints are important in the sport industry because customer experience is co-created through interactions with service touchpoints (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Linking all these interactions with a design framework we can see that encounters between customer and service provider that go beyond transactional exchanges contribute to memorable experiences (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010).

Next Steps

The literature review explained the SX framework as a conceptual way for organizations and researchers to understand the sport user experiences. Relationship marketing demonstrated a way to action that understanding in a strategic and tactical manner for the WNBA or a team. The social media literature described platforms used and the benefits of them. What was missing is the need for understanding how social media fits into the SX framework which includes other entities outside the direct control of the organization. Kunkel et al. (2020) notes that there is a lack of research related to sport brand relationships when multiple brands interact either directly or indirectly. A sport research panel concluded that there is a need to diversify research to account for the impact that technology has on the experience and how the organization should respond (Funk, 2017). The research will apply the SX framework by investigating the WNBA's social media content in conjunction with their four-step approach as described earlier.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Research Questions

To understand how the WNBA's social media content fits into the SX framework the research examined each of the three components of relationship marketing to optimize consumer experiences. Research question 1 focuses on the interaction component, research question 2 concentrates on communication, and research question 3 centers around the value.

Research Question (RQ) 1: What is the nature and scope of the Indiana Fever team's consumer interactions and experiences with social media (organizational, users, and co-created)? This will be addressed using secondary data from social media posts and comments, engagement rates, and documents.

RQ 2: From an organizational perspective, how is social media planned and distributed to consumers by the Indiana Fever and their players? This will be studied through secondary data from coded social media posts and interviews.

RQ 3: From an organizational perspective, how is value created for Indiana Fever team's consumers via social media? This will be answered with both primary and secondary data, with primary data coming from interviews.

Methodology

A pilot study was conducted using semi-structured interviews of both employees of various WNBA teams as well as consumers of the WNBA. The research question for that study was: What is the nature and scope of the WNBA's consumer interactions and experiences with social media and other digital platforms? These interviews were an

attempt to understand their perceptions of all the digital offerings of the WNBA during the lead up to and completion of the 2020 WNBA season. The 2020 WNBA season took place in a bubble which forced all content to be shared to consumers in a digital manner. The pilot study research concentrated on the digital environment rather than the traditional physical or fixed environment that the WNBA (the sport organization) helped create and that sport user experienced. This environment was created across platforms, systems, and content creators culminating in a unique personalized experience for the sport user.

The pilot study had significant limitations, primarily related to access to participants and data. Of the 12 WNBA teams contacted, representatives from only 3 teams participated whereas fan interviews consisted of 11 participants. Each of the interviews lasted on average approximately 45 minutes and were conducted either over a video call or voice only calling. Although it was difficult to gain significant insights from the limited participation in this study, one clear theme emerged: the use of social media. Those interviewed noted most of their content consumption came directly from social media platforms during the COVID hiatus. It was also noted that it wasn't simply information from the teams that was being consumed and shared. Employees from the WNBA stated that they used social media to stay connected with their players because they were dispersed around the world. Fans noted that they followed players more than they had in the past because, as one participant stated, "We were all in the same boat, stuck in our homes not knowing what to do next or how to interact with anyone." Therefore, we found that the subject of this paper's research should be reconceptualized to focus on only the social media aspects of the WNBA which would include the players.

The decision to pivot to focus on social media was also reinforced because of the public access to social media accounts ensuring that sufficient data would be collected.

Ultimately, the pilot study validated the need to shift into a qualitative case study approach for social media in the WNBA and to update the research questions.

A qualitative research method was employed given the subjective and often personal meanings attached to sport experiences by those who participate in them. Brustad (2009) stated that sport researchers must understand that sport revolves around participation and human interaction. Qualitative methods attempt to understand a phenomenon in its natural environment to make sense of the meaning people attach to it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Specifically, this research used a case study methodology because it allows for extensive data collection and a greater understanding of the topic. This is because a case study is conducted over a set time frame, using “detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). Yin (2003) outlines three main criteria to follow when choosing to use a case study method. The first is defining the type of research questions to use, asking “what” or “how” or “why.” This research asks what the nature of the social media offerings are and how they are perceived by consumers. Answering those what and how questions will directly impact why social media has value for both the organization as well as the consumers. The second criteria for a case study are the degree of control the researcher has over the data collection. If the researcher has less control, then a case study is recommended. In doing the pilot study a key limitation was the minimal control over collecting the data and therefore a case study meets this criterion. The final criteria that Yin uses is that a case

study is best applied to contemporary events rather than historical. In this research, the WNBA's social media is examined by applying the Sports Experience design framework as well as relationship marketing.

Data Collection

The case study analyzed the WNBA's social media with detailed focus on a single team with the purpose of answering the above stated research questions. A single team was selected in order to gather a complete data set from both the players and organization. The team selected is the Indiana Fever for multiple reasons. First, they are a smaller market team so the data collected would be more manageable. Second, during the pilot study their team leadership participated and was willing to continue with this research. That allowed access to the team that I would not have otherwise been able to achieve.

Data for a case study is collected in the natural setting from multiple sources of data instead of one single source (Creswell, 2009). Multiple sources of information were collected which included interviews, observations, and documents as described by Creswell 2009 and Yin 2003. Figure 3 below depicts the data sequence flow chart for this research. The data was collected in three sequential stages as they relate to relationship marketing to address the three research questions. The data collected is from both the sport organization, the Fever, as well as the players who had public and active social media accounts during the lead up to the 2020 season. Although each stage focuses primarily on one of the research questions, they also impact the holistic understanding of each other as depicted in the chart with the arrows.

The first stage uses the relationship marketing category of interaction to address RQ1. Interaction is defined in relationship marketing by Abeza et al., (2017) as a two-way exchange of content which has benefits for both the organization and the consumer. This stage of the research defines and organizes what social media content the organization offers and what the consumers do with the content, for example sharing or commenting on the posts. The data in this stage is secondary and was collected through social media posts, calculating engagement rates, and documents. The second stage centers on the relationship marketing category of communication to answer RQ2. Communication is a process that supports the development and enhancement of consumer relationships (Grönroos, 2004). This stage uses secondary data that was collected in stage one and analyzes the information using a coding method. The third stage concentrates on the value of social media from the organization's perspective answering RQ3. In relationship marketing, value creation as well as consumer satisfaction is accomplished through the interactions from the communication process thus completing the figure's interconnectivity. This stage uses the data from the previous stages as well as a primary data source of the interviews with the Fever organization.

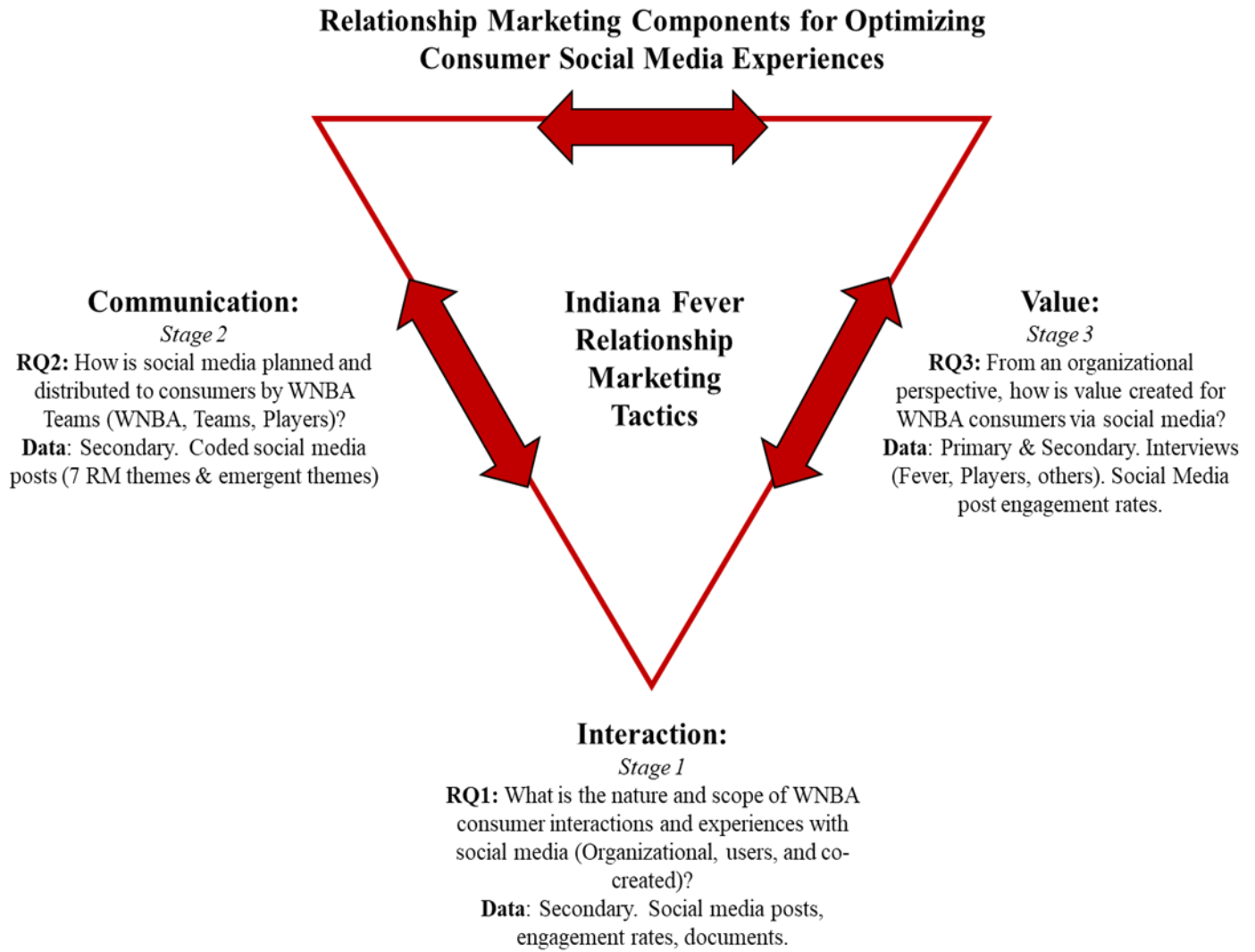


Figure 3 Data Sequence Flow Chart

Social Media data was collected from three platforms, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, each of which is a unique source. These three platforms were chosen because the WNBA uses them to engage with the audience. The WNBA and teams in the WNBA have aired games and events in live streams on both Facebook and Twitter with those watching able to instantly engage with the content and other viewers with comments and reactions. The WNBA, teams, and players use Instagram in interactive ways with game

related content as well as content from off the court. Data was not collected from YouTube or TikTok for this research. YouTube has been primarily used to show highlights after events and is less engaging than Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. TikTok is the newest platform and was not the primary site used by each of the teams at the time of the study.

The social media pages were collected from one team, the Indiana Fever, due to the access I gained through the pilot study. All players who were on the 2020 opening day Fever roster had their social media data collected on each of the three platforms. Not every player is active on social media, or they are active on certain platforms and not others. Data was collected only on the platforms used. The players' identities were replaced with a code, Player A through J. Although they are public figures and their social media pages are open to anyone, keeping the data anonymous ensured that an unbiased assessment could occur for both the research and the reader. Their names were replaced with the corresponding codes in the article and interview analysis as well.

Players C and D were drafted to the Fever in April because their data was collected from draft day and forward. None of the players had an active public Facebook account, so the only Facebook data collected was from the team's account. A key individual from the Fever with a public social media presence was collected as well. This is a former Indiana Fever player and at the time of collection, a Fever front office employee Player J. She is active on Instagram and Twitter. The table below lists each of the social media pages that data was collected from, the follower count during the selected timeframe, the posts, and comments. Table 4 shows the social media sites, platforms, followers, posts, and comments. Data was collected from March 2020, which

marked the announcement of the COVID-19 stoppage, through July 2020, when the season began.

Table 4
Collected social media sites statistics

Social Media Page	Platform	Followers	Posts	Comments
Player A	Instagram	35,476	5	72
Player A	Twitter	25,548	221	410
Player B	Twitter	2,803	18	28
Player B	Instagram	18,317	9	301
Player C	Instagram	20,917	5	284
Player C	Twitter	5,514	48	33
Player D	Instagram	8,581	4	116
Player E	Instagram	15,064	12	275
Player E	Twitter	4,777	48	23
Player F	Twitter	12,081	14	19
Player G	Instagram	22,105	9	302
Player G	Twitter	6,855	31	16
Player H	Instagram	33,565	12	481
Player H	Twitter	10,550	109	106
Player I	Instagram	71,615	2	237
Player J	Instagram	74,002	125	1,663
Player J	Twitter	73,869	272	547
Fever Team	Twitter	55,598	525	1,220
Fever Team	Facebook	71,147	122	2,336
Fever Team	Instagram	45,127	185	2,049
Total		613,511	1,776	10,518

Social media data was collected in two ways. An online tool was used to export data which gathered the statistical data required for this research. This tool exported the following categories: Who posted the content, date and time of posting, number of reactions, number of comments, number of shares (if applicable). That software exported the data to an excel spreadsheet. The tool did not export the comments associated with the posts. Comments from the posts are vital to this research to understand the interaction between consumers and the organization or player. To export the comments, the second

method of collection was employed which was the manual exporting of each comment. This was done by logging into the platform site from a laptop, filtering the posts to the specific time frame and copying and pasting the comments into a new column in the previously saved excel sheet. In total, we collected 1,776 posts with 10,518 comments, broken down as follows: 122 Facebook posts with 2336 comments, 1286 Twitter posts with 2,402 comments, and 368 Instagram posts with 5,780 comments.

Documents were collected in the form of relevant online articles from a national sports news site and a local Indianapolis news site. This was done by logging into each of these sites, putting the filter on for the research timeframe, and using WNBA search terms. After this was done the articles were exported as a PDF for analysis.

ESPN articles were selected as the National Sports News. This was based on the enduring media partnership with the WNBA. Additionally, at the time of this research ESPN had 34 straight months as the leading digital site for sports news with an average of over 91 million unique visitors which was 20.9 million more than the next highest sports site.¹⁶ Articles were selected by using the search terms for the timeframe, WNBA, Indiana Fever, and each player's name. The Fever were mentioned as a part of a list or in a minimum way on three occasions. They had a section dedicated to them in two articles related to the draft and upcoming season. There was one article in which the Fever was the primary theme which covered the Hall of Fame selection of Player J.

The Indy Star was selected as the Local Sports News site for articles. This newspaper is located in the same city as the Fever and has the largest circulation in the

¹⁶ <https://espnpressroom.com/us/press-releases/2021/01/espn-digital-in-2020-34-straight-months-at-no-1-espn-app-grows-leadership-position-by-42-percent-espn-tops-11-5-million-subscribers-social-climbs-to-no-1-for-best-year-on-record/>

entire state of Indiana with over 166,000 daily subscribers.¹⁷ During this timeframe, eleven articles were written which included interviews from the Fever. These articles covered coaching staff hirings, the Draft, Player J’s Hall of Fame announcement, social justice issues, season, and player previews. Those topics are represented across social media posts and comments. Table 5 lists the articles.

Table 5
Indiana Fever national and local articles

Date	Site	Title
3/18/2020	Indy Star	Former Indiana Miss Basketball April (McDivitt) Schilling joins Fever coaching staff
3/26/2020	Indy Star	2020 WNBA Draft will be held virtually without players, fans or media
4/5/2020	Indy Star	[Player J] Hall of Fame selection ‘a story book ending’
4/6/2020	ESPN	Why Naismith Hall of Famer [Player J] is the WNBA GOAT
4/17/2020	Indy Star	WNBA draft: [Player C]’s skill, intangibles make her a perfect fit for Indiana Fever
4/18/2020	Indy Star	‘You can’t pass up a player like that.’ What [Player J] was looking for in first draft as Fever GM
4/18/2020	ESPN	WNBA Power Rankings – Washington Mystics, Seattle Storm lead the way
5/29/2020	Indy Star	Without the benefit of training camp, Indiana Fever announce 2020 roster
6/3/2020	Indy Star	Fever coach Marianne Stanley on George Floyd death: ‘Now is the time for real change’
6/4/2020	ESPN	WNBA in early talks for 22-game regular season, sources say
6/5/2020	Indy Star	Indiana Fever players on fight for social justice; ‘We will no longer be silent’
6/15/2020	Indy Star	WNBA announces plans for 2020; games will be held at IMG Academy
6/20/2020	Indy Star	Fever rookie [Player C]: Competitor, inspiration, ready to return basketball
6/28/2020	Indy Star	Coronavirus ended her initial comeback but [Player I] is eager for second year in WNBA

¹⁷ <https://www.cision.com/2016/06/top-10-daily-newspapers-in-indiana-2/>

During the interview process with the Fever Exec A, it was suggested that the 2020 WNBA Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) be included in the research because there were specific clauses that addressed marketing at different levels throughout the WNBA many of which focused on social media for the organization as well as the players. Selected information from the CBA is dedicated to the WNBA's marketing plan, the additional marketing and promotional compensation plan for the teams and players, and player social media content creation requirements. This agreement outlined the league as well as the league sponsorship agreements as it relates to the players with the intent to market and generate revenue. This is different than the previous CBA which did not address social media marketing opportunities in this detail. Because of the marketing plan and compensation laid out by the CBA it is likely that organization and player behavior is impacted therefore included in this case study.

A semi structured interview was conducted with front office employees of the Indiana Fever, with a focus on the value of their social media and customer engagement teams. The first interview was done with the Fever President and Chief Operating Officer, Exec A, the with the Fever's social media manager Exec B, and marketing vice president Exec C. Semi structured interviews were used because there are pre-formulated questions but does not require strict adherence to those questions which allows the interviewer opportunity to probe further as the interview unfolds (Myers, 2020). The purpose of the interviews was primarily to address the relationship marketing of Value and RQ3. The interviews included discussions on both RQ1 and 2 as well as Interaction and Communication. Interviews were conducted over the video communication platform Zoom and recorded in order to transcribe the conversation.

Because of scheduling and access, the interview with Exec A took place prior to the completion of the social media data collection. The interviews with Exec B and Exec C took place after the social media data collection. Additionally, I spoke with Exec A on two occasions when the Fever came to Chicago (where I am based) to play against the Chicago Sky. I also spoke to Exec A and Exec C once in Indiana at a Fever game that I traveled to attend. This took place after the interviews were completed. The conversation was informal with updates to some of the topics discussed.

The information from the social media collection informed specific questions for the interviews.

1. State your title and experience with the team
2. Explain / describe your team's social media engagement strategy and how you decided on that strategy.
3. What were the key insights or lessons learned with this strategy?
4. How does your team assign value to your social media content?
 - a. What is your return on investment (ROI) metrics?
 - b. What are your key performance indicators (KPI)?
 - c. How does social media engagement impact sales?
5. How does your team engage with the audience beyond the public posts?
6. What coordination does your team have with the WNBA, Players, Media, or others outside of the organization?
7. Please explain the consumer research you have done and how you use it in your strategy.
 - a. What is next for your social media strategy?
8. Going through your team's social media I noticed that "Hail State" related posts and comments were significant (due to your players from Mississippi State).
 - a. How do you maximize engagement with that audience?
 - b. What ROI or value added have you gotten out of that?

Data Analysis

Each part of the data is analyzed from different perspectives; generally, as related to the sport user, and the sport organization which includes the team and players. This approach will allow the data set to address each of the three research questions. This section of the data analysis will explain and define findings, justify those findings' impact

on the research questions, and compare them to literature and industry standards. Then the discussion section will link the findings to the research questions, sport users, and sport organizations. In this section the following sets of social media data will be analyzed, post engagement rates, post frequency, post timing, post type, post topics, and comments on the social media posts. Next the articles will be analyzed, followed by the CBA. Finally, the interviews will be analyzed.

Engagement Rate

As noted in the literature review, the engagement rate is a metric used to interpret how involved the user is with content. The formula to calculate the engagement rate is Reactions plus Shares plus Comments plus Views divided by numbers of followers then multiplied by 100. Reactions are dependent on the platform used. On Instagram and Twitter, a heart icon is pressed which indicates a “like” which is considered a reaction for the formula. On Facebook there are seven options to react to the post or comments shown using an emoji. The options are “like” shown as a thumbs up, “love” shown as a heart, “care” shown as an emoji hugging a heart, “haha” shown as an emoji laughing, “wow” shown as an emoji gasping, “sad” shown as an emoji crying, and “angry” shown as a red-faced emoji. Not everyone uses the reactions in the same way. For the purposes of the engagement rate calculations each of the reactions are counted equally. Shares are shown on Facebook under the post, on Twitter the Share is called a “retweet” and is shown as an icon under the post. It should be noted that on Instagram counting the number of shares is not possible unless you are the account manager. The comments are shown under the posts on each platform. On each of the platforms the views were only visible if the content was a video.

Posts with higher engagement rates are more likely to be seen by users because of the way the platforms show content. For example, when a user engages with a post in any way on Facebook, all their friends and followers will see that post and their engagement on their own feed. This is important because engagement extends the original post's reach which could potentially lead to new users seeing and engaging with that content. When these engagements and interactions are positive in nature that creates a brand advocate which then enhances the user's relationship to the product and experience (De Vries, 2014).

The engagement rate of every post was calculated individually using the formula above. Each post was exported to an excel spreadsheet with columns indicating the engagement variables. The quantity of the variables was noted and then calculated. These calculations were done on each post as well as the combined engagement rates of each platform. They were then ranked from highest to lowest. Although there has been literature written on engagement rates in multiple industries there is not one standard as the benchmark for a successful post based on engagement rates. As noted in the literature review by Opendorse's State of Sponsored Social Report the overall average engagement rate for global professional sport organizations is 3.9% for athletes, 1.2% for teams whereas the WNBA engagement rates are 6.9% for athletes and 1.6% for teams (Weber, 2020).

In the data set used, the Fever and Fever player's Instagram was the platform with the highest combined engagement rate with 4.36%, then Facebook with 1.8%, and Twitter with 1.64% and a total combined rate across all platforms of 2.27%. To compare this with the WNBA's league accounts, their combined engagement rate across all their

platforms is 1.1% and the average engagement rates for all the teams in the WNBA is 1.6%.¹⁸

Below are five charts depicting engagement rates. Figure 4 depicts each of the sites that data was collected with their combined engagement rate across all posts throughout the designated time. Additionally, there is a line showing the overall average engagement rate for the global sport players and teams as noted by the Opendorse study. This chart shows that the team is above the global sport organization average of 1.2% as well as above the WNBA average of 1.6%. This chart also shows that 10 of the 17 player sites are above the global sport average from athletes of 3.9% and 9 of the 17 are at or above the WNBA player average of 6.9%. Player B was the only athlete of the 17 which had their Twitter rank above the global or WNBA averages. All the athletes Instagram's

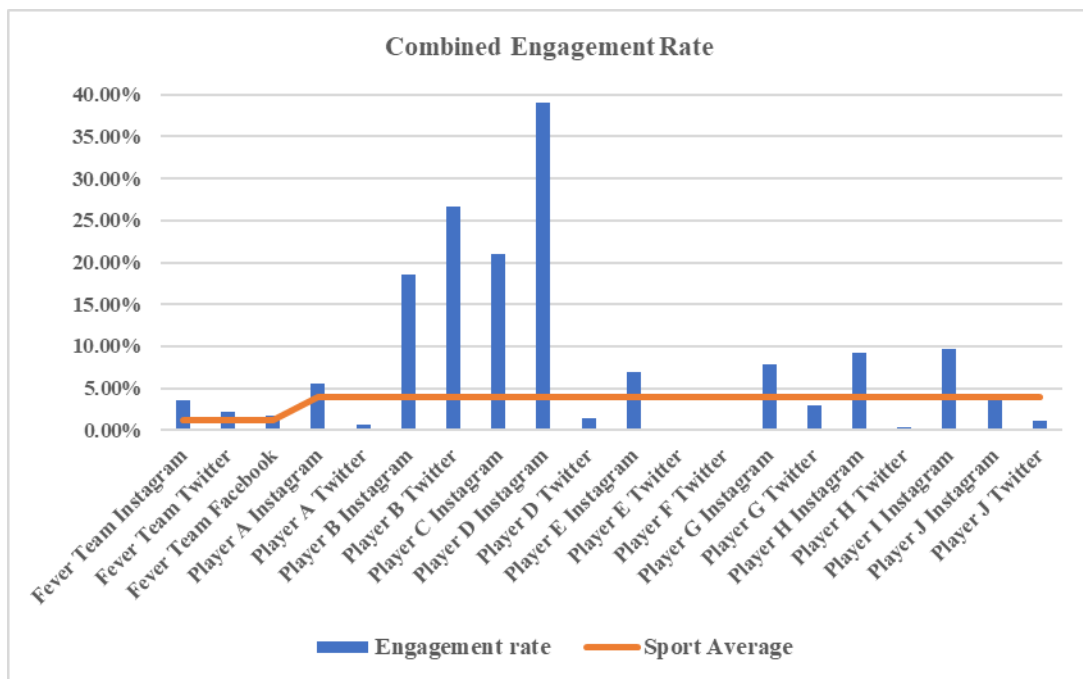


Figure 4 Combined engagement rate

¹⁸ Calculated using SocialBlade.com services

ranked at or above the global average with all but two ranking at or above the WNBA average.

The next four charts depict the post with the top 10 highest engagement rates. Figure 5 shows the overall top 10 posts, who posted them on which platform, the rate, and the type of content. Figures 6 -8 show the top 10 posts of each of the three platforms in the same way.

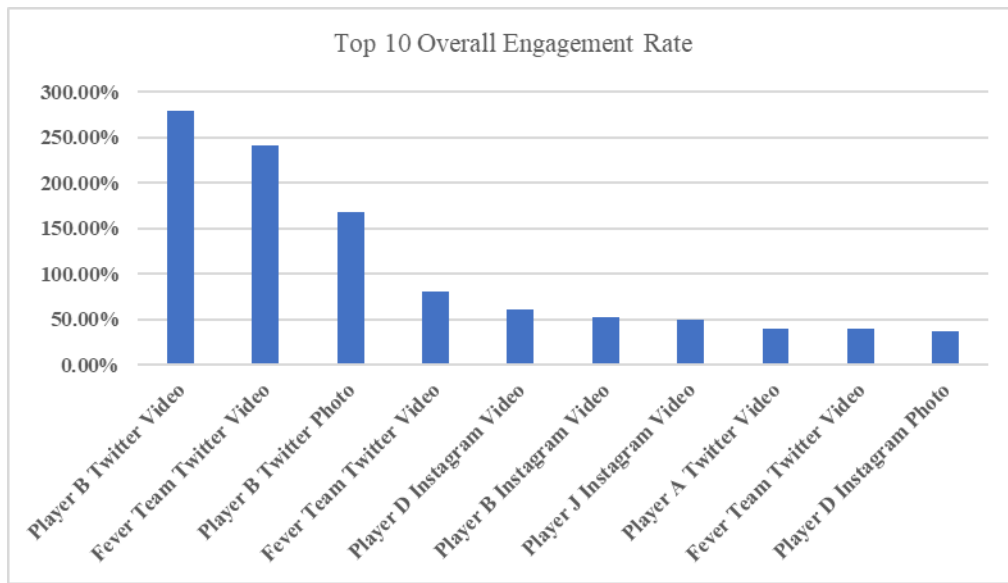


Figure 5 Overall top 10 posts (engagement rates)

Figure 5 shows that seven of the top 10 posts came from players rather than the team, and six of the 10 posts were from Twitter. Videos were eight of the 10 highest performing posts, which can be expected due to the additional variable of the view count. The top performing post was a Twitter video of a highlight from Player B’s national team with the caption “I miss this” which had two and a half times the views as she had followers. The second highest post was a Black Lives Matter video from the team’s Twitter account which also had two and a half times the views as they had followers. The

third highest post was again from Player B and was a photo of her national team. The fourth highest post was a different Black Lives Matter video from the team's Twitter account which was a statement from the team and players. The fifth highest post was a video from Player D's Instagram talking about various social justice initiatives. The sixth highest post was Player B's third post in the top ten and was an Instagram video of her talking about social justice initiatives as well. The seventh highest post was an Instagram video from Player J celebrating her college coach's legacy. The eighth highest post was from Player A's Twitter and was a video of her family doing an at home fitness challenge which was a popular trend during Covid. The ninth highest post was from the team's page and was a Twitter video of a player and her twin daughters announcing the upcoming schedule. Finally, the tenth highest performing posts was again from Player D on her Instagram account. This was her rookie season, and the post was the first post of her in a Fever Jersey. These posts were half basketball related, one trend, and four about social justice. The top engagement rate was 278.67% and the average of the top ten was 104% engagement rate.

Figure 6 depicts the top 10 most engaging Instagram posts, eight of which are from the athletes and two are from the team's account. The top four posts were noted in the top 10 overall. The fifth highest post was a video from Player C about Black Lives Matter. The sixth highest post was a video on the team's account of Player D being drafted. The seventh highest post was a photo of Player B in her jersey for the first time on media day. The eighth highest post was multiple pictures of recent accomplishments of Player D such as college graduation and being drafted. The ninth highest post was a video of Player I who was partnering with her hometown community for a charity event.

The tenth highest post was a video on the team’s account on media day behind the scenes of players dancing. Half of these posts are basketball related, one was about the community, and four were about social justice. Three of the posts were photos and the other seven were videos. The top was 61.07% and the average was 38.61% engagement rate.

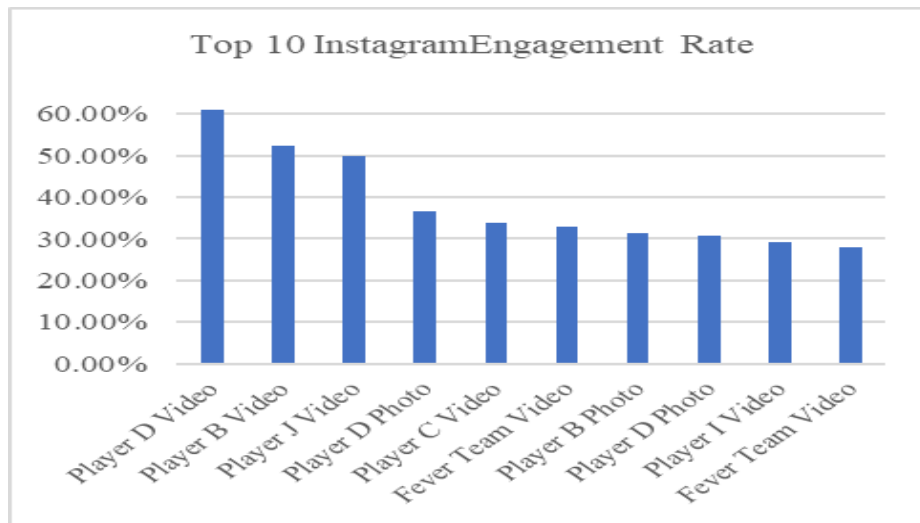


Figure 6 Top 10 most engaging Instagram

Figure 7 depicts the top 10 most engaging Twitter posts, half of which were from the athletes and half from the team. The posts were mostly videos with two photos. The top six posts were noted in the overall top posts. The seventh highest post was from the team’s account and was a video tour of the housing at the Wubble. The eighth highest post was a video from the team’s account which was a series of interviews conducted by Player A. The ninth highest post was a video from Player C which was a highlight of her high school career stating “this is where it begins” that she posted on the day she was drafted. The tenth highest post was also from Player C a week after she was drafted and is

a photo of her arriving in Indiana. These posts had six related to basketball, two related to social justice, one was a trend, and one was an interview series about various topics. The top post on Twitter was 278.67% and the average of the top 10 was 98% with an overall average of 1.7% engagement rate.

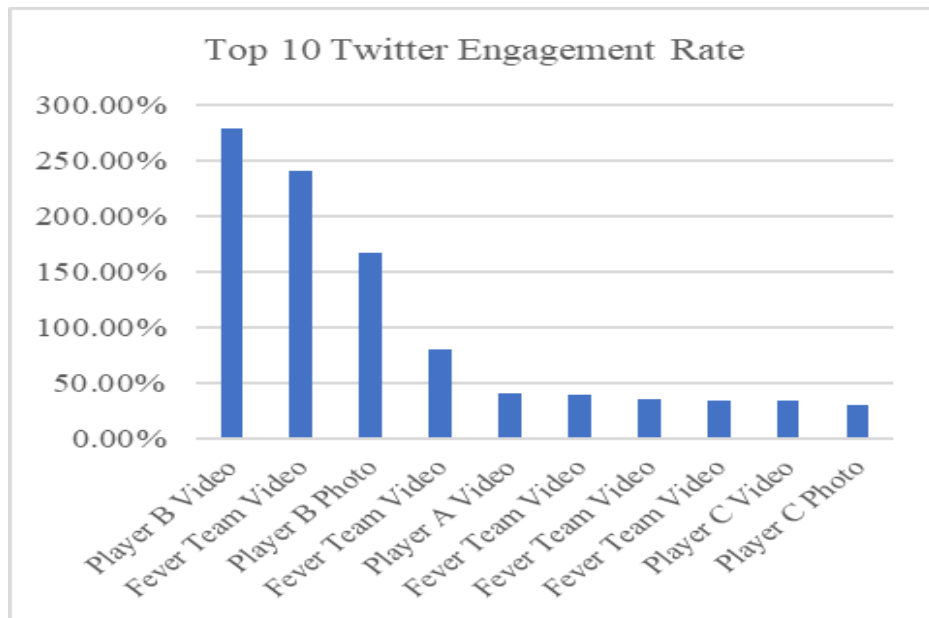


Figure 7 Top 10 most engaging Twitter

Finally, Figure 8 depicts the top 10 most engaging posts on Facebook. It should be noted that only the team's Facebook page was analyzed. None of these posts made it to the top ten overall; the highest rated Facebook post was 17th overall. There were eight videos, one link, and one photo in the top ten. The top post was a video congratulating Player J's induction to the hall of fame. The second highest post was a video trend of players at their homes in different locations passing the ball and editing it together to appear that they are passing it to each other. The third highest post was a video about the players talking about the upcoming season. The fourth highest post was a highlight video

of Player G from last season. The fifth highest rated video was of Player J talking about her hall of fame announcement. The sixth highest rated was the Black Lives Matter statement video from the team. This same post had almost 10 times the engagement on Twitter (80.95%) as it did on Facebook (8.43%). The seventh highest post was a link of a highlight video of Player J to celebrate her birthday. The eighth highest post was a photo of the new jerseys with Breonna Taylor’s name on them. This was in support of Black Lives Matter; every WNBA jersey in the 2020 season had her name on it. This was the most shared post of across every site and platform in this time period. The ninth highest post was of a player and her twins announcing the upcoming schedule, the same post from Twitter that was the sixth highest with 40.08%. This post on Facebook had a 5.63% engagement. The tenth highest post was a video about community involvement with the local hospital. The highest post on Facebook had a rate of 31.63% with an average of 10.94% which is lower than the other platforms but still above the global sport organization average.

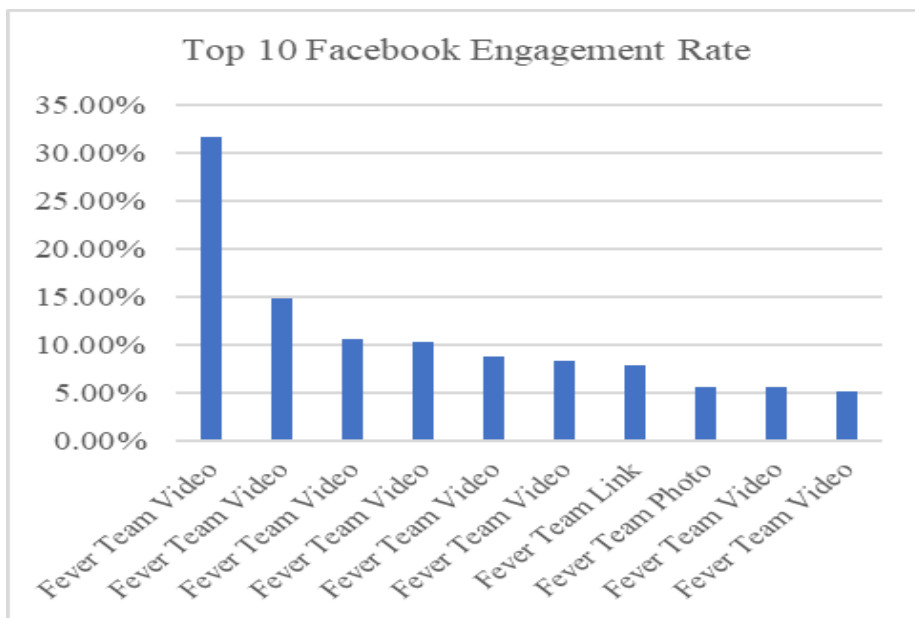


Figure 8 Top 10 most engaging posts Facebook

It should be noted that engagement rates are based on interactions of the post as it relates to the number of followers they have. This does not mean that the posts with the highest rates have the most reach. In the discussion section, this paper will take the findings of the engagement rates and combine that with the other variables to understand the insights and implications. Engagement rates impact each of the three research questions. Engagement rates show the interactions of the content and the users addressing RQ1: What is the nature and scope of consumer interactions and experiences with social media? The differences in the engagement rates across platforms for similar or the same posts help the organization understand the differences in the audience behavior by platform, which helps inform their posting strategy. This addresses RQ2: How is social media planned and distributed to the consumers by the team and players? Finally assessing which posts perform well and understanding why helps answer RQ3: How is value created for the team's consumers via social media?

Post Frequency

Post frequency shows the dates of each post, how often there were posts, and if there were any significant events related to the posting strategy addressing research question 2. It is thought that the more active an organization is with its users the more trust can be built. On the other hand, however, if an organization is not actively engaging with their users the relationship could suffer. Frequent exposure helps nurture the relationship with the users and strengthen the users understanding of the organization (Rishika et al., 2013). More content allows for more opportunities for the users to engage with the organization.

Figure 9 shows the frequency of the posts combined across the three platforms. Combining the team and the players across each platform a post was made every day from March 17, 2020 through July 24, 2020. The post with the least number of posts was July 4, 2020, with 3 total posts and the day with the most posts was July 22, 2020, with a combined 125 posts. July 4th is a holiday and July 22nd was one of the media days which would help explain the range. During this time there were Facebook posts 60% of the days with July 21, 2020, one of the media days, being the day with the most. There were only two days that there was not a post on any of the Instagram pages, March 22, and July 6, 2020. The day with the most Instagram posts was April 17, 2020, which were all related to the WNBA Draft. There was at least one post daily on Twitter throughout the time analyzed. April 18 and July 22, 2020, were the two days with the highest amount of posts, which represented the WNBA draft day with 41 posts and one of the media days with 114 posts. The average number of posts was 13.5 per day in this time period.

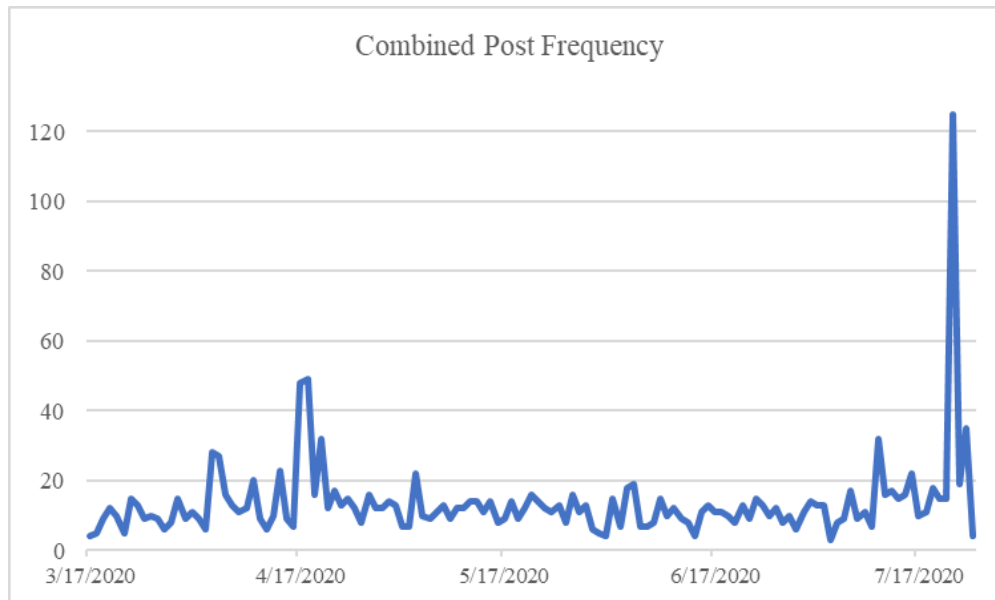


Figure 9 Frequency of the posts combined

Post Type

The type of media content was collected from each post by observing and documenting in the spreadsheet. Seven different types of content were observed and defined. All the posts had some form of text which will be further explored in the next section, post topic. Text can include a description or hashtags. Twitter was the only platform with strictly text without other forms of media which occurred on 430 total posts. A GIF, or Graphic Integrated Format, was posted 27 times on both Twitter and Facebook. A GIF is a short, animated image or video clip and can be shared as posts or comments¹⁹. An example of a GIF posted is a player's reaction or short highlight meant to evoke excitement or emotion. An infographic is a representation of information in a graphic format which is easily understood²⁰. An example of an infographic is an action shot of a player and her stats or other information about the image. Infographics were posted 222 times across all three platforms. A link is clickable text that sends the user to an outside site such as an article, a shop, or video. Links were posted 85 times on Twitter and Facebook. It should be noted that clickable links are not supported in Instagram posts. Links can be shared in the bio on the home page or in Instagram stories. A photo or multiple photos were posted 356 times across all three platforms. A retweet is reposting a tweet that was on a different users account so that your followers can see the tweet²¹. Any type of content can be shared using the retweet function and this feature is only available on Twitter. There were 260 retweets in this data set most of which came from players retweeting league or team content. Each platform has a video function. When a video is

¹⁹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/GIF>

²⁰ <https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/definition/infographics>

²¹ <https://help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/retweet-faqs>

shared the view count is shown in the bottom corner which is used as a variable in the engagement rate calculations. There were 396 videos shared in this data set which included player highlights, trends, and statements. Figures 10 and 11 show the overall percentage of type of content shared, the percentage of type of content shared by the team, and the percentage of type of content shared by the players.

The charts show the difference in posting strategy between the players and the team which will help to understand research question two. Posts with videos resulted in the highest average engagement rate with 6.65%. It should be noted that videos add an additional variable to the engagement with the view count which influences the increased rate. Posts with one or more photos had an average engagement rate of 1.41%. Videos and photo posts were the two most frequently posted content. The rest of the posts all had under 0.6% average engagement rates.

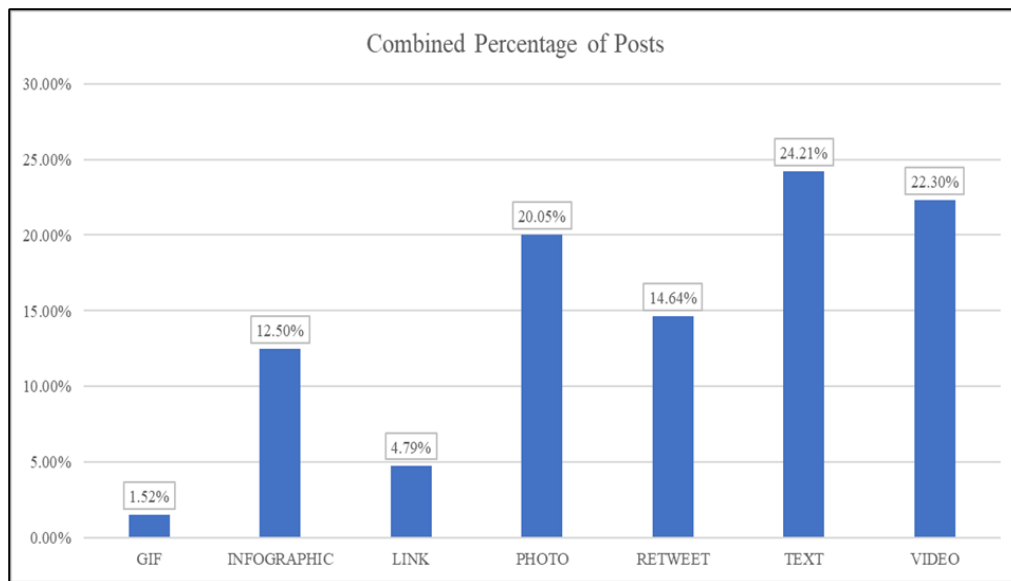


Figure 10 Percentage of post type

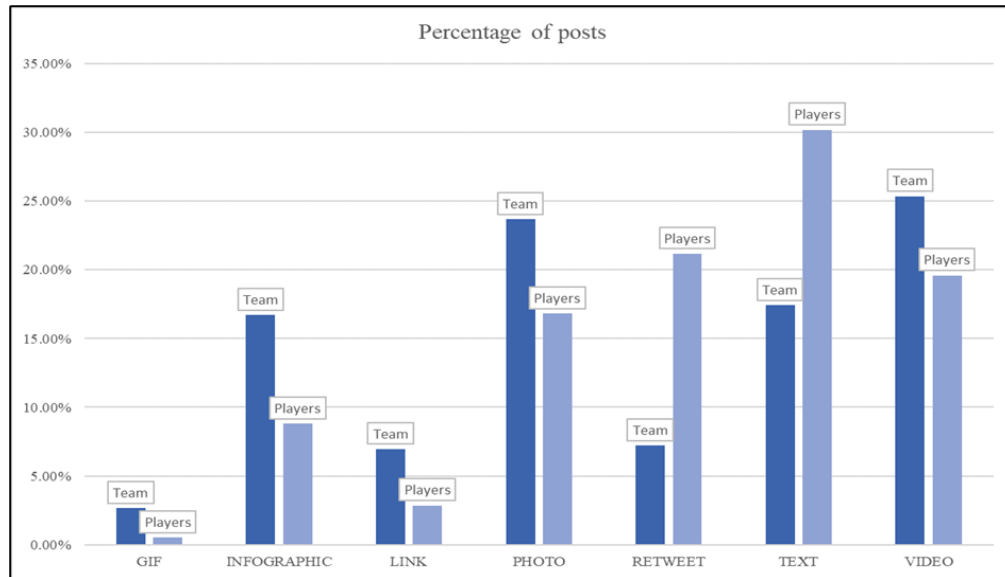


Figure 11 Percentage of post type (organization and player)

Post Topics

This section covers the topic of posts that appear on player and team platforms; comments from the user will be analyzed in the next section. Post topics describe the content that the organization and players provide for users to consume. This directly addresses both research question 2: How is social media planned and distributed to the consumers by the Indiana Fever and their players, as well as research question 1: What is the nature and scope of the consumer interactions and experiences with social media?

Each post was given a label in order to help organize the data. The label for the team posts was created by using the first letter in team, the first letter of the platform, and the number of the post with the earliest being one and up through the latest. For example, the team's 14th post on Facebook would be TF14. For the players a similar method was created by using a P for player, and the letter that was designated for that player. For example, the 9th post on Twitter by Player A would be PAT9.

Two columns were created in a spreadsheet of every post to understand the topic of the posts, the post text, and the description of the post. The post text was copied as is into a column. If there was an emoji in the post that was converted into a text description and defined. Emoji definitions can be found in appendix E. Emoji definitions were found on an online emoji dictionary²² as well as using context clues and basketball knowledge. For example, post TF35 that used a clover emoji, in the case of the Indiana Fever meant that player was connected to Notre Dame because their mascot is the Fighting Irish. The description of the post was created by looking at the associated media, or intent of the post. For example, post TF15 post text read “a must have” with a fire emoji. To understand the intent of the post, the description is necessary. In this case it was a link to purchase the new team t-shirts. Additionally, there were instances where jargon, slang, or nicknames were used in the post text and needed further explanation in the description column. For example, post TT242 read only “Queen V” which is a nickname for Player I. The description of the post then states that the post is a picture of Player I to be used as a phone background for fans. Of note were several words that were deliberately misspelled; for example, post PJI12 added multiple letter “s” to the end of the word “yes.” When this happened, the word was changed to the proper spelling for sorting and analytical purposes.

Once the posts were organized, it was noted that Player B had multiple posts in French, her native language. I am unable to adequately translate French, therefore they were not included in the data set. During this timeframe she posted 44 times, 26 of which

²² <https://emojipedia.org/>

were in French leaving 18 to be analyzed. Overall, this left 1,776 posts as shown previously in table 4.

The next step was to identify the topic of the post to be further coded and analyzed. Three overarching themes were identified, and each post was labeled accordingly. It was no surprise that the theme of sports was the most frequently posted topic, lifestyle was second, and information was third. This is depicted in figure 12. A post was labeled as if it was primarily about basketball or any other sport. These posts could be highlights of a game or player, a throwback post of past highlights, posts about hockey such as post PAT74 where Player A celebrated that a new Women's Hockey Expansion team was created. A lifestyle post meant that the post was about the daily life of the poster, team, or community. This involved birthday posts, social media trends, personal topics, or social justice posts. For example, when the players arrived at the Wubble and fans were given a tour of their housing, facilities, and what they planned to do in their free time. Or, additionally, post PHT101 where Player H shares a video of her Wubble meal with the caption "Taco Tuesday was amazing last night." Finally, an information post provided knowledge to the consumer from announcements, links, or direct replies. An example of this is post TF91 which was a video using a player and her children to announce the upcoming game schedules to the fans.

POST FREQUENCY

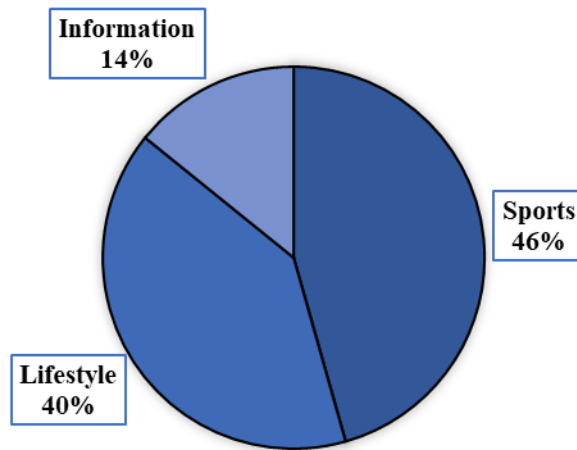


Figure 12 Frequency of post theme

Within these are overarching themes; a more detailed set of themes were identified using the literature review that showed as it relates to relationship marketing for sports there are seven types of social media posts: Updating, Publicizing, Selling, Promoting, Appreciation, Spreading, Serving. These seven categories served as the start of the thematic code book. The Fever posted each of the seven categories, however there were two additional categories discovered during my research. The first is participating in trends such as dances, home challenges, or other similar activities. These posts are unrelated to sponsors or the sport organization and they show a more relatable side to the athletes. These posts could be found on both the official team sites, as well as the players' personal sites. These posts have the potential to go viral with high engagement rates and interactions from the fan base if done in a timely manner. The trend post with the highest engagement rate was a post PAT3 from Player A where she and her family did an at home fitness challenge that was popular during the COVID lockdowns with a 40.53%

engagement rate. These posts were labeled trend in the code book. The second type of posts are personal posts unrelated to sponsors or the sport organization. These posts include opinion pieces, family, friends, faith, or pets. These posts are found on the players' sites although not all players use their public page for personal content. This is a way that fans can get to know players outside of the sport to build personal relationships with players and other fans. These posts tended to have a lower engagement rate than the other posts. These posts were labeled cultural in the code book because they are related to the individual poster's cultural influences, ideas, customs, or social behaviors.

The seven relationship marketing categories (appreciating, promoting, publicizing, selling, servicing, spreading, and updating) along with the two additional categories were organized and labeled. Overall, the two most frequent categories of post were updating and cultural with 28.6% and 27.5% respectively. This was expected because the updating posts covered major topics such as the draft and details of the season. During this time, people stayed home with their families and there were several political and social issues being reported on a regular basis. The remaining frequencies were as follows: trend 12.7%, spreading 9.7%, appreciating 8.8%, publicizing, 7.7%, promoting 2.8%, and selling and servicing at 1% each. These categories were also tallied under the three original overarching themes of sports, lifestyle, and information. Each of the 9 categories were represented except within lifestyle where promoting and selling did not have any posts. This is depicted in figure 13 below.

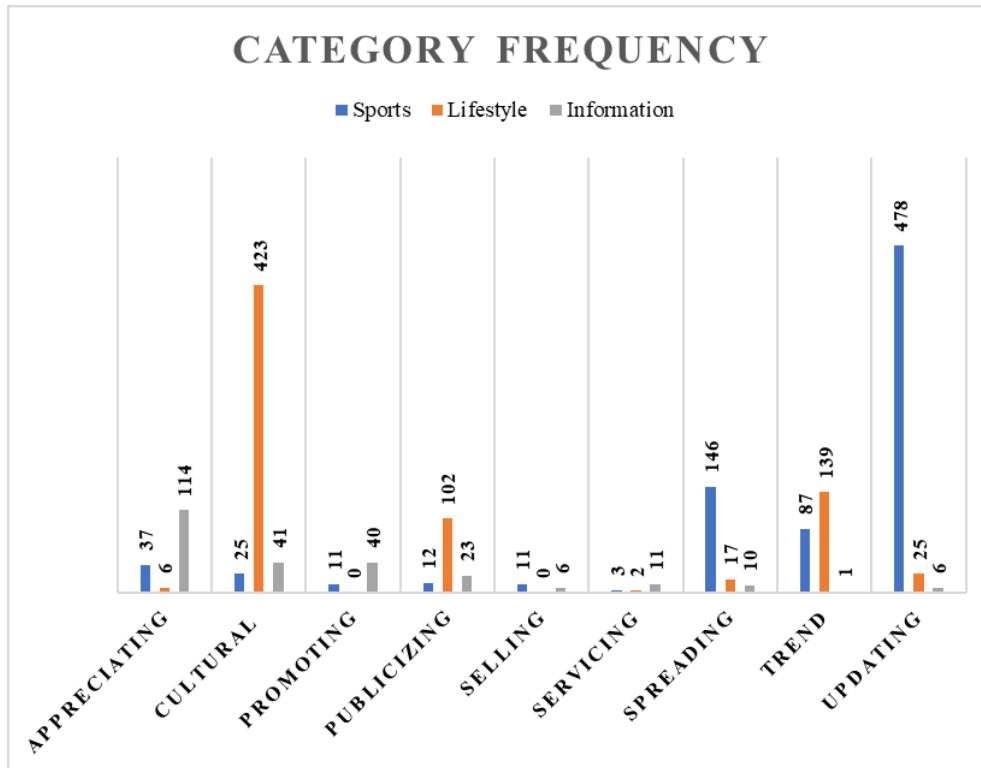


Figure 13 Frequency of Category posted

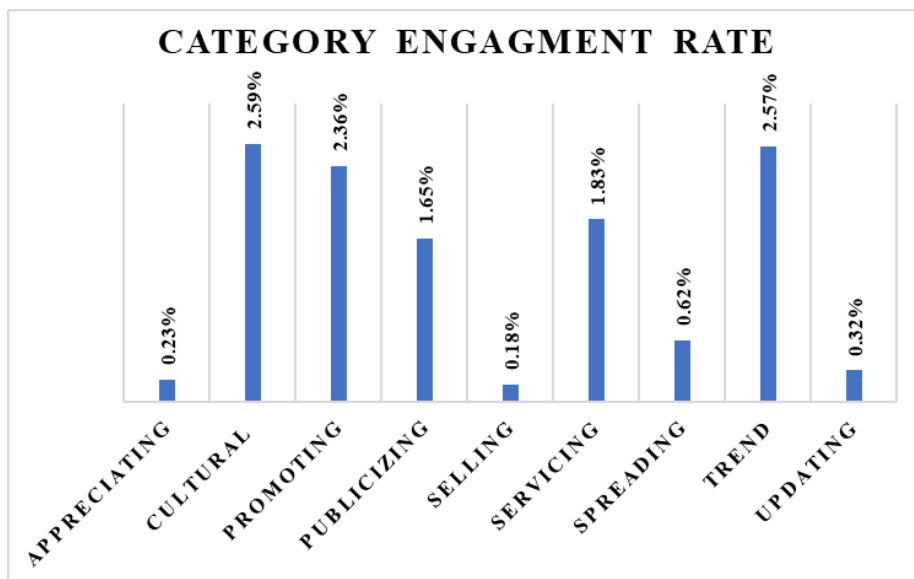


Figure 14 Engagement rate by category

Engagement rates of each of the categories were calculated and it was found that the top three were cultural at 2.59%, trend at 2.57%, and promoting at 2.36%. The engagement rates are shown in figure 14 above.

In the next section, comments posts will be analyzed. For this research the comments are made by the sport users based on what the sport organization posted. Using the data from the sport organization, presented above, along with data from the sport user will allow for this research to have a holistic understanding of social media as it relates to the sport experience design framework.

Post Comments

The comments section is not controlled by the sport organization; users are served a post with a certain topic but have the ability to change the tone or subject by using their comments. As noted in the literature review, the way users interact on social media plays a pivotal role in the idea of a virtual fan community. The comments section is a place where interactions can take place amongst other users, the organization, players, and other stakeholders. This section focuses primarily on research question 1: What is the nature and scope of the Indiana Fever's consumer interactions and experiences with social media? The comments section has a role to play in research question 2 as well: How is social media planned and distributed to consumers by the Indiana Fever and their players? Fans asked questions in the comments and when enough of the same type of questions were asked, instead of simply replying to that individual, the team or players would post content that addressed that topic, such as how to watch games. In this section the research seeks to understand the user's reactions to the various posts, what are the user's preferences, and how the user shapes the content created by the organization.

Comments on each post were saved and further cleaned to be properly analyzed. First, unrelated spam was identified, counted, and deleted. For this research spam is defined as an unsolicited advertisement sent in bulk or incoherent phrases. Examples of spam comments are requests for unrelated actions such as “the first 10 people to go to my page wins a new car.” In total there were 464 spam comments across each platform; it should be noted that social media managers can install filters to prevent spam and they have ways to monitor comments with the ability to delete meaning there may have been more spam comments that were not collected. There were comments that had extreme language or hateful slurs, in those cases the content of the comments were deleted and replaced with the note “Hateful language” which took place 26 times. Like spam it should be noted that the owner of the pages could have filters in place to prevent and delete these types of comments. These comments were included in the sentiment analysis as extremely negative. Similar to the posts, comments that were in a foreign language were excluded with the exception of common phrases such as “merci,” or “thank you” in French. There were 46 total foreign language comments not analyzed. Comments that were just an emoji, just a hashtag or just a tagged person or a combination of the three were excluded from further analysis. There were 1,939 comments that were just emojis, 109 comments that were just hashtags, and 241 comments that were just tagged people. This brought the comments from 10,518 comments to 7,765 comments to be analyzed, broken down as follows: 1,929 Facebook comments, 817 Twitter comments, and 1,888 Instagram comments.

Within the 7,765 remaining comments there were several that were not text. This includes photo comments or GIFs, on Facebook and Twitter because Instagram does not

have that capability. This took place 238 times and were done in a positive manner. Examples of this include users' personal photos of their game experience when replying to a post about players such as with post TF107, a media day photo of a new player in their Fever Jersey. The commenter posted a picture of that player in college meeting them after a game. Additionally, there were several comments that were just numbers. This had to do with multiple calls to action by the poster. An example of this is post TT293 which was an infographic of multiple jersey designs and asked fans for their favorite. This type of post was done more than once and resulted in a total of 338 comments.

With the remaining comments simple corrections and definitions were made. When words were spelled wrong or spelled using slang methods they were corrected and noted. An example of a slang spelling would be "plz" which means "please." Emojis were written out and defined, in the same way they were when analyzing the posts. When coding Cabell et al. (2013) states that "coding requires great sensitivity to not only obvious meanings but also more subtle meanings" (306). In many cases basketball has its own unique vocabulary and slang which results in the need to define certain words or phrases. A list of definitions was created from personal experience, context of the topic, as well as an internet search. This also included jargon, nicknames, and acronyms. An example of this is referring to a player as the "GOAT" an acronym for "the greatest of all time." These definitions can be found in appendix D.

Once the comments were cleaned they were ready to be analyzed using the reliable methods for developing code schemes (Campbell et al., 2013). Established methods were used for organizing the data from the comments to identify codes and keywords with the aim of categorizing and structuring the data. Inductive thematic

analysis method was used for organizing the data from the comments by reading and re-reading the data to identify codes, patterns, and keywords with the aim of categorizing and structuring the data. A codebook was created as a data management tool to organize similar text for interpretation (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Codes that were generated based on the literature review were labeled, defined, and described. Using NVivo software themes began to emerge with specific words, phrases, or thoughts. Themes “represent some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clark, 2006) which connects codes to each other. Inductive thematic analysis allows for the data to determine the themes. (Boyatzis, 1998). Using an inductive analysis identifying patterns create the code book of themes which can be found in appendix F.

User comments are not in the control of the organization and therefore a larger variety of topics were posted. Comments were first labeled based on the topic of the post; this was done because some comments simply read “yes” and without context, would not be possible to understand the meaning. Next comments were organized into one of four broader categories: basketball, interactive, lifestyle, and social issues. These categories are similar to the post topics made by the Fever (the organization) with two adjustments, interactive replacing information, and the addition of social issues. Once the comments were organized into these main categories they were further categorized with more specific themes. For example, a basketball comment could be about how someone plays, or welcoming a new player, or some form of criticism. These comments were grouped together and each of the categories were defined.

Basketball comments were defined as any comment that relates to some facet of the game. This was, unsurprisingly, the largest category. These basketball comments

were then further organized into 12 more specific subcategories. Cheering a coach, a player or the team were defined as basketball related comments about a coach, player, or the team. Examples of this are “That’s my coach!” or “she is a guaranteed bucket” or “Let’s get that dub ladies.” The next basketball subcategory was “congratulations,” defined as basketball related comments that congratulate a coach, player, or team. Examples of this are “congrats to the face of the Fever!” The next basketball subcategory was “exciting to watch,” defined as comments expressing their excitement to watch a player, the team, or the season in general. An example of this is “been waiting for years to see Player B hit the court with the Fever. Let’s get it!” The next basketball subcategory is “informative,” defined as comments with links or information about the team or players. An example is someone leaving a link to an article that they wrote for their blog about a player and the comment, “Check it out, an honor to write about you.” A significant amount of Mississippi State University (MSU) comments were posted because of the two former MSU players on the team which warranted its own subcategory. An example of this is “as a MSU and now Fever fan, I agree!” The next basketball subcategory is “opinions,” which are comments that are about the management, administrative actions, or sponsor related decisions. These types of comments were most prevalent around player movement and the draft. An example of this is “No way, I like Player E but (Former Player) is more well-rounded.” The next basketball subcategory is “personal experience,” which are comments that share their experiences as a fan of the team or a player. An example of this is “I saw her play in person! She is awesome!” The next basketball subcategory is a photo or media which is a photo or GIF of a player or the team, either from their personal photo albums or downloaded from elsewhere. An

example of this is when a post is about a certain player and the commenter shares a picture of them when they met them or watched them play in person. The next basketball subcategory is thank you, which is a basketball related comment thanking a player or the team. An example of this is “Thank you Player J, I love watching you play basketball!” The final basketball subcategory is “welcome,” which took place mostly around the draft or when a new assistant coach was announced. An example of this is “Great pick, welcome to Indy!” Basketball comments took up 47.51% of all comments, as shown in the post frequency section, sports in general made up 46% of the posts made by the team or players. Figure 15 shows the frequency of the basketball subcategories with cheering a player as the highest, and informative and cheering a coach as the lowest.

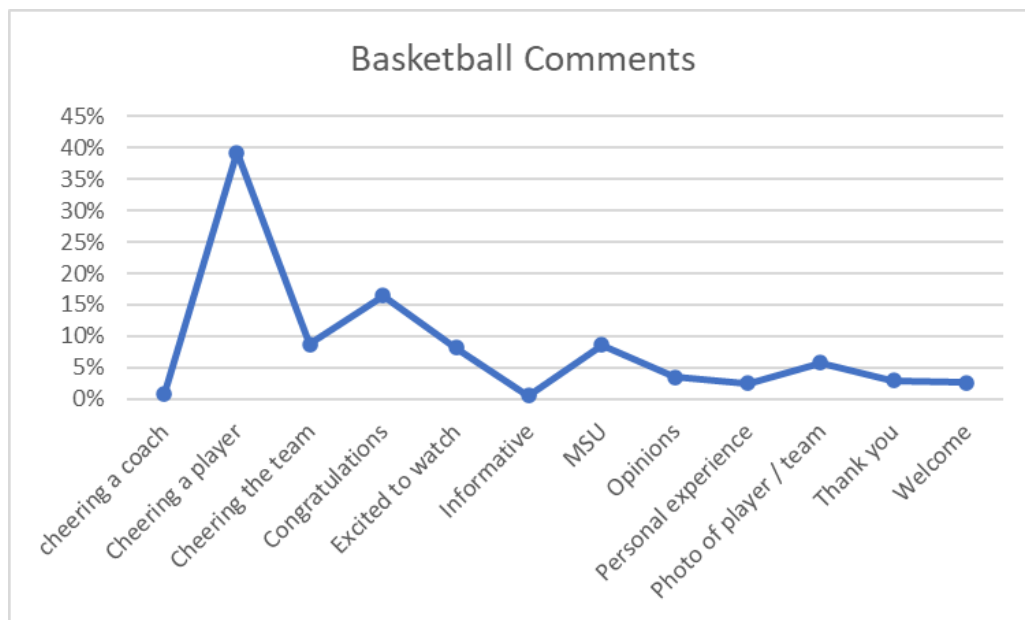


Figure 15 Frequency of basketball subcategories

Interactive comments are defined as comments that were completing a call to action from the original poster or contributing to the conversation. These comments were further organized into three subcategories. The first interactive subcategory is a poll response. This was not a vote that you click on, but rather a text response to a question or topic made by the poster. An example of this is from post T1123 a picture of several jersey options and the text “Which one?” Comments were mostly numbers with a short explanation; for example, “One and three are my favorites!” The next interactive subcategory is participation which is defined as replying to a game or trend. An example of this is a game that the Fever would post with two similar game photos and with the text “spot the five differences.” An example comment is “popcorn, logo, different color shoes, and I couldn’t find the other two.” The final interactive subcategory is a question, defined as asking a direct question with the expectation of an answer. For example, “can we watch games on the WNBA app?” to which the Fever responded directly with an infographic of how to watch their games. Interactive comments were 9% of total comments, participation was the highest with 69.73%, followed by questions at 27.22%, and poll response with 3.06% of the interactive comments.

The lifestyle comments were defined as comments that relate to the player or commenter’s life outside of basketball, which had 5 subcategories. Similar to the basketball category there is a cheering a player subcategory, the difference being that these comments are not basketball related, but instead are about the player’s life off court. An example of this type of comment is “I just read your article; you are so inspiring.” The next lifestyle subcategory is extreme negative which is personal comment about the team or player. These comments were deleted and replaced with a note that said “hateful

language” so that they can be included in the overall analysis. These comments were either a personal attack on someone’s lifestyle, looks, or political beliefs. Although it was noted how often they occurred that number may not be accurate due to content filters or the owner of the post deleting comments. The next lifestyle subcategory is fashion, defined as comments about clothing, hair, makeup, or shoes. An example comment is “Love the shoes, looking sharp as ever. Best dressed in the W.” The next lifestyle subcategory is holiday which are comments about a birthday or other holidays. A majority of these were some form of birthday wishes, often adding emojis or the player’s nickname. The next lifestyle subcategory was similar to the basketball subcategory of thank you but different in that it is thanking the player or team for something unrelated to basketball. For example, “thank you for sharing your story.” Lifestyle comments made up 14.61% of total comments which was far less than the 40% of lifestyle posts made by the team or players. Figure 16 shows how much each of the subcategories represent with cheering a player as the highest.

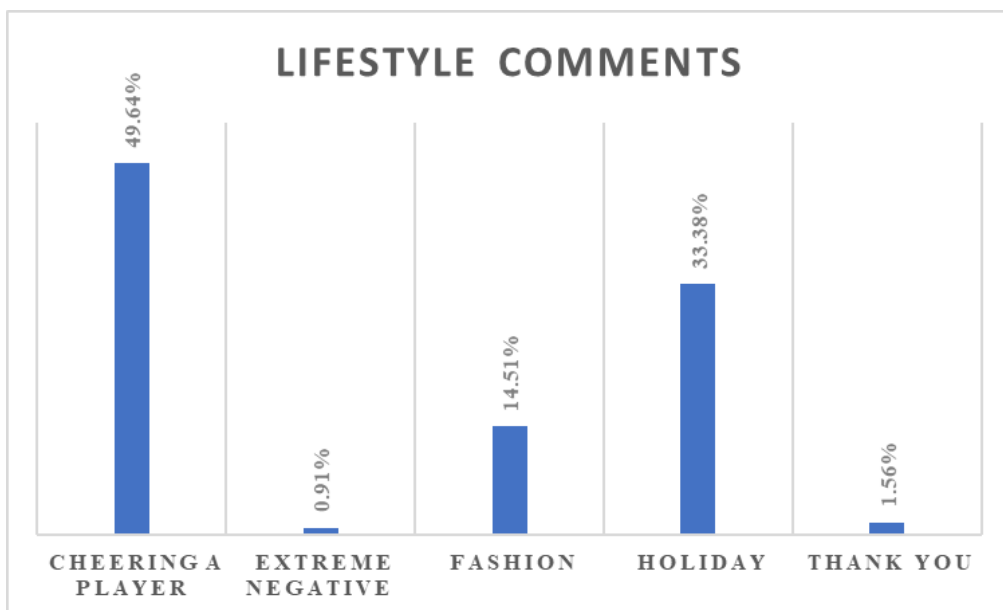


Figure 16 Frequency of lifestyle subcategories

Social Issues is the next category with 5 subcategories of comments. Social issues are defined as comments that relate to social, political, or community topics. The first subcategory is BLM which is defined as comments related to the Black Lives Matter movement and surrounding topics. An example of these comments is “Enjoy your powerful messaging of division. Your league will fold.” The next social issues subcategory is community which are comments about community involvement or community service. An example comment is “I’m in! I love how this builds the community.” The next social issues subcategory is COVID, which are any comments related to COVID-19 but unrelated to the impact on scheduling or basketball game play. For example, “As a healthcare professional I cringe every time anyone in this administration talks about COVID-19.” The next social issues subcategory is money, which are comments that relate to pay inequality or other financial topics. An example comment of this is, “give what the charities around can handle! Some good to be done.” The final social issues subcategory is voting, which are comments surrounding voting in local and national elections. An example comment is, “Voting is the single biggest way we can all create change. Everyone has a vote, so everyone has a voice.” Social issues made up 2.25% of the total comments, however because this topic often got heated, it is likely that some of the comments were deleted. Figure 17 depicts the percentage of each subcategory withing social issues.

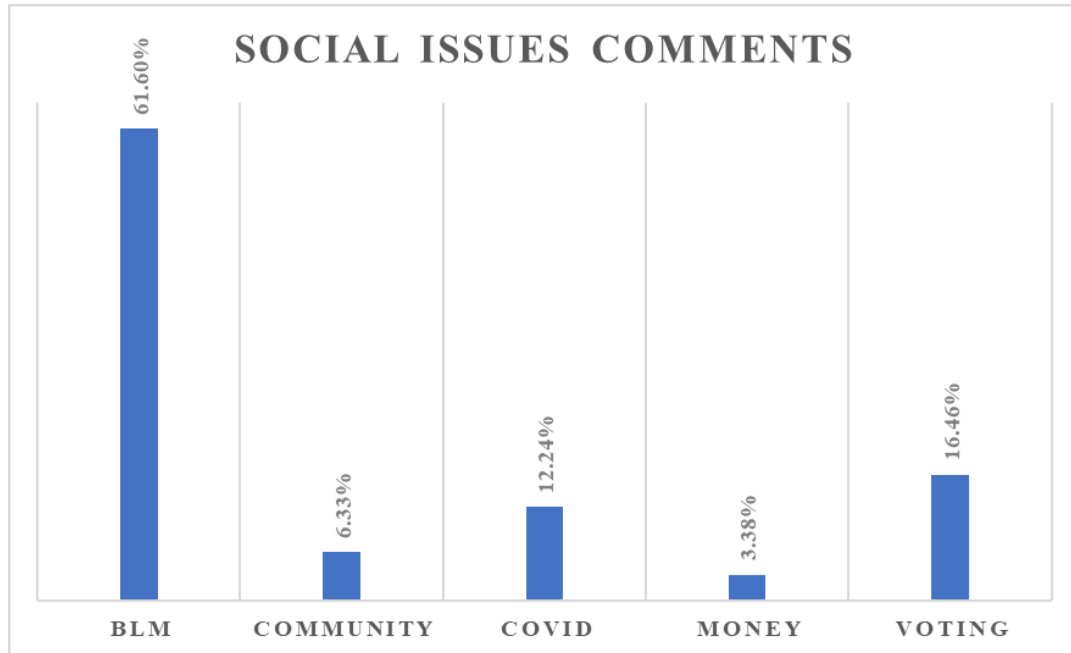


Figure 17 Frequency of social issues subcategories

The final category is other, which notes the emoji only, foreign language, hashtag only, spam, and tagged site comments. This took up 26.61% of the overall comments. Emoji only comments accounted for 69.27% of this category and spam taking 16.58% of the other comments.

Figure 18 depicts each of the comments categories and their subcategories for reference. Understanding what the users are reacting to, and what they are saying about the content the organization offers is a valuable and quick way to connect with the users. In the upcoming discussion and implication sections on how organizations can use this information will be explored.

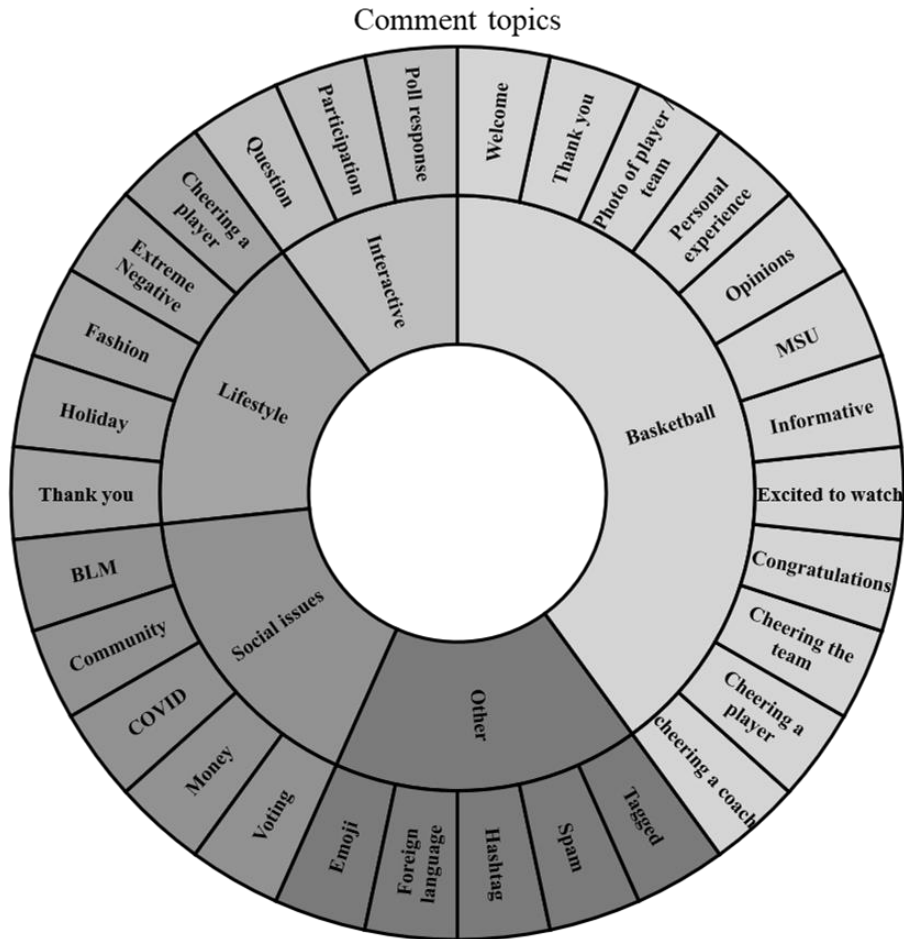


Figure 18 Comment categories and subcategories

A sentiment classification analysis was conducted on these comments with the purpose of understanding how the users feel about the content and the experience on the organization’s social media platforms. A sentiment classification analysis is a way to identify comments on a scale of positive or negative reactions. There are multiple names for the sentiment classification analysis in literature such as subjectivity analysis, opinion mining, and appraisal extraction (Pang & Lee, 2008). Some sentiment can be explicit, such as “the Fever are my favorite team” being a positive statement. Other statements are

not as obvious and are a subjective way to look at the data, because the cultural jargon used in basketball was done manually with contextual clues and definitions of certain words. For example, saying something is “weak” generally means that it is not good, however saying something “had me weak” means that it is funny. Additionally, curse words usually have a negative connotation to them, but in some cases, they are used to emphasize a positive reaction. These social media comments were generally one thought or short statements. Because of that it was assumed that the entire comment was in one sentiment classification. The sentiment classification analysis for this data uses five categories: extremely negative, negative, critical, neutral, and positive.

Extreme negative comments are defined as hateful comments generally speaking or based on personal attributes, or political beliefs. As noted throughout this paper, social media site owners have the ability to put in filters, delete comments, block people, as well as other users reporting individuals. Because of this it is likely that there were comments that were not collected. The next sentiment classification is negative, defined as comments that complain, disapprove of the topic, or are deliberately argumentative. The sentiment classification of critical is used because of the nature of sport organizations. This is defined as comments that criticize the management, administrative actions, or stakeholder related decisions. These are different from negative because there are instances when users are upset with a player’s movement, and they express it using negative vocabulary. The next sentiment classification is neutral which means comments that are neither positive nor negative, usually a reaction to a call to action. This could be a response to a poll question such as “which jersey do you like the best, jersey #1, jersey

#2, or jersey #3?” The final sentiment classification is positive, defined as comments that show support or excitement to the topic.

The sentiment classification analysis was done after the comments were organized by their topics and themes. The comments categorized as others were not analyzed; this included hashtags, tagged sites, spam, and emojis. The words in the comments were defined if they were jargon or had specific meaning as it relates to the team. Reactions to the comments, such as likes along with replies to the comments were taken into consideration when assigning classification to them. Overall, the comments were primarily positive at 86.24% with 3.69% being some form of negative or critical. The sentiment classification was categorized by platform as well as by comment theme to show the difference in the audience and topics covered. Table 6 shows the sentiment classification by platform. The first line shows the percentage of type of comments total. The following three lines show how each sentiment classification was broken down across the platforms. For example, of 0.35% extremely negative comments Twitter had the highest extreme percentage of those comments. Of the positive comments, Instagram had the highest percentage.

Table 6
Sentiment classification by platform

	Extreme Negative	Negative	critical	Neutral	Positive
Total percentage	0.35%	2.06%	1.28%	10.07%	86.24%
Facebook percentage	25.93%	11.32%	22.22%	37.07%	23.99%
Twitter percentage	40.74%	28.93%	25.25%	16.22%	26.63%
Instagram percentage	33.33%	59.75%	52.53%	46.72%	49.38%

Next the sentiment classification was organized across the themes, depicted below in table 7. Interestingly social issues were not the top in extreme negative comments even though it is a hot button topic. I suspect this has to do with filters, blocking, and deleting comments. Basketball and lifestyle had high marks in the positive sentiment classification which shows that the users tend to enjoy the product of basketball as well as the players in their off the court actions.

Table 7
Sentiment classification by theme

	Extreme Negative	Negative	critical	Neutral	Positive
Basketball	44.44%	36.48%	96.97%	18.02%	70.47%
Interactive	0.00%	3.14%	3.03%	79.15%	4.88%
Lifestyle	51.85%	0.00%	0.00%	2.70%	22.56%
Social Issues	3.70%	60.38%	0.00%	0.13%	2.09%

Social media data was collected from the organization’s perspective with the post frequency, type, and topic. These posts’ engagement rates were then identified and noted. Social media comments from the posts were collected, coded, and given a sentiment classification. This was done to understand how the organization’s social media presence contributes to the sport user’s experience as it relates to the SX framework. Each set of data centered around the three research questions which are the three components of relationship marketing: interaction, communication, and value. Now that the data has been collected and organized, the next step is to optimize the consumer experiences which will be done in detail in the discussion and implications sections.

The next portion of the case study is to examine documents in this case, online articles from national and local outlets. An additional document to be analyzed is the 2020 WNBA Collective Bargaining agreement. Following the documents portion the

semi structured interviews will be analyzed which will conclude the data collection and analysis portion.

Articles:

The articles were downloaded and analyzed using similar methods as the social media posts and comments. The theme of the articles was matched with some of the themes of the social media posts and further analysis of social media posts matching the article themes was conducted. Linking the articles with social media posts that had the same theme resulted in understanding how the sport user reacted to each of those topics. The three main themes of the articles were the Draft, Player J's Hall of Fame announcement, and social justice. There were 126 social media posts directly around the Draft with an overall engagement rate of 3.67% which is considered significant. The highest rated post of the Draft was from the Fever's top pick, Player C, who shared a highlight video on Twitter which received 34.11% engagement rate. The sentiment for the draft posts was mostly positive with a minimal amount of criticism based on players the team did not select. Player J's Hall of Fame announcement and induction had a total of 94 social media posts with an overall engagement rate of 4.5% which again is a significant engagement rate. The highest rated Hall of Fame post was on Fever's Facebook with a highlight video that had a 31.63% engagement rate. These posts were overwhelmingly positive, with many former players and athletes outside the WNBA participating in congratulating her. Overall, there were 186 social justice related posts. These posts focused on Black Lives Matter related content, Women and LGBTQ rights, as well as COVID-19 related posts. These posts had mixed reactions in the comments from extremely negative and argumentative to supportive and positive. The combined

engagement rate of social justice posts was 3.59% and the highest rated post had an 80.95% engagement rate. This was a Twitter video by the team with the players talking about BLM and what it means to their personal life. These topics all had a higher overall engagement rate than the total average engagement rate of all posts which was 2.27%.

The national articles were less frequent than local and had a much different and more generic tone. None of the ESPN articles conducted interviews with representatives of the Fever organization. There did not appear to be an effort to connect the articles to the Indiana audience market. An example of this is the article about Player J's Hall of Fame selection which was 37% discussing why another player (not up for the hall of fame) could possibly be the greatest player of all time, and 31% questioning why the Fever did not win more than one championship with her. It did not discuss basketball besides the WNBA (college or Olympics). This article left out several well-known facts about her, such as her childhood friend Kobe Bryant, who had recently passed away, being selected along with her. Conversely, the local site conducted an in-depth analysis of her entire basketball career, interviews, her hearing disability, and her connection to the Indiana community. It was overwhelmingly positive in tone.

As expected, there were more local articles of higher quality than the national offerings. These articles were of higher quality than the national articles because they put a positive spin on the players in court actions and interviewed those who were the subjects. The articles went into further detail than the national articles. The local articles were written with the Indiana Fever's audience as the target, whereas the national articles were much more generalized. The articles that were concerning social justice issues

spoke primarily about the issue and how the players are using their platforms to spread awareness or call for action.

These articles supported many of the social media trends and topics with in-depth information for the users who want more than photos or short text. It is clear from the social media comments that the Fever fans are knowledgeable about the game of basketball and comment accordingly. These local articles used the fan's understanding to focus on basketball related specifics, such as advanced statistical analysis of Player J's career as well as how the new draftees will fit into the Fever's program.

Collective Bargaining Agreement:

The CBA puts a monetary value that can be paid to a player in addition to her base salary for social media marketing from the league. The CBA explains the strategy of how the WNBA and each of the teams will use individual players for player created content through the Marketing and Promotional Agreements. The CBA discusses the minimum amount of money spent by the league and teams for marketing which is at least one million dollars a year. In addition to that next year's marketing, activities will include 25% of shared revenue after the season is completed (p. 106). The CBA states "WNBA shall take into consideration the diversity of the player population and shall use commercially reasonable efforts to coordinate with the Players preferred social media partner when such usage involves sponsor-related social media posts" (p. 195). This includes not just WNBA or team created in game posts or sponsored posts it also includes player content creations. Examples from the CBA are a player using their own page or "taking over" a team or the league's page to conduct behind the scenes access or a day in the life of a player or other related content.

The language in the CBA allows players to monetize their social media posts which is likely to lead to more frequent and higher quality posts. This also opens the door for sponsorships based on that player's lifestyle, reach, and personal fan base. Social media-based sponsorships lead to greater awareness which broadens the audience and creates value for the sport organization.

This addresses research question 3: How is value created for WNBA consumers via social media? Teams and players can use their social media analytics such as engagement rate, topic, and sentiment classification to show the value of their platform. This will allow for both the players to monetize themselves as a brand as well as create more content based on the user's preferences.

Interviews:

This section covers the semi structured interviews that were conducted with high level front office employees of the Indiana Fever. Prior to the interviews a packet to Temple University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was submitted. It was determined that because these interviews were with subject matter experts about business process, strategy, and tactics along with public records that it is not defined as research involving human subjects and Temple IRB review and approval are not applicable. The interviews were recorded, notes were taken throughout, and the interviews were later transcribed. The audio files were listened to multiple times to ensure that nothing was missing. Once the transcription and notes were completed, they were cleaned eliminating filler words, adding definitions to jargon and, if needed, context to the specific answers which were included in the code book from the social media posts and comments. Open coding was used for each line of the responses using themes from the literature. The interview

responses were then grouped into clusters of related information (Miles et al, 2020). Each of the topics were then labeled based on the research questions it addressed. Below the data from the interviews are organized by the theme of the response.

These interviews were conducted with the primary purpose of addressing RQ3, from an organizational perspective, how is value created for WNBA consumers via social media. The other two research questions were addressed as well when discussing their strategy and insights.

The interview with Exec A lasted approximately 90 minutes and was conducted first. She is not the subject matter expert on the day-to-day operations of the social media team however, she does have strategic oversight on the strategy and was able to give me access to Exec B and C who have direct control over Fever's social media. Because of her role, her interview was focused on the broader way in which value assigned to social media.

Collective Bargaining Agreement (Exec A)

In addition to the questions from the interview guide, Exec A spoke about the CBA and how that influences their overarching social media strategy, which is why I included it in this research. She noted that because of social media and how the CBA is set up there are more opportunities for sponsorships for the individual players as well as the team itself. She stated:

The future of sports sponsorship is to reimagine what you can bring to the partner, and not just what the partner brings to you. What impact does your organization want to be a part of what sponsors match that, and how do you share that across each other's various platforms? This is where the new CBA comes into play for us. It allows us to associate players with highly visible partners in a way that wasn't being done on a league wide deliberate level before.

This serves more than one purpose from the sport organization's perspective. First, it helps with awareness; sponsors spread content to their network which brings in new audiences or strengthens the current fan base. Second, it supplements the players' income, adding value. The WNBA contracts are not worth multimillion dollars, and many players travel overseas to play in the off season. This can lead to injuries, shorter careers, or late arrivals to the WNBA season, she explained:

I was shocked to find out that the average player only plays about 3 or 4 years, you see players who have been in the league a long time, but that is not the norm. So, the more opportunities for income for the players while in their short WNBA careers the more satisfied they are with their career.

Engagement Strategy (Exec A)

Strategic questions were asked by the interview guide which included describing their engagement strategy, insights from that strategic plan and audience interaction opportunities. Audience growth and reach were the goals Exec A set for their strategic plan. She discussed the strategy prior to her arrival (shortly before the 2020 season) that was heavily focused on the Indianapolis market only and not the entirety of the state's 92 counties. The justification for that strategy was that the games were played in Indianapolis so there was not a need to focus limited resources on outlying counties:

I told the staff that we have to figure out how we bring the game to all of the counties because we don't sell tickets in every county yet, but we will. We just have to figure out how. Our original plan was to do in person community events and show them through social media posts before and after the event. We were also exploring how to stream our games on a geographically fenced social media channel, so anyone in our market could watch on our platforms. And then COVID put a stop to just about everything.

The Wubble season was announced, and none of the games would be played in home arenas, they would all be played from one location. Exec A explained that evened the playing field with small market teams and teams from major metropolitan areas:

The Wubble was our big opportunity for every team to build a fandom in all 50 states, not just across our own state, but internationally too. The WNBA increased streaming games to the TV plan to not just build the audiences but to test what worked. Honestly, it didn't change the plan I had for our team much, but it did validate it. This ended up giving our fans more access to games than before.

The league's idea was that since the fans could not attend the games in person that broke down the barrier of cheering for your "home team" and the fan could choose which team or players they preferred.

Digital Platforms (Exec A)

She then spoke about how it wasn't a simple transition for the fans and stated the importance of teaching fans how to consume the different type of media than they may be used to such as live streamed events. She said that the way that they prepared fans for the season, which also kept them engaged before the season, was to host various live streams on social media and exclusive Zoom calls, which both maximized the use of technology as well as taught the fan base how to interact with the team and each other digitally. Examples of this were Zoom calls for the season ticket holders and the coach and players prior to the season and throughout the season from the Wubble:

What we were trying to do at first was to just teach our fans about this digital engagement. To do that you have to have a lot of touch points to make it worth their effort.

This also helped them to understand their digital fan base, and how to serve them the content that they prefer:

Some people came to our games because they wanted their kids to have a fun experience, they don't watch on TV or stream the games because they are not necessarily a fan of us or the sport, but they are a fan of the experience. So, the digital space might not be for them. We spent our digital efforts on our hardcore or diehard fans. But when we did that, we noticed that they skewed older which is why we had to make the efforts to teach them how to engage on social media platforms.

Exec A noted that their social media strategy was more than offering content to the fans, engaging with the fans, and teaching the fans how to have these digital experiences. She discussed the value of testing and learning what works, what doesn't work, and how to use this new understanding to add to the in person and digital strategies post COVID.

The second interviews were also conducted over a Zoom call with Exec B and Exec C. Their interviews were conducted simultaneously due to availability. It was not ideal, however, both contributed to the interview based on their expertise. This interview lasted just over an hour. These two manage the overall marketing and digital strategies and daily operations therefore their interview more closely followed the guide.

The overall theme from these interviews was that because of the complications around the Wubble season they were forced to pivot their strategy to what was planned. They stated that social media is better suited for immediate pivots and experimental content unlike their overall larger marketing plan. Their approach centered around four areas: creating content, research, engaging and informing fans, and creating opportunities for sales and sponsors. Each of these four areas address the three research questions and relationship marketing principles: communication, interaction, and value.

Content Creation (Exec B and C)

When asked about their social media strategy and how it was impacted by COVID-19, they spoke first about how they would create and collect content. This directly relates to research question 2, how social media is planned and distributed to their consumers. The ways in which their team would collect and create content had to change due to the COVID-19 protocols and variables. They had to figure out how to show new and interesting content of the players and how to share it with the fans. Prior seasons they would use the training camp as a way to create multiple posts, however there was not a training camp prior to traveling to the Wubble as explained by Exec B:

We were all confined to our own homes across the country, and we couldn't come into work, so we had to use previous season highlights and some content that the players shot themselves and we edited together. Every day was a learning experience just trying to figure it out as it was happening.

Exec C added to the preseason content creation strategy by talking about Player J's Hall of fame announcement:

It was announced in mid-March that Player J would be inducted into the Hall of Fame, so we created several content packages to go along with that. It was great because it also was a way to remind the fans about the championship we won with her, which the fans enjoyed reliving.

Posts from the Fever's accounts concerning the Hall of Fame had an average of just under 8% engagement rate. Examples of the type of posts they shared on this topic were video highlights, video of several different sports stars in multiple sports congratulating her, infographics on her career stats, and photo highlights.

Wubble Content and Coordination (Exec B and C)

When the team was able to come together for an abbreviated training camp and then the actual Wubble season, gathering and creating social media content was still difficult. Exec C spoke about having to be creative with what they captured and how they captured it:

At the Wubble we had limited staff, if you weren't directly a part of the game like a coach or medical, you just weren't coming, every team had one media person. This really forced us to have to stretch the content in ways that we had not previously did. We didn't have 4 or 5 people around the different areas of the games to take pictures at every angle.

They both talked about the fact that this was what was going on with every team.

So, each team had to learn from each other. Exec C talked about cross team coordination:

The league ended up setting up sync meetings so we could set up some best practices. We shared content if it was relevant. Like we got a good shot of one of their players so we would give it to them. Of course, if one of their players made a great block or was scoring on one of ours those weren't the pictures we shared!

Exec B followed up with that point about the league having a coordinated effort across all the team's social media:

This cross talk ultimately led to better content and better working relationships now. We all think our way of doing things is the best and it might be, but because of this we got to see how others did things so we could take from it what would benefit us. I also think in the long run in non-wubble seasons we are going to be so much better because we had to do it in the hardest environment already.

Social Media's Value (Exec B and C)

When talking about the value that social media brings to the organization, they spoke about using social media as a quick way to conduct research either in an overall manner, specific topics, type of content preferences, or audience details. This address research question 3, the value that is associated with social media. The research helps

understand the types of consumers on each of the platforms so the organization can create the best performing content. Social media analytics shows where the audience is located which informs follow on more in-depth research. Exec C talked about using that audience data from the analytics to create meaningful content for those groups:

If we saw a geographical location that our content was being consumed, we took notice. Of course, we are going to get Indiana and the surrounding areas, but we also have a big fan base in Mississippi because two of our players went to school there. We have to address that in our content.

The social media team was able to show the front office that the MSU fans were loyal and engaged on a regular basis. In a traditional season the front office might do a MSU fan appreciation night, create a road trip, or have special giveaways. Exec C went on to say that they couldn't do that in the Wubble season, so the social media team had to be creative:

We helped create a unique experience for those fans, we reached out to them using social media, all the fans that were constantly engaging with MSU related posts or they made MSU related comments we contacted. We were able to create an exclusive Zoom call with them and our two players. You couldn't have done that without social media.

This not only shows the value of social media, but it also addresses research question 1, how fans interact with social media. Exec B also talked about the international fans. The Fever had large concentrations of fans in multiple places due to having a foreign player as well as the American players who played overseas. The social media team wanted to ensure that they were able to consume the content:

The great thing about social media is that there is a translate button. If we write text and someone doesn't speak English, they just push the button. But we wanted to make sure that any posts that we thought would do well overseas we didn't use too much slang or if it was an infographic or something we had a descriptive caption.

Social Media Data and Research Collection (Exec B and C)

They also spoke about the value social media has for conducting research on their own players. This is important for multiple reasons; it helps the team know how to create content around the players, it helps the team match players with potential sponsorships or sponsored posts, and it can help with a tagging strategy. Exec B talked about the draft; they do not know for sure who they are getting on their team because other teams may get them first, so they had to be prepared for multiple scenarios:

The draft was virtual, so all the content was from the player or their family. Getting that reaction video from them and knowing what to do with it right away was key. We also looked at how their network reacted, like their former team or teammates that are already in the league. We basically had to preposition a ton of potential content just in case.

The social media team was able to learn about the new players through their own social media accounts and then was able to create a posting strategy which was personal to them. This included certain hashtags, tagging certain universities or local news outlets, or using specific slang for example the term “sic em” is specific to Baylor University, which Player C had just graduated from. Social media is also a way to learn which sponsors or sponsored posts would fit which players based on personality, social media presence and hobbies. Exec C explained that it is more than getting to know a player and there are business opportunities:

The way the new CBA is written there are ways for the players to get paid more with marketing which is mostly social media especially in the 2020 season. We can link them with the right type of sponsors, we can prove their value with the analytics from their personal pages or from our page when they are the main topic of the post. We can really increase their paycheck and that can lead to even more sponsors on their own and more exposure.

Social media allows for a variety of sales and sponsorship opportunities. Along with providing research and testing through social media, players can share what matters to them. Social media allows an easier way for linking players and the team with a range of sponsors large and small. Exec B used the fashion example, where players will walk up to the game in their outfit and teams post those pictures. That was more difficult during the COVID season, so they had to adapt:

We quickly realized that they all just get off the bus right outside the doors to the shared arena, not a big walk up. So, we coordinated with the other team's one social media person. One of us was at the bus for both teams, and the other was set up in the gym and we shared. The players figured it out and started coordinating their shirts with messages on them like "Vote" or other social issues they were passionate about.

This is an organic way to showcase a message or a brand. Players will wear shirts with a slogan or branded clothing and shoes. They might hold a certain sports drink or other items such as fashion accessories, cups with logos and so forth. These pictures get shared across WNBA sites, team sites, media sites, sponsored sites, and the player's pages.

Future Use of Social Media (Exec B and C)

The interview closed with Exec B talking briefly about the 2022 season and the impact from the NCAA Name Image and Likeness (NIL) agreement as well as ESPN Fantasy league which will be noted in the further research section:

The NIL will change how these young players approach social media, their personal brand, and their understanding of sponsorship opportunities. They will bring in a different network of fans than previous draft classes where their fans are mostly geographically aligned.

Exec C talked about the upcoming ESPN Fantasy league which is the first time they have done this in a complete season and how the social media team can benefit from it:

We can see that our fans are some of the smartest basketball fans in the league based on comments. So, we think that not only will they play in the fantasy league, but they will do well in it. Therefore, the social media team is tasked with creating a strategy which takes advantage of that area of the fan base.

In addition to their fan's knowledge of the game, fantasy is a way to have wins outside of the WNBA games. The Fever are not currently a top performing team; however, they have a few players that would score high in fantasy:

The social media team has to remind people to put them on their team and then to show when they do well regardless of the actual team's win loss record.

They also believe the fantasy engagement will drive increased viewership to their games particularly with new fans. Their thinking was that if someone wants to do well in fantasy, they will have to watch the players so that they can make informed decisions on how to manage their fantasy team.

Throughout the data collection and analysis, it has been shown that the social media team provides significant value to the organization in many different areas. Social media can be used as a way to get important and new information out quickly to fans using either an update post, replying to a public post, or answering direct messages. This results in users having a better experience. Social media was a way to provide content to fans while there were no live sports. This took place with highlight videos, contests, trends, organic content made by the players from their homes. Social media is a way to

engage with fans in a multitude of ways, and a way to learn about the fans as well as the fans learning about the organization.

The next portion of this paper is the discussion and results. In that section the data will be reviewed based on research questions and from the organization perspective and user's perspective.

CHAPTER 4 PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH

Discussion of Results

Using a case study method, the Indiana Fever's social media presence was collected, organized, and analyzed to identify how it aligns with the SX framework and relationship marketing. The data was studied from the perspective of the organization as well as the user when applicable. Three research questions were used, each focusing on a different part of relationship marketing: interaction, communication, and value. Some of the data and findings overlap into more than one of the research questions. This section will discuss the results of each, first with a brief summary, and the following sections will look at the implications of the findings first from a strategic level, then theoretical implications where a proposed updated SX framework will be introduced, and finally managerial implications.

Research Question 1:

Research question 1: What is the nature and scope of the consumer interactions and experiences with social media? RQ1 was the first stage in understanding the Indiana Fever's relationship marketing tactics for this research. This question addresses the relationship marketing category of interaction which, as noted in the literature review, is a two-way exchange of content that benefits the organization as well as the user (Abeza et al., 2017). This stage used secondary data from social media posts from the Fever as well as the players in the Fever's organization. This question was also supplemented with the interviews. Interaction was calculated and evaluated based on the user's actions from

what the organization posted. The users' actions that were analyzed were the engagement rates, comments, and sentiment classification analysis.

The engagement rates of the posts varied from no engagement to as high as 278.67% across the three platforms studied. The post with the highest engagement rate of 278.67% was from a player with the smallest following of less than 3,000. The engagement rate average of the team and players ranged from 0.14% to 39.06% on the platforms that they used. This study showed that the organization as a whole performed well as compared to the global sport average engagement rate of 1.2% with an overall average of 2.5% engagement rate across all posts. This study sought to understand the engagement rates, how they varied across platforms, how they varied based on the content and timing of the post, and how they varied based on who was creating the posts. This is important because it indicates how much interaction the posts have with their audience. It does not, however, indicate if a post is well received; for example, a post could have multiple negative reactions which results in high engagement. This can take place with angry reaction buttons, or multiple negative comments, or users sharing it to then show others their dislike of the post. That is why the engagement rates, although important, cannot stand alone in the analysis. User comments and a sentiment classification analysis are a part of the equation.

Comments on posts ranged from zero to 440 comments with the average number of comments of 9.5 per post. With social media, users can make comments about posts that other users see which are not in the control of the organization. This can have an impact on other's experiences and interactions in both positive and negative ways. Comments allow the other users and the organization to see the conversation about a

topic which they can chose to participate or influence. Comments help identify users' needs, wants, and intent. Users may comment that they want to attend a game, or that they like a certain style of merchandise which the organization can use outside of the social media team to provide the preferred experience to the users.

Comments can show how the users feel about a post, a player, the organization, or a topic. This is done with the sentiment classification analysis. Users can share a memorable experience with the organization and other users through comments.

Zomerdijk and Voss (2010) explain that this contributes to the overall perception of the organization amongst users. The Fever's posts were overwhelmingly positive or neutral. The organization can assess if certain content is liked or disliked by their audience. Using social media analytics, they are also able to tell which audience segments feel a certain way so that they can then use that information to create a more desirable experience.

This research explored the literature on relationship marketing pertaining to interaction. Grönroos (2004) explains that interactions are central to the relationship marketing process through direct and indirect channels. The interactions that this research studied showed various degrees of loyalty amongst the users. Comments on social media posts were not just between one user and the organization or team; there were multiple incidents where users were interacting with each other. Tapscott (2009) explains that these types of interactions create champions for the organization. This is something that social media can accomplish that media that is not interactive, such as TV broadcasts, cannot achieve.

Research Question 2:

Research question 2: How is social media planned and distributed to consumers by the Indiana Fever and their players? This research question was the second stage relationship marketing tactics research covering the relationship marketing category of communications. The ability to communicate with users has grown using technology such as social media (Stavros & Westberg, 2009) and allows organizations to have a more refined plan based on the needs of the consumers. This research question was investigated using secondary data from the organization's social media planned and distributed content. This covers frequency, type, and topic of the posts. Additionally, this research question was addressed in the interviews. Sport organizations use social media to understand what to post, when to post, and the topics to post based on users' reactions to the content, as noted in research question 1.

Post frequency shows both how often a post was made along with what date those posts were made. This research showed that there was at least one piece of new content across the team or players platform every day during the time period analyzed. The post frequency also showed spikes in content surrounding key dates, most notably the draft and the season media day.

The type of post showed what the organization's content looked like, such as a picture, video, or links. The type of posts was compared across platforms and by the team or players. Using data that relates to research question 1 the organization is able to see what type of posts resonate best with their users and plan a posting strategy accordingly.

The topics of the posts were noted and analyzed. It is no surprise that a sport organization would have mostly posts about sports (46%) or informative (14%) content.

This research sought to further understand sports and information posts by organizing them into further categories from previous literature. Additionally, this study looked at the lifestyle and cultural category (40%) to better understand what content is produced and shared when basketball is not taking place, which is relevant in a stoppage or offseason.

This research offers new insights into the literature on the communications category of relationship marketing, such as the two additional categories of trends and cultural. Previous literature showed that there were seven categories of communication for sports organizations using relationship marketing identified by Abeza et al. (2017). These categories add to the understanding of social media because athletes' lives have become a part of the experience for the fan base. Fans want to cheer for the athlete on and off the field, to do that marketing departments attempt to "humanize" the athletes and further humanizing the brand (Abeza et al., 2019). With social media, this can be done more effectively by the athletes themselves as well as by the organization.

Research Question 3:

Research question 3: From an organizational perspective, how is value created for Indiana Fever team's consumers via social media? This is the third stage of the research's investigation into the value of Fever's relationship marketing tactics. Value is the third tenet of relationship marketing which is the result of the previous two relationship marketing categories interaction and communication (Grönroos, 2004). This question was answered with primary and secondary data. Information from social media posts and analytics, how the CBA assigns monetary value, audience data, and the interviews were used to address this research question.

Social media analytics are a way to see what posts are performing well. This is done by using the engagement rates, as well as the player's reach. The reach is calculated based on the number of people who see the posts even if they do not interact with it. This research found that the two players that had the highest engagement rates were not the players with the highest follower count or quantity of posts. All three metrics should be considered when assigning value along with the demographic of the audience that sees and interacts with the content.

In the interviews it was noted that aligning certain players with certain sponsors, topics, or information was a key portion of evaluating the value of the posts. An example is that if the Fever wanted to connect with a certain audience, they might not use the highest performing player, but rather use the right player to get the message across. The literature notes that the objective of relationship marketing is the value generating process (Abeza et al., 2020; Grönroos, 2017) by ensuring that the users are satisfied with the content.

The literature showed that the value of relationship marketing is not only for the user but also for the organization specifically in the information that the organization learns about the users through interactions (Steinhoff et al., 2019). In the interviews it was noted that one of the most valuable parts of social media from an organization's perspective is the creation of an audience database. They can understand various metrics of their audience based on social media interactions. They can then use that information to support business decisions for the team.

This research explored the literature concerning value in relationship marketing and found that using relationship marketing tactics the Fever were better able to

understand their fan base and bring value to them. This led to opportunities for the players as well as the organization to grow their audiences through unique partnerships.

Theoretical Implications:

The results of this research applied the first two steps of the four-step customer journey approach which can be used to analyze the way that the Sport Experience design framework is used in an organization. This consists of identifying the journey, understanding how it is currently performing, identifying ways to support the journey, and implementing the change needed to enhance the journey (Rawson et al., 2013). First the research evaluated the performance of each of those interactions by calculating the engagement rate as well as coding the comments to understand the sentiment classification of the posts. Second the research identified the interactions throughout the user's journey. This was done by organizing the social media posts by frequency, type, and topic as well as articles written about the Fever. The third and fourth steps to examine the application of the SX are evaluating and adapting the experiences based on steps one and two. These findings were done through Relationship Marketing components, which were the foundation of the three research questions.

This research identified that although the digital experience can be supported by the SX design framework, there is room for growth. The way in which a sport user experiences the sport context in the digital environment is supported by the SX, however it is unique enough that an update is considered necessary using the new insights of this research. The original SX design framework included the digital space embedded in the sport context; however, it should be expanded to include elements outside the direct control of the organization.

These elements include player content and interactions, sponsored content, user generated content and interactions, and other independent operators. The sport organization determines and creates activities for the sport user (Funk, 2017). However, with social media there are touchpoints that are created without the organization. In this research it was found that users interact with other users in the comment sections in both positive and negative ways, which aligned with the literature on the topic of a virtual fan community (Walker et al., 2017). These users might not interact in person as you would see in the stands of an arena event. However, in the digital context these users can virtually high five by reacting or replying to their comments. This could lead to them following each other's social media sites or setting up virtual watch parties or fan groups. Although interaction is a key part of a relationship marketing strategy, this type of interaction is not in the control of the organization.

Sport organizations must consider third party variables such as apps or platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. The organization must adapt their content to fit into the various platforms and audiences. The organization also does not control who is using the platforms or how they have access or limitation of access to the platforms.

When introducing the SX design framework, Funk (2017) cited an example of a user riding a bicycle to explain each element of the framework which is relevant to the proposed expansion of the digital portion of the sport context. Describing that there are four elements that should be considered. Element A: a sport user likes riding their bike without the need for the organization's support. Element B: a sport user wants to ride with a group along a safe route with resources such as water or snacks. In this element the organization can sell access to the route and resources. Element C: the organization

designs a ride with events based on consumer research. Element D: the organization delivers the ride based on the consumer needs and provides the resources for a successful event.

From a social media perspective element, A could be a user consuming content that the organization did not create such as something from other users, digital media, or sponsors to satisfy their needs. Element B could be a user wanting to experience the content with a group, such as a virtual watch party. Virtual interactions amongst current and potential users are an important aspect for an organization to consider (Gensler et al., 2013). An example of this would be a game being streamed on a social media platform such as Twitter. The organization conducts the game, but a third party would provide the resources to watch the game. Element C in the digital environment would be the organization using the data collected from interactions and other means of collection such as user behavior. Element D is an organization providing all the needed digital touchpoints for the users to have a complete experience.

Expanding the context of the SX design framework to identify the nuanced differences of digital experiences in the sport context will result in more holistic understanding. This research found that the sport context should be multifaceted to include what the sport organization is in control, what the sport organization is not in control of, as well as third party organizations that impact the users' experiences. Identifying how the different experiences are interconnected in the digital space helps create the sport organizations' brand ecosystem (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020) throughout the sport context. Additionally, players who have been traditionally grouped as part of the

organization should be considered as a separate entity in the digital portion of the context rather than under the complete control of the organization.

Managerial Implications:

This research examines how social media content impacts the SX framework and contributes to the sport user's experience in relation to the WNBA using relationship marketing tactics. In doing so, it will give organizations a clearer understanding of how to use the consumer's journey to achieve their goals and ultimately create better content related to their product. In the reviewed literature sports marketing professionals explained the emerging trends in the sport industry that will influence the way organizations must adapt to provide the best product for its users. The five trends identified that this research focused on were technology, internationalization and globalization, sport consumer experiences, individualization and personalization, and commercialization all of which social media can impact (Funk, 2017). With the proliferation of social media content, the sports context is no longer a static experience that is carefully and completely under the control of the organization. The research shows the various ways individuals, groups, or others who are outside the organization impact the experience through social media.

The implications of understanding the social media experience will allow the WNBA to have a strategic approach to shaping the experience both under the direct control of the organization as well as the experience that the stakeholders create which the organization is not in control. As the research shows, the WNBA and its teams can leverage social media in multiple ways. Outward facing content that the user sees and interacts with as well as the behind the scenes benefits of social media.

With social media and other digital platforms there are not the same geographical limitations that exist for in-venue events. This is particularly important because the WNBA is geographically limited to 12 US cities and markets. Many WNBA players go overseas to play during the WNBA off season creating an additional fan base who are less likely to be able to attend in person games in the United States. Smaller market teams, such as the Fever can increase their fan base using social media in ways, they wouldn't be able to with only live events.

The WNBA has announced their intent to have expansion teams in the near future, in which social media plays an important role. As noted in the interviews, the Fever's social media team uses their analytics to identify audience segments. They note geographically where groups of audiences are as well as the psychographic audience segments. The WNBA can use their social media platforms as one part of their research to identify potential areas of interest for future teams. The Fever's social media team also discussed giving those specific segments content that might be different than their standard offerings. When the WNBA expands the newest teams can build their fan bases using social media by conducting research on the audiences in that market by monitoring their social media habits and behaviors. The Fever's social media team talked about how they do this surrounding the draft, by researching the social media from the university and the surrounding area that the player comes from. This gives them insights into what that audiences expect and wants from the organization.

Finally, this research shows that the players are a part of the organization but also have a distinct role in the digital ecosystem through their personal social media branding. Social media allows athletes to have more control over their personal brand and

sponsorship opportunities. The research showed the value that the athletes' platforms have, the interviews showed how the organizations attempt to match athletes with various sponsors or branding opportunities. The CBA formalizes ways for the organization and WNBA to use the athlete's platforms and brand for monetary gain as well as audience reach.

In conclusion, an example of the managerial implications that this research found is how the two players from Mississippi State University impacted the Fever's social media presence during this time period which is highlighted below. This can be used by any organization that finds a niche topic that they wish to target and optimize their content.

Mississippi State University (MSU) Example

The state of Mississippi does not have a professional sports team in any of the main categories, their closest WNBA team geographically is the Atlanta Dream (283 miles). Two players on the Fever played their college basketball at Mississippi State University, Player F (2015-2019) and Player I (2014-2018). They are the only two current MSU players in the WNBA.

First, looking at MSU from the perspective of RQ1 or the relationship marketing category of interaction Player F only used Twitter during this time frame, and she had 12,081 followers with an average engagement rate of 0.14% on her posts. Player I only used Instagram during this time frame, she had 71,615 followers with an engagement rate of 9.69% on average. Player F was last among all players and the team in average engagement rate, and Player I was fifth. Comments that were explicitly about MSU represented almost 5% of all comments and 9% of all basketball specific comments.

Posts about either or both of the MSU players from the team accounts performed well. Posts from the Fever about these two players on media day outperformed all other media day posts with an average engagement rate of 3.67% whereas the rest of the media day posts without them averaged 1.2% engagement rate.

Several comments had to do with proclaiming that they will watch the games and cheer on the players no matter how the game is shown (in person, TV, or a streaming platform). This helps the organization understand the intent of this segment of the fan base. These comments would identify the players as “our” players. This was not the case with comments about other players as they relate to their former university teams. Below are comments about MSU players and a comment about Player C as it relates to her university fans cheering.

MSU example: “Everyone loves our T, you go girl!!!! We are all so proud of you and we can’t wait to see you and our Player I back at it again!!! #HailState #Maroonforever”

Baylor University example: “Congrats on the draft, another Bear in the W. When you finally get to play against Dallas we will come”

MSU related comments were either all positive or neutral sentiment classification. The neutral comments had to do with calls to interact by the organization such as, “which jersey is your favorite?” and MSU fans would choose one of the two players with an MSU hashtag or emoji with their selection.

Next, we look at MSU as it relates to RQ2, the relationship marketing topic of communication. There was one article written about an MSU player, Player I in the Indy Star. That article primarily focused on her recovering from an injury in the previous season but notes her excitement to play with Player F. This article link was shared on the Fever’s social media and resulted in several comments about seeing the two of the back

on the court together again. The engagement of that post was 5% above the average and had 142 comments, 133 more than the average post. The social media team took note of the success that MSU related posts were having so they ensured that they included regular posts for that fan base. In the interviews Exec A explained:

Player F and Player I came to us with a huge following in Mississippi, they are not Fever fans, they are fans of the players. But we have the opportunity for our team to represent them because these players' careers are limited, they will retire eventually. How do we keep the fans they brought? We have to have a strategy that gives them what they want, and we do that mostly through social media.

These posts satisfy the MSU fans but have additional implications, the better a post performs the more likely a user will see it on their feed. So, knowing when to create and share high performing posts helps reach consumers the organization might not be able to do otherwise. This also helps strengthen the relationship of MSU fans to be Fever fans as well.

Finally, MSU content from the perspective of RQ3, or the relationship marketing category of value. This is done with the previously explained data as well as with the interviews. The data shows that the MSU fans are excited, supportive, engaged, and loyal. The social media team shares this information with the front office and sponsors along with other analytics that were unavailable as they are proprietary information. Based on that reporting the front office can develop a strategy to maximize this audience segment. As noted in the interview section special events were created for these fans. Exec A also noted that merchandise sales must be researched before they are put into the market. For example, they don't want to create boxes of jerseys that won't sell, and they want to be able to meet the demand for the jerseys that will sell. Because of the information the social media team learned about this fan base they know what to make

available and how to market those items. They can also link those players up with sponsors who either have a connection to Mississippi or are looking to grow their audiences in that area because they can prove they are able to reach that segment.

Expected Contribution

This research will extend the understanding of how social media content impacts the SX framework and contributes to the sport user's experience in relation to the WNBA. It also allows for the organization to understand how to use the consumer's journey to achieve their goals and ultimately create better content related to their product. With social media content the sports context is no longer a static experience that is completely created under the control of the organization. The research shows the various ways individuals, groups, or others who are outside the organization impact the experience through social media. This research showed that there is a need to add to the existing SX framework for digital specific experiences within the sport context. The expanded framework would include two key groups, those associated with but are not directly controlled by the sport organization and those associated with or who are influencing the sport users apart from the organization.

Those associated with but are not controlled by the organization include players, which could be past or present, coaches from previous teams such as their NCAA team, other related athletes such as a player from the NBA and sponsors or other stakeholders. Those associated with or are influencing sport users apart from the organization include the virtual fan community, niche sites such as shoes or community organizations, fans or players connected to other organizations such as overseas teams, national teams, or NCAA teams, and any other social media influencers. Each of these entities play a role in

the experiences of the consumer in the sport context, but unlike the current SX framework these entities are not controlled by the sport organization.

Finally, it should be noted that on social media and other digital platforms there are not the same geographical limitations that exist for in-venue events. This is particularly important because the WNBA is geographically limited to 12 U.S. cities and markets. Many WNBA players go overseas to play during the WNBA off season creating an additional fan base who are less likely to be able to attend in person games in the United States. Smaller market teams, such as the Fever can increase their fan base using social media in ways, they wouldn't be able to with only live events.

The implications of understanding the social media experience will allow the WNBA and other sport organizations to have a strategic approach to shaping the experience both under the direct control of the organization as well as the experience that the stakeholders create.

Limitations and Further Research

There were limitations and challenges during this research that should be noted. The social media data that was collected was open to the public; however proprietary data from the Indiana Fever was not collected. This information would have been beneficial in understanding the complete picture of their social media. Their audience data, results from their tests, and the advanced analytics of each of their sites would have allowed for greater insights into the data. Similarly, players are in control of their own social media accounts and manage them how they see fit. Some players turn comments off, delete negative comments, or enable filters. This is not something that can be seen without access to their accounts. Additionally, without access I was unable to analyze stories or

direct messages. Finally, on the Indiana Fever there were multiple players that speak English as a second language; not understanding cultural nuances or languages, I was unable to include certain interactions in the final data set. Recommended further research would be conducted with an organization or players who consent to full access to the social media data set. This would likely uncover relevant information that was unable to be collected throughout this research.

Although this research looked at the comments and interactions of the users it did not interview them, which would give a more complete view of the experience. In future research it is recommended that either an interview or surveys take place with users of the associated social media accounts.

This research was done on one of the twelve WNBA teams, which gives a limited assessment of the experience. Indiana is a small market team; future research should be conducted using multiple teams or if possible, every team. This would be needed to be able to do a side-by-side analysis of the teams.

This research did not include other digital offerings such as fantasy gaming. ESPN has announced that in conjunction with the WNBA they are launching the first season long WNBA fantasy game for the 2022 season (ESPN, 2022). When managing a season long roster for a fantasy league, participants should remain interested in both watching the games as well as understanding the news around the games and players. This is also a way to increase awareness for casual fans and gives a different opportunity to grow the base. Linking a fantasy league with social media has been successful for other sports leagues, understanding how this will influence the WNBA's audience will lead to further research opportunities.

Finally, this research did not include future WNBA players who are currently playing in college. The NCAA Name Image and Likeness (NIL) agreement that is now in place allows college athletes to build their personal brand on a larger scale than they have previously (Edelman, 2021). In women's college basketball this has primarily been done through social media (Hosick, 2021). These athletes will come into the WNBA with their own strategy, a more connected fan base, and expectations for themselves as well as for their sponsors. Understanding how this will impact the WNBA's strategy is necessary to continue exploring the impact of social media on the sport users and sport organizations. This also brings up the need to look at individual athletes as their own brand in future research. This could be accomplished by following players across their different teams from college to the WNBA, the Olympic team, and their overseas teams if applicable.

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APPENDIX A
CURRENT WNBA TEAMS (AS OF OCTOBER 2022)



Atlanta Dream
since 2008



Chicago Sky
since 2006



Connecticut Sun
since 2003



Dallas Wings
since 2016



Indiana Fever
since 2000



Las Vegas Aces
since 2018



Los Angeles Sparks
since 1997



Minnesota Lynx
since 1999



New York Liberty
since 1997



Phoenix Mercury
since 1997



Seattle Storm
since 2000



Washington Mystics
since 1998

APPENDIX B

EXAMPLE SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS ENGAGEMENTS BY PLATFORM

Facebook:

Account:
Indiana Fever (Official)

Content type:
Informative text and Photo

Platform:
Facebook

Engagement:
Likes, Shares, and Comments



Likes:
116

Comments:
17

Shares:
8

Engagements:
141

Followers:
85,614

Engagements Rate:
.164%

$(141 / 85614 = .00164 * 100)$

WNBA Team Engagement Rate Average:

1.6%

Publish date: 6 SEP 2021 <https://www.facebook.com/indianafever>

Instagram:

Account: Sabrina Ionescu
WNBA player

Sponsor: State Farm

Content type: Video

Platform: Instagram

Engagement: Likes, Views, and Comments

Likes: 17,104 (not pictured here)

Views: 119,231

Comments: 95

Engagements: 136,430

Followers: 692,000

Engagements Rate: 19.7%
(136430/692000 = .197 * 100)

WNBA Player Engagement Rate Average: 6.9%

Publish date: 10 JUN 2021 https://www.instagram.com/sabrina_j/

Twitter:

Planned: Highlighted at the top of her feed

Account: Chiney Ogwumike
WNBA player

Content type: Video

Platform: Twitter

Engagement: Likes, Retweets, Views, and Comments

Likes: 64,000

Views: 2,000,000

Comments: 902

Retweet (Shares): 8,854

Engagements: 2,073,756

Followers: 94,100

Engagements Rate: 2203%
(2073756/94100 = 22.03 * 100)

WNBA Player Engagement Rate Average: 6.9%

Publish date: 13 FEB 2020 <https://twitter.com/chiney/>

YouTube:

Content type: Video

Platform: YouTube

Likes: 20,000

Views: 3,480,708

Comments: 1,681

Engagements: 3,503,389

Followers: 194,000

Engagements Rate: 180.5%
 $(3,503,389 / 194,000 = 18.05 * 100)$

WNBA League Engagement Rate Average: 1.1%

Paid Ad: Relevant ad related to content

Engagement: Likes 20K

Engagement: Comments 1.6K

Account: WNBA (194K subscribers)

Engagement: Views AMAZING ENDING to the 2016 WNBA Finals!!!
 WNBA • 3,480,708 views • Oct 20, 2016

The L.A. Sparks win the 2016 WNBA Finals in dramatic fashion!!!
 Check out the last 23 seconds of this historic Finals game!!!

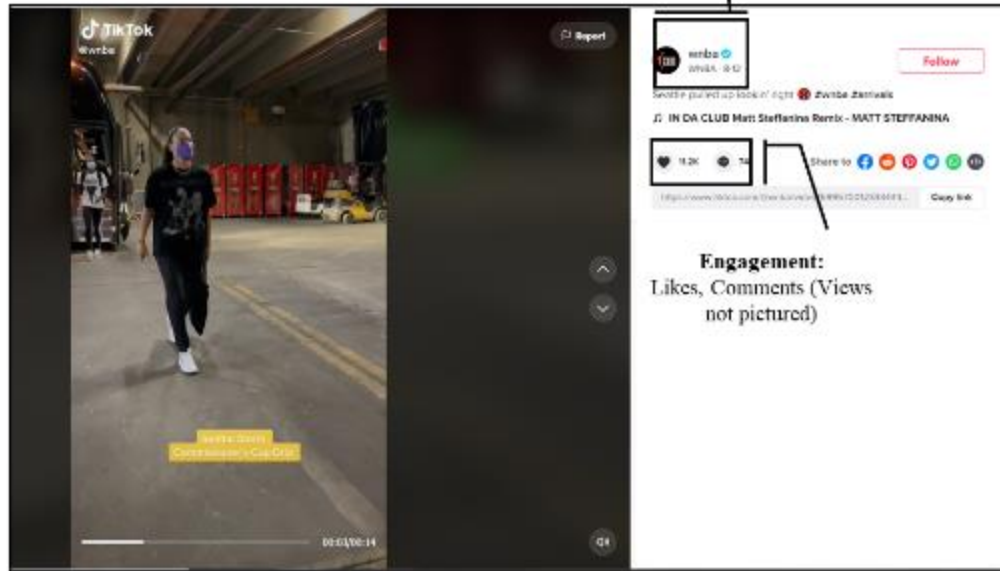
Publish date: 20 OCT 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/user/WNBA>

TikTok

Platform:
TikTok

Content type:
Video

Account:
WNBA



Likes: 11,200

Views: 123,300

Comments: 74

Engagements: 134,574

Followers: 825,700

Engagements Rate: 16.29%

$(134574/825700 = .162 * 100)$

WNBA League Engagement Rate Average: 1.1%

Publish date: 12 AUG 2021 <https://www.tiktok.com/@WNBA>

APPENDIX C EXAMPLE SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS BY COMMUNICATION CATEGORY

Updating:



<https://twitter.com/chicagosky>

Publicizing:



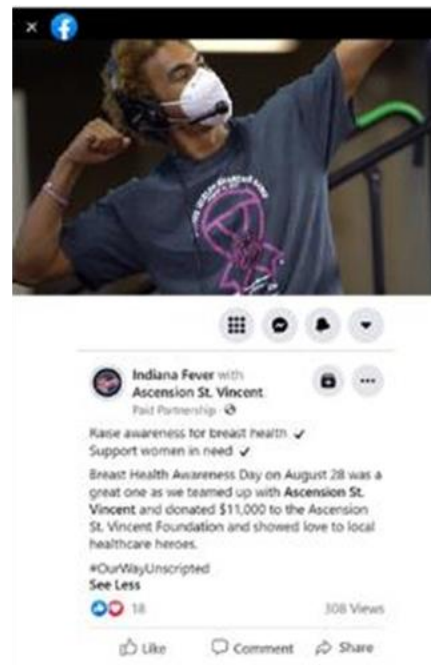
<https://www.facebook.com/seattlestorm>

Selling:



<https://insidesportsjournal.com>

Promoting:



<https://www.facebook.com/indianafever>

Appreciating:



<https://twitter.com/minnesotalynx>

Spreading:



<https://twitter.com/kingjames>

Servicing:



<https://www.instagram.com/candaceparker>

**APPENDIX D
CODE BOOK: DEFINITIONS**

TERM	DEFINITION AND SIGNIFICANCE
24	Player J jersey number
2 WAY PLAYER	Someone who excels on offense and defense
21 (GAME) 2K20	A type of playground basketball game Or 2K, title of a popular basketball video game
ACE	Nickname of previous player
AD	Athletic director
ASSASSIN	Someone who can be counted on in clutch moments in a game
ATL	Atlanta
AVI	Avatar: an icon or figure representing a particular person
AYE	Emphatically say yes or agree
BAE	Before anyone else, a term for a significant other or between two female friends
BAG	Getting money
BALL OUT	To try or play extremely hard
BALLER	Great basketball player
BB	Or Bball, shorthand for basketball
BC	Informal spelling for because
BEAST MODE	A person in a competitive moment or working hard
BIG T	Or Princess T, or Sweet T, nickname for Player F
BIPOC	Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
BIRD	Nickname of previous player
BLM	Black Lives Matter, represents a social justice movement
BRUH	Term for a friend, or an interjection to question what was just stated
BTW	By the way
BUCKETS	Scoring points in basketball
BUCKEYES	Mascot for the Ohio State University
BULLDOG	Or Dog, Mississippi State University mascot
CATCH	Nickname for Player J
COCKS	South Carolina University mascot Gamecocks
CUZZO	Or Cuz, means cousin (an actual cousin or someone who is like family)
DAGGER	A clutch play or shot in a game
DANGEROUS	Used to say that the basketball team should be successful with this roster
DASSIT	Slang for that's it
DAT	Informal spelling for "that"
DEF	Informal spelling for definitely
DM	Direct message on social media platforms
DOPE	Slang for something that is good

DPOY	Defensive Player of the Year
DRIP	Nice outfit or accessories
DUB	A win, comes from shortening the letter W
EAT	Or let's eat, slang to get what you deserve such as money or scoring
EUROCUP	Basketball tournament for European teams
EVA	Informal way to say ever
EWEEZY	Or Weezy, nickname of former player
FACTS	To agree with something
FAM	Short for family
FAV	Informal spelling for "favorite"
FBF	Flashback Friday, posting something from the past
FEVER NATION	Represents the Fever's fan base
FIBA	International basketball federation
FLATS	Type of chicken wing
FOR SHO	Slang meaning for sure, to agree
FREDDY	The name of the Fever's mascot
FWD	Shorthand for forward
GAWD	Informal spelling for God
GIRL DAD	Represents a father supporting his daughter made popular after the death of Kobe Bryant
GM	General manager of the team
GO OFF	Play well or looks good
GOAT	Greatest of all time
GRIND	Hard work
GRR	Or with more "r"s, means frustrated
GUN SHOW	Guns represent arm muscles; gun show means someone's arms look fit or flexing
HAIL STATE	Supporting Mississippi State University (MSU)
HANDLES	A player excels in dribbling
HANG TIME	Jumping high
HAWKS	University of Iowa mascot
HBD	Happy birthday
HC	Head coach
HEARD	Or heard you, a way to say you agree with what was just stated
HEEL	Short for Tarheel, University of North Carolina mascot
HESI	Informal spelling of hesitation, a move in basketball
HINKLE	Location of the Fever's home games
FIELDHOUSE	
HOF	Hall of Fame
HOOPER	Good basketball player
HOOSIERS	Term for people from Indiana
HORSE	A shooting game in basketball
HUNGRY	Eager to achieve or work for something
I SEE YOU	Slang term for recognizing someone accomplishing something

ICYMI	In Case You Missed It, posts something as a reminder
IG	Instagram
IKR	I Know Right, a way to agree
IMG	Location of the Wubble
IN THE LAB	Working on skills or fitness
INDY	Indiana or Indianapolis
IRISH	Represents Notre Dame University mascot
IYKYK	If You Know You Know, something makes sense to a certain group of people but not to others
JK	Term for just kidding
JU	Nickname for Player B
JUWANNA MANN	Derogatory term for a women's basketball player based on a movie
KD	Nickname for Player D
KELZ	Nickname for Player G
KICKS	Nice shoes
KILLA	Or killing it, slang for someone who is the top of their game
KING	A male friend or significant person
KITCHEN	Or go back to the kitchen, derogatory term to tell a woman they do not belong in sports
LA BUILT	Someone from Louisiana (LA)
LC	Nickname for Player C
LEMME	Informal spelling for "let me"
LIT	Slang for something is above average or exciting
LMAO	Laugh my ass off, something is funny
LMBO	Laugh my butt off, something is funny
LOL	Laugh out loud, something is funny
LOVE IS LOVE	Represents support for gay marriage
LUCAS OIL	Indianapolis NFL stadium
MAMBA	Or Mambacita, nickname for Kobe Bryant and his youth girls' team, represents someone who works hard on their skills
MAROON	A way to support Mississippi state
MAV	Nickname for Player E
MEEK	Or Mek or Meka of Mika, nickname for Player J
MERCH	Slang for merchandise
MISS BASKETBALL	Best high school basketball player in her state
MVP	Most valuable player
NATCHAT	Online series of Player A interviewing relevant people
NAW	Informal way to say no or disagree
NBD	No Big Deal, to say something exciting happened while trying to stay calm about it
NO CAP	You are not lying; you are telling the truth when others do not believe you
NWSL	National women's soccer league
OG	Slang for someone who's incredibly authentic, or "old-school."

OMG	Short for Oh My God or Goodness, to show excitement or shock
ON FLEEK	Slang for something looking good or on trend
ON POINT	Extremely well done
OOTD	Outfit of the day
OT	Over Time in a game
OTD	On this day
PACERS	Indiana's NBA team
PERIOD	Or periodt, to emphasis a point
PG	Point Guard, a position on a basketball team
PLZ	Or PLS, Please
PRIDE	Support of LGBT+ events and people
QUEEN V	Nickname for Player I
RAIN	Or make it rain or raining, scoring several consecutive points with limited misses
RIDE OR DIE	Person you can trust
RONA	Slang for Coronavirus or COVID-19
ROOK	Represents a rookie, someone in their first year
ROYALS	Represents Players F and I's nicknames (Queen and Princess)
RT	Retweet
S/O	Shout Out, to highlight someone or something
SAY HER NAME	Represents social movement raise awareness for Black Women victims violence
SHEESH	To express disbelief in a positive manner
SHERO	A female hero
SHORTY	Slang term for a woman
SICEM	Saying to support Baylor University athletes
SICK	Slang for something that is amazing
SIS	Term of endearment between female friends
SLAY	Someone is fashionable
SMH	Or SMDH, Shake My (Damn) Head, something is hard to believe
SNIPER	A good field goal or three-point shooter
SPLASH	A shot that goes in without hitting the backboard or rim
SQUAD	A group of close friends or the team
STL BORN	Someone from St. Louis
SWAG	Or Swaggy, someone with self-confidence or swagger on and / or off the court
SZN	Season
T1D	Type 1 diabetes
TARHEELS	Or Heels, University of North Carolina mascot
TAT	Informal spelling of tattoo
TBE	The best ever
TBT	Throw Back Thursday or Throw Back To, posting something from the past
TC	Nickname for Player J
THE LAST DANCE	A multi episode documentary on former NBA player Michael Jordan (MJ)

THE W	Nickname for the WNBA
THIS	When said as a complete statement, is a way to emphasize or agree with a point
THO	Informal way to say though
THREADS	Clothes
TIFF TIP	Represents Player H's weekly fitness tips
TUESDAY	
TOUGH	Or Tuff, a positive description of someone or something
TULLY	Name of previous player
TWITTER	A series of connected tweets by one person meant to be read in a row
THREAD	
U18	Under 18 years old, U followed by a number is Under that age used for basketball divisions
UNC	University of North Carolina
UR	Short for you are
VOL	University of Tennessee mascot
WACK	Slang for something that is not good
WBB	Women's basketball
WEAR	Represents a symbol to end gun violence
ORANGE	
WHOOOP	Or Woo Hoo, exclamation of support
WILDIN	When a person is doing or saying wild and crazy things
WING	A position in basketball
WTF	Or WTH, short for What the F**K or What the Hell
WUBBLE	Name for the closed environment that the season played out
YAS	Often spelled with multiple "S", represents and emphatic yes or agreement
YEP	Or Yeppers or yep with multiple "P"s, slang for yes or agreement
YOUNGINS	Rookie or 2nd year players

SENTIMENT	DEFINITION
EXTREME	Hateful comments generally speaking or based on personal
NEGATIVE	attributes, or political beliefs
NEGATIVE	Complain, disapprove or the topic, or are deliberately argumentative
CRITICAL	Criticize the management, administrative actions, or stakeholder related decisions
NEUTRAL	Comments that are neither positive nor negative, usually as a reaction to a call to action
POSITIVE	Comments that show support or excitement to the topic

APPENDIX E
CODE BOOK: EMOJI DEFINITIONS

EMOJI	DEFINITION AND SIGNIFICANCE
EMOJI: 100	Shorthand for 100%, with the usage meaning “keep it real”
EMOJI: ANNOUNCEMENT	Used to announce something to everyone
EMOJI: BASKETBALL	A basketball
EMOJI: BASKETBALL PLAYER	Indicates someone playing basketball
EMOJI: BEAR	Baylor University mascot
EMOJI: BELGIUM	Belgium flag
EMOJI: BIRD	Represents University of South Carolina Gamecocks
EMOJI: BIRTHDAY	Various birthday related emojis such as cakes or party hats
EMOJI: BLAST	Represent something is exciting
EMOJI: BROKEN HEART	Used to convey sadness
EMOJI: BULLSEYE	Used to represent agreement or that someone made a great point
EMOJI: CAMERA	Used when players are showing off their fashion choices
EMOJI: CANADA	Canadian flag
EMOJI: CAT	Represents the Belgium National team
EMOJI: CELEBRATION	Used to convey congratulations and celebration
EMOJI: CHEF	Represents that someone has a high shooting percentage
EMOJI: CHILI	Used to say something is hot or spicy gossip
EMOJI: CLAPPING	Used as a round of applause or to show you are making a point or celebrating something
EMOJI: CLOVER	Represents Notre Dame University mascot
EMOJI: CROWN	Slang for a queen or princess
EMOJI: CRY	Represents something sad unless paired with text indicating they are crying while laughing
EMOJI: CYCLONE	Represents Iowa State University mascot
EMOJI: DANCING	Represents dancing or having a good time
EMOJI: DETERMINED	Represents someone is giving maximum effort
EMOJI: DIAMOND	Convey various senses of beauty, wealth and sophistication
EMOJI: DOG	Represents Mississippi State University mascot
EMOJI: EYES	Represents either "I see you" or watching drama take place
EMOJI: FACE PALM	Used to display frustration or embarrassment
EMOJI: FINGERS CROSSED	Gesture indicating luck or that you are close with someone
EMOJI: FIRE	To say something is exciting

EMOJI: FIST	Symbol of resistance or defiance or support to someone making a social justice post
EMOJI: FLAG	Used to draw attention to the topic
EMOJI: FLEX	To show strength
EMOJI: FLOWER	Used for special occasions
EMOJI: FUEL	Used to convey hard work
EMOJI: GOAT	Represents greatest of all time
EMOJI: GORILLA	Could be considered racist in some contexts, especially when used towards Black people
EMOJI: GRAPH	Represents getting better
EMOJI: HAIR FLIP	Sassy or pretty
EMOJI: HANDS UP	To show gratitude or thanks
EMOJI: HEART	To show love or support
EMOJI: HUG	Conveys giving love or support
EMOJI: ICE	Slang for cold meaning able to calm a difficult situation
EMOJI: KISS	Conveys giving love or support
EMOJI: LAUGHING	Represents something is funny, could be sarcastic
EMOJI: LAUGHING	Used to show something is funny
EMOJI: LOVE	To show that you love or support something
EMOJI: MIC	Either an announcement or singing
EMOJI: MIND BLOWN	Represent such emotions as shock, awe, amazement, and disbelief
EMOJI: MONEY	Represents getting paid or earning something
EMOJI: NEWSPAPER	Represent a news announcement or article link
EMOJI: NUMBER ONE	Represents something is the best
EMOJI: OKAY	Represents "I'm okay" or "yes, that's correct / good"
EMOJI: ORANGE	Represents University of Tennessee mascot
EMOJI: PALM TREE	Represents the Wubble that is in Florida
EMOJI: PLANE	Represents travel
EMOJI: POINT	Indicates something to look at in the text or post
EMOJI: PRAYER	As a prayer or please or thank you
EMOJI: PRIDE	Shows support for LGBT Community
EMOJI: QUESTION	Used to question or scorn something or someone
EMOJI: ROCKET	Indicate a fast increase
EMOJI: SHAKA	Used to show something is relaxing or chill
EMOJI: SHH	Convey silence or discreetness in some cases it means that someone needs to be quiet
EMOJI: SIREN	Represents an announcement
EMOJI: SKULL	Indicates "dead" or "I died" as in laughing hard
EMOJI: SMILE	Represents something is makes you happy
EMOJI: STAR	Represents that someone is a star
EMOJI: STAR EYE	Someone or something is amazing, fascinating, impressive, or exciting
EMOJI: SUN	Represents happiness

EMOJI: SUNGLASSES	Convey a confident, carefree attitude or that something is excellent
EMOJI: TEA	Gossip. Unless on player j posts then it is just about her tea business
EMOJI: THINKING	Represents a thoughtful statement
EMOJI: THUMBS UP	Represents approval, agreement, or good job
EMOJI: TROPHY	Recognition of achievement
EMOJI: TV	Represents something to watch either on a streaming device or linear TV
EMOJI: UK	British flag
EMOJI: WINK	May signal a joke, flirtation, hidden meaning, or general positivity
EMOJI: WOMAN	Represents a woman
EMOJI: WORK	Indicates putting in efforts to get better

APPENDIX F
CODE BOOK: COMMENT THEMES DEFINITIONS

MAIN CATEGORY	DEFINITION	SUB- CATEGORY	DEFINITION
BASKETBALL	comments that relate to some facet of basketball	cheering a coach	basketball related comments about a coach
		Cheering a player	basketball related comments about a player
		Cheering the team	basketball related comments about the team
		Congratulations	basketball related comments that congratulate a player, coach, or team
		Excited to watch	comments expressing their excitement to watch a player, the team, or the season in general
		Informative	comments with links or information about the team or players
		MSU	Mississippi State University specific comments
		Opinions	comments that are about the management, administrative actions, or sponsor related decisions
		Personal experience	comments that share their experiences as a fan of the team or a player
		Photo or media	photos or the team or player, either a personal comment or downloaded reshared
		Thank you	basketball related comments thanking the team or player
Welcome	comments welcoming a new coach or player or the team		

INTERACTIVE	comments that were completing a call to action from the original poster or contributing to the conversation	Poll response	Replying to a multiple-choice question from the post
		Participation	Replying to a posted game or trend
		Question	Asking a direct question with the expectation of an answer
LIFESTYLE	comments that relate to the player or commenters life outside of basketball	Cheering a player	non basketball related comment about a player or their friends and family
		Extreme Negative	Extremely negative personal comment about a player or team
		Fashion	comments about fashion, hair, makeup, or shoes
		Holiday	comments about a birthday or other holidays
		Thank you	non basketball related comment thanking a player or the team
SOCIAL ISSUES	comments that relate to social, political, or community topics	BLM	comments related to Black Lives Matter movement and surrounding issues
		Community	comments about community involvement or service
		COVID	comments related to COVID-19 (not related to scheduling)
		Money	comments related to pay inequality or other financial topics

		Voting	comments about voting
		Emoji	comments with only emojis
		Foreign language	comments in a foreign language
OTHER	Spam, hashtag only, emoji only, tagged site only	Hashtag	comments with only a hashtag
		Spam	unsolicited advertisement sent in bulk or incoherent phrases
		Tagged	comments with only a tagged site

APPENDIX G
CODE BOOK: POST THEMES DEFINITIONS

Term	Definition	Example
Updating	Organizations post content with relevant information surrounding the team or players.	Injuries or starting lineups
Publicizing	Events are based around image building activities to engender community support	Charity events
Selling	Encouraging consumer attitudes results in purchasing a product or ticket.	Orange Hoodie campaign
Promoting	Contests, giveaways, or other activities again with the intent to sell a product or ticket	Giveaway nights
Appreciating	Building relationships with consumers with content that recognizes the fans in unique ways.	Fan appreciation night events
Spreading	Sharing relevant content from others in such a way that their reach expands to a larger audience	Influencers post about games or events such as NBA players
Servicing	Organization's sponsors can publicly show their support resulting promotional opportunities of their products to the fans.	Sponsored content and products such as shoe deals