

Digital Sport Fandom

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The Rise of Digital Sport Fandom

The advent and growth of the internet exponentially increased the number of opportunities for sport fans to interact with other fans, teams, and athletes. Early avenues of interaction, which included message boards and social network sites (e.g., Facebook), allowed fans to engage in fandom-related activities online. The 2012 London Olympics was generally considered a major turning point for digital platforms in sport and is dubbed the “first social media Olympics” (Pegoraro & Lebel, 2021). The global scale of the London Olympics showcased both the power and scope of emergent technologies with athletes and fans from around the world gathering to engage via social media platforms (Humphreys, 2012). Six years later, the 2018 World Cup generated 115 billion impressions (i.e., views on Twitter) during the tournament (Bavishi & Filadelfo, 2018). Today, coaches, athletes, fans, sport organizations, and journalists alike all maintain accounts on various digital platforms and interact with one another (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011).

As each new sporting event unfolds, digital platforms consistently generate new record-breaking traffic, fueled by the persistent growth of the user base. While the total number of all social media users in 2010 was just under one billion, that number grew to over 3.6 billion by 2020 (Tankovska, 2021). The sport industry reflects this general mass popularity of digital platforms; over 60 percent of sport fans follow sport accounts on social media (Ivana, 2020). Thus, this chapter explores the relationship between digital fandom and the sport industry. It begins with an examination into why sport fans embrace digital media, with an emphasis on social media due to its near ubiquitous state in both society and the sport industry. Next, this chapter discusses digital engagement, highlighting its role and use in the fan experience. The chapter then acknowledges that digital fandom is not always positive by discussing the dark side of sport fandom. Finally, this chapter concludes with an overview of the future of digital fandom, including new technologies and what that means for sport practitioners and scholars alike.

Theorizing Digital Sport Fandom

Originally, digital platforms were envisioned to operate as virtual communities that allowed users to participate in designing, publishing, editing, and sharing in a dynamic environment (van Dijck and Poell, 2013). These digital platforms were embraced by fans as channels

to display their fandom (Pegoraro et al., 2018). The motives of gathering information and technical knowledge, together with receiving entertainment and diversion, were found when examining digital media use from a sport perspective (Hur, Ko, & Valacich, 2007; Seo & Green, 2008). The capacity of digital platforms to foster self-expressions among users provided instantaneous connectivity and helped to break down geographic and communicative boundaries for sport fans allowing them to interact with their favorite athletes and teams with relative ease (Pegoraro, 2013). The potential of digital media was further realized with the advent and adoption of social media platforms. These new opportunities for engagement by fans and sport consumers have garnered significant attention from sport researchers. A frequent focus of sport researchers looking to understand digital fandom has been investigating why fans use digital media, or their motivations.

Why Fans Use Digital Media

For sport fans, following digital media of sport figures, organizations, and media has become a popular past-time. Consequently, there has been a significant shift in the sports communication paradigm (Hambrick et al., 2010), with social media being a dominant medium embraced by sport fans and organizations alike. Sport organizations have embraced digital media including social media to provide fans with information updates, online marketplaces to purchase sport-related products and services, and interaction opportunities such as message boards and blogs (Hardin et al., 2012). Meanwhile, sport fans use social media for interactivity, information gathering, entertainment, fandom, and camaraderie (Filo et al., 2015). More broadly, social media has been found to complement or enhance the sport consumption experience (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010), such as sport fans using a second screen (e.g., using a smartphone or computer while watching a sport game on TV) for their excitement, need to obtain information, and its convenience (Hwang & Lim, 2015).

Existing sport management scholarship has identified motives driving social media use. For example, Clavio and Kian (2010) found that an important motivating factor for following an athlete's Twitter was the perception of the athlete as an expert, with followers' motives captured under three categories: organic fandom, functional fandom, and interaction. Other research has considered social media more broadly, finding 12 motives associated with usage among sport fans: arousal, passing time, camaraderie, entertainment, self-expression, habitual use, escape, information surveillance, building a virtual community, companionship, coolness, and maintaining relationships (e.g., Billings et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2017). Overall, these motives have been summarized as interactivity, information gathering, entertainment, fandom, and camaraderie (Filo et al., 2015). Evidently, by this summary of drivers of social media usage, fandom is an important component.

Digital media, and social media more specifically, play an important role in digital fandom as it facilitates the opportunities for sport fans to (i) express their fandom and (ii) strengthen their fandom. First, digital media allows fans an additional way to express their fandom, with fandom often being a driving factor of social media usage (e.g., Mumcu & Lough, 2017; Witkemper et al., 2012). Prior to digital media, the ability for fans to effortlessly express their fandom was limited; for instance, they could wear a team's jersey following a win or call up a friend to discuss the win, but it was difficult to broadcast their fandom. Now, with digital media, it is possible for a fan to continuously post throughout a game, essentially having a megaphone to broadcast their fandom digitally. Consequently, existing research indicates that fans use social media to balance and express various sport identities (Larkin & Fink, 2016) and express their passion and identification (Wakefield, 2016). This chapter will further discuss how digital media facilitates fandom

expression in the next section on digital engagement when it looks at how digital media, particularly social media, is used to reinforce and perpetuate offline fandom behaviors.

Second, digital media helps to strengthen fandom. As we know from existing literature, there are various antecedents of fandom including: the need to belong, the need for distinctiveness, socialization into fandom, presence of rivals, proximity to a team/stadium, perceived similarity with the team, player attributes, and the team's history (Koch & Wann, 2016). Social media helps to facilitate opportunities for these antecedents, which in turn can strengthen fandom. For example, digital media can help to overcome geographic differences, artificially increasing the proximity to a team or stadium and increasing fandom (Collins et al., 2016). Social media can enhance the similarity to and sense of connection with sport teams and athletes since it can provide fans with additional information on and access to their favorite sport entities. For instance, when Clavio and Kian (2010) explored motives for following a retired LPGA player, there was a motive of affinity towards the athlete, such as interest in the athlete and affinity for the athlete's writing. Similarly, for athletes who feature two-way, social communication with fans on their accounts, fans were motivated to follow them for consumption, admiration, promotion, and community (Frederick et al., 2012). Social media is designed to connect fans, allowing them to feel a sense of belonging and connection to other fans and sport entities they might not have access to otherwise. Consequently, interaction is often a motive of social media usage (e.g., Gibbs et al., 2014) and fans often use social media to build a virtual community (e.g., Billings et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2017). Therefore, by examining why sport fans use social media, we can understand its role in facilitating expression and strengthening of digital fandom.

Digital Engagement

Scholars have investigated how different types of content prompt consumers to engage or interact, moving them from passive to active consumers on digital platforms. Thompson et al. (2014) found consumers most often interacted with content that poses questions and provides behind-the-scenes content opportunities. Boehmer and Tandoc (2015) found retweets of sport news by students were impacted by perceptions of credibility and likability of the source. Respondents were influenced by a tweet's originality, informativeness, and style when deciding what types of content to retweet. Characteristics of the users, including their interest in the tweet's topic, the relevancy of the tweet's topic to the user, similarity in opinion, and impact on the user's followers, all impacted users' decisions on whether they would retweet a post. Engaging with content was also found to be influenced by students' perceptions of their own Twitter followers' interests (Boehmer & Tandoc, 2015).

As digital platforms and their user bases have matured, scholars have re-focused their attention to issues beyond why people follow and what prompts engagement, to studies that investigate the different types of outcomes that digital interaction can provide to sport consumers. At the same time, there has been a rise in social television (TV), or second screen experiences. Each live sporting event draws significant attention on digital platforms – the 2018 Super Bowl, for example, generated 4.8 billion tweets around the event (Cohen, 2018). Cunningham and Eastin (2017) found that 79 percent of participants used second screens for social media interaction while watching sports (e.g., posting and commenting on Facebook or Twitter) and 65 percent looked online for information related to the game or sport while it was being played.

Recognizing that sports fans are increasingly turning to Twitter to experience events and receive commentary, Smith et al. (2019) surveyed fans to measure how Twitter might influence their enjoyment of viewing live and mediated sporting events. Respondents in this study were found to focus on American football and they primarily reported using Twitter to augment their

consumption of sports. When asked about how Twitter use impacted their enjoyment level while consuming live and broadcast sports, heavy Twitter users reported higher enjoyment levels when using the platform to watch sports (Smith et al., 2019). Practically speaking, this research shows that engagement with content and posting of one's own content on Twitter can be important drivers of consumer enjoyment of digital sport viewing.

Research has also considered traditional sport consumer behavior, such as BIRGing (Basking in Reflective Glory) and CORFing (Cutting off Reflective Failure), online. In analyzing nearly 100,000 tweets posted during two of England's 2018 World Cup games, it was evident that English fans tended to BIRG when England was leading or victorious and tended to CORF when England was trailing or defeated (Fan et al., 2020). Sport fans' online engagement increased with the excitement level of the game, such as sharing and exchanging opinions and information more during more exciting game moments (Lee et al., 2014). Overall, this illustrates how fans use digital platforms to extend traditional fan behaviors during live sport events.

Similarly, researchers have investigated rivalry on digital platforms as rivalries have long been a part of sport consumer behavior. The convenience to engage in expressions of rivalry – to commiserate, celebrate, as well as antagonize by interacting with teams and fans – has reached an unprecedented degree of flexibility and freedom on digital platforms. Watanabe et al. (2019) measured the number of Twitter posts by individuals about US college football teams to model how often fans create content during game days. After controlling for a number of factors, including the type of rivalry game, results indicated that fans post more during traditional rivalries. Furthermore, newer rivalry games had less impact on the amount of content posted about a team. Previous research on the effect of conference realignment on attendance (Szymanski & Winfree, 2018), revealed the loss of rivalries were estimated to only have a negligible impact on attendance at games, sometimes accounting for only half a percent change in attendance demand. Therefore, the study demonstrated that rivalries may play a more substantial role in driving consumer interest for college football teams in the digital realm, compared to actual physical attendance (Watanabe et al., 2019). Thus, not only does digital fandom represent a replication of offline fandom behaviors, but there is also an additional importance of digital fandom.

Role of Digital Fans

The engagement of fans online has allowed them to experience a shift in their role – no longer just fans, rather they are increasingly involved in the design and production of the sport experience. For example, sport attendees can form online fan communities and leverage these fan communities to demand change from sport organizations or content providers, like when the United Kingdom's Parliament agreed to discuss the possibility of letting fans return to watching live matches in stadiums following the Covid-19 global pandemic after an online petition amassed over 190,000 signatures. Digital media provide sport fans the tools to call for change. It connects fans to other like-minded fans, lets them congregate, discuss and demand change, and facilitates the collection of opinions/signatures/signs of support to amplify fans voices, often at no financial expense. This allows fans to be, or at least feel, increasingly involved in the fan experience.

Digital media has also given rise to the notion of value co-creation. Using social media can increase the flow of information and comments of stakeholders, particularly those coming from fans (Zagnoli & Radicchi, 2010). The use of social media by sport fans can raise awareness of sport events or unique experiences, in turn having fans act as a marketer for that sport event. When David Ayres, a 42-year-old Zamboni driver and operations manager in Toronto, was called into the Carolina Hurricanes' net as the emergency goalie against the Toronto Maple Leafs in a regular season game, he became an internet sensation due to social media attention from various

stakeholders. The Hurricanes then capitalized on his internet popularity, designing t-shirts in his honour. Overall, this example demonstrates the value the online community was able to create around the unique event. Effectively, digital fandom not only facilitates additional, online opportunities for fans to express and experience their fandom (such as tweeting their BIRGing and CORFing), but also increases their role in the sport experience, letting them take on a more active role and call for change in the industry.

Dark Side of Digital Fandom

Thus far, this chapter has painted digital fandom in a positive light. For example, we have examined the opportunities that digital media allows for fans, such as highlighting how social media can be used to complement and enhance the fan viewing experience (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010) or demand and facilitate social change. However, it is important to acknowledge the dark side of digital fandom to paint a balanced picture of the reality of sport fandom in a digital age. Therefore, this chapter will briefly overview three negative aspects to digital fandom: (i) how digital media can reinforce offline inequities, (ii) negativity on digital media, and (iii) privacy concerns related to data collection and usage.

Digital Media as an Equalizer

The advancement of digital media was thought to be a disrupting force that could help balance and equalize the sport industry as well as society more broadly. For example, due to its ability to lower the threshold for civic engagement and increase the awareness of and opportunities for social justice, the internet and social media have been dubbed great equalizers (Xenos et al., 2014). Conventionally, offline civic behavior has been reserved for men (Putnam, 2000), with women being less politically interested and informed (Verba et al., 1997). Though some researchers are optimistic with respect to social media's ability to stem or reverse patterns of civic inequality (e.g., Xenos et al., 2014), other researchers find evidence that gender inequities are perpetuated and reinforced on social media (e.g., Brandtzaeg, 2017).

Traditionally, women's sports have struggled to receive media coverage compared to men's sports (Cooky et al., 2015) and the coverage that is received is often gendered, portraying women athletes as women who play sports as opposed to simply athletes (Meân & Kassing, 2008), and often overly sexualizing women or branding them as mothers (Cooky et al., 2015). Digital media has the potential to disrupt this narrative and provide sport fans with a more equitable quantity and quality of sport coverage. Digital media also has the potential to provide sport teams and athletes with more of a voice and control of their own narrative; just as it has with sport fans. However, emerging scholarship on digital media's ability to challenge offline inequalities is mixed. Some research suggests that the inequalities are still perpetuated; for example, digital coverage of the 2008 Olympics was 1.6 times more likely to feature men than women (Jones, 2013) and self-presentation of athletes on social media (e.g., Twitter) indicates a persistence of hegemonic values (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014). Conversely, other scholarship finds that social media has the potential to be leveraged to promote women athletes positively; for example, Pegoraro et al.'s (2018) study following the #SheBelieves for the US Women's Soccer team during the 2015 World Cup found a positive framing of women as athletes. Effectively, the evidence of digital media challenging and disrupting offline inequalities versus perpetuating and reinforcing them is mixed. Thus, a potential dark side of digital media is that, without purposeful efforts to change narratives surrounding inequities, digital media might continue to exasperate them.

Online Negativity

Another dark side of digital fandom is related to the negativity that can be experienced by users. Since all social media users have the ability to comment and react to posts, social media can become toxic and negative for some users. For example, the racist and discriminatory online comments directed towards Ethan Bear, an NHL player from the Ojibwa Nation in Saskatchewan and the first player to have his name printed on his jersey in Cree syllabics, became so bad that the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations Chiefs and the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations released statements calling for the NHL to address racism and hate towards First Nation people in the league. While digital media can provide a voice for individuals and organizations to support individuals such as Ethan Bear in this example, it also provides the same voice to individuals seeking to spread hate and negativity. This can negatively impact social media users who are on the receiving end of bigotry or observing it.

Negativity or the fear of receiving a negative backlash can stifle the voices of users; for example, women athletes report receiving unwanted direct messages and rude public messages on their social media which has a silencing effect as they expressed concern about post reception, resulting in them rethinking and shying away from certain post content (Geurin, 2017). This can make it difficult for athletes to be authentic and fully leverage their online brand. As athletes speak out, such as NBA athletes who have leveraged their social media accounts to express social justice causes like Dwayne Wade and LeBron James posting pictures of themselves and their team respectively wearing the apparel a victim wore when he was shot by the police (Demby, 2012), there is a responding conversation by stakeholders, with some critics going so far as to say that athletes should “stay in their lanes”. Digital media, and particularly social media, makes it increasingly easy for angry or upset fans to vocalize or express their negative emotions, with less sense of consequence as people can experience anonymity online. Overall, negativity on digital media can hurt those receiving it and those reading it.

Privacy

The final dark side of digital sport fandom discussed in this chapter is related to privacy, with a particular emphasis on the amount of data fans are knowingly or unknowingly giving away in the name of fandom. The rise of digital fandom parallels other advancements in technology including big data and machine learning; namely, tools and techniques sport organizations can use to collect and analyze fans’ data. For example, a sport team and their newly upgraded digital stadium might use an online ticket process and an app in their stadium to improve fan experiences such as providing mobile ticketing, real-time information about parking or traffic, coupon and discounts for in stadium purchases, etc. However, for fans to embrace these improved, digital fan experiences, it is often at the expense of providing data such as their demographics, purchase history, in-stadium behavior, and/or credit card information. Moreover, in the wake of Covid-19, fans may be required to provide sensitive health information to enter a venue. Failing to properly secure data can lead to data breaches and security concerns for consumers, particularly for health data that sport organizations are not used to handling.

Fitness apps, such as Strava, are another area of potential privacy issues as they track, store, and often make available collected data. Fitness apps represent a great tool in digital fandom, a way for athletes to track and share their workouts and even connect with other users. Moreover, the competition element, such as apps allowing users to set up challenges with and against other users, can help to drive and increase fandom. However, providing all this information can have unintended consequences. For individual runners or cyclists, the Strava Flyby feature showed

who they've passed on a run or bike ride, intended to help connect athletes and build a community. However, the unintended consequence of this data collection was the ability to document the routines of a user, including where they lived, worked, and exercised.

In response to fans moving their consumption online, sport management scholars have also moved to online research techniques, such as digital media content analysis. When fans converse in a digital world, such as posting online in groups or on social media, they are likely doing so without realizing their posts may be collected and analyzed without their knowledge. This raises many discussion points when academic researchers leverage publicly available social media data: "Did the participants know they were going to be a part of a research study? Would the comments be different if people knew their responses were going to be used in an academic setting? How can permission be obtained to use the posts or comments on the website?" (Ruibley & Hardin, 2014, p. 4). Effectively, as fans increasingly move to digital spaces, they are consciously or unconsciously providing more data and information about themselves to the general public which may be collected, stored, analyzed, or applied in a way that they might not be comfortable with. Moreover, major data breaches, such as an attack on a sport organization to obtain fan information such as credit card numbers, have the potential to significantly and negatively impact all sport stakeholders involved. Thus, privacy, or more accurately the lack thereof, is a dark side of digital fandom that needs to receive significant attention.

The Future of Digital Sport Fandom

So, what is next in the digital world of sports fandom? There is no doubt that new digital trends will continue to permeate and disrupt the sports industry, providing many future avenues for research. We conclude this chapter by broadly reviewing a few potential areas we believe offer promising opportunities: (i) new social media platforms, (ii) new technologies, and (iii) women's sports.

New Platforms

Currently, platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram maintain dominance (Tankovska, 2021). However, new platforms are constantly introduced to vie for digital market share. Two new platforms that are growing in popularity and have the potential to become common place in digital sport consumption are TikTok and Clubhouse.

TikTok is a social media platform that allows users to upload videos that can be anywhere from 15–60 seconds long and share them to a feed that is aggregated and displayed based on user preferences. TikTok recently sprung up in popularity, boasting 689 million users as of January 2021 (Tankovska, 2021). If teams or athletes want to engage with fans in a short-form video format, TikTok provides a good avenue to do so. Due to its relative novelty compared to more established platforms, few studies have yet to analyze TikTok's impacts on fan engagement (although see Su et al., 2020). While TikTok does nothing inherently new, it is yet another social media platform fans can use to express or strength their digital fandom.

Clubhouse is another platform that has recently gained momentum. Unlike other digital platforms that primarily make use of video and text, Clubhouse relies solely on audio. Creators on the platform carry out convention-style panels, allowing designated speakers to engage in conversation with other prominent figures. The platform also allows users to digitally "raise their hand," and – if chosen by moderators – they are offered the chance to ask questions. The NFL partnered with Clubhouse to have live conversations about their most recent player draft

(Bloom, 2021). This format allows fans the opportunity to interact with multiple athletes and prominent figures directly and would give unique opportunities for digital fandom.

While TikTok and Clubhouse exemplify new platforms that have gained traction and have the potential to facilitate digital fandom, there is no guarantee that they will continue to grow into sustainable channels nor be adopted by sport industry stakeholders. Consequently, it is important for academics and practitioners alike to continually monitor different platforms to understand their evolving role in digital fandom. Additionally, social media companies are continually restricting the data available from their platforms. Therefore, even though there may be more platforms for fans to use in their digital fandom, there may be barriers to researching their usage within the sport consumption experience.

New Technologies

Social media platforms are well-established within the digital ecosystems and there exists many use cases for sports researchers with those tools. However, digital innovation is not limited to social media – other technologies provide different avenues for researchers to explore digital sport fandom. We outline two potential opportunities: (i) AR/VR and (ii) NFTs.

AR and VR. Augmented reality (AR) is a technology that provides a composite view of the world by super-imposing computer-generated images over a consumer's real-world view. While AR has long since been embraced by the sport industry to improve consumers' viewing experiences (e.g., the first down line superimposed in TV broadcasts of American football), it has the potential to continue to advance and be embraced in various aspects of the sport industry. Virtual reality (VR) is the natural evolution of AR as it goes a step further and completely replaces a consumer's visual field with a digital experience through electronics. Both technologies offer exciting opportunities for the sport industry, potentially providing fans with more digital or virtual fandom opportunities. For example, in 2017 FC Bayern Munich used their own team app to create an interface where fans could virtually insert themselves into selfies with the team's star players (Srivastav, 2017). This immersive experience is reported to have increased the club's revenue, while providing an additional way for fans to express their fandom. The MLB has also added AR to its At Bat app with the aim of enhancing the game that fans are watching on the field (Newman, 2017).

Overall, we have learned that digital or virtual environments provide fans with additional opportunities to express their fandom; for example, after your team wins a game, not only can you wear their jersey to show your support, but you can now post pictures and videos with it online to broadcast your support to a wider audience and share in the moment with others online. AR and VR are the natural extensions of the ability to experience and express fandom. Since AR can enhance a traditional experience, such as providing real-time player statistics by holding an app up to a game, it has the possibility to strengthen fandom. VR has the potential to provide fans with immersive experiences they would not otherwise have, like sitting courtside at a game, again facilitating fandom opportunities. As these technologies are adopted by the sport industry, it will provide academics with interesting research opportunities including: whether fans truly enjoy these augmented experiences; how AR/VR experiences impact digital fandom; are fans more likely to engage with teams that use AR/VR; and do these digital immersive experiences lead to increased attendance or purchases.

NFTs. Another new technology that facilitates unique ways for fans to interact with their favorite teams and players are non-fungible tokens (NFTs). Most sports fans are familiar with the concept of trading cards and other collectibles. NFTs essentially act as digital extensions of this collectible market. What makes them special is that they use blockchain technology to create

immutable digital receipts of object authenticity. Additionally, a royalty payment can be attached to any future sale of the NFT, meaning a creator can make income on the work in perpetuity.

Athletes have already begun to sell NFTs independently of the sports they participate in, as evidenced by releases by athletes such as Megan Rapinoe and Sue Bird (Caron, 2021). This means athletes can offer a very singular experience directly to their fans. Moreover, the NBA uses this technology to sell “moments”, which are NFTs of specific in-game instance of an NBA season sold on a platform called Top Shot. This means fans get the chance at digital ownership of the league and its players. One moment of LeBron James has sold for \$208,000; this is evidence that NFTs can provide a completely new income streams for athletes and sports leagues. NFTs represent an opportunity to continue to migrate fandom to a digital space; for instance, why own a physical poster or a trading card when you can have an NFT? Since NFTs are still in their infancy, it is unclear the degree to which they will be adopted by the sport industry or the role they will play for fans. Will fans migrate to a digital fandom completely, with NFTs serving the role of collectibles, or will NFTs only resonate with the most extreme fans who would have always invested in expensive paraphernalia? These represent important areas of inquiry for academics and practitioners alike as NFTs gain traction in the industry.

Women's Sports

Neilson (2018) surveyed 1,000 individuals in eight of the most commercially active sports markets: United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Australia, and New Zealand. The report found that 84 percent of all general sport fans showed interest in women's sport and 66 percent reported watching at least one women's sport. It also found that 63 percent of respondents felt brands should invest in women's sport, 75 percent could recall at least one brand that is involved in women's sport, and 20 percent said they were more influenced by brands associated with women's sport than ones associated with men's sport. These figures reveal not only the public's interest and appetite for women's sport, but also the opportunity for digital fandom.

Women's sports represent a unique opportunity for digital fandom due to their historical underrepresentation in sport media. For example, unlike the NBA that has long-standing contracts with broadcasters, the WNBA leverages numerous broadcast medium including traditional broadcast avenues like ESPN and non-traditional like Twitter and mobile apps. Without the baggage of traditional structures, women's sports have an opportunity to be an industry leader with respect to digital fandom. Namely, women's sports can disrupt the industry and leverage new technologies to reach their existing fans and cultivate new fans. As women's sports challenge existing status quos, there are exciting research opportunities to explore the impact on digital fandom. For instance, Pegoraro et al. (2021) examined the role of broadcast medium on game day social media engagements, finding that Twitter broadcasts were associated with lower engagement levels than other broadcast avenues. Overall, women's sports are keenly positioned to leverage opportunities for digital fandom.

It is also important going forward to ensure that digital fandom is a safe and accepting place for women and women's sports. When discussing the dark sides of fandom, the points of digital media as an equalizer and online negativity were raised; specifically, discussing how digital media can perpetuate and reinforce offline inequalities or be unsafe and negative for users. Just Not Sports released a YouTube video that featured men reading mean tweets about women sport reporters directly to these reporters, illustrating the unsafe online feedback women can receive. In this video, the men were visibly uncomfortable by the comments that had been directed towards the women reporters. While digital media can serve as an equalizer, giving women

ample opportunities to engage with sports media, it can also be a megaphone for negativity. Furthermore, this chapter briefly highlighted how the negative backlash women receive online can be stifling for them, resulting in them rethinking and shying away from certain post content (Geurin, 2017). Going forward, it is important that digital fandom, particularly around women's sports, is developed in such a way to encourage positivity and inclusion, rather than reinforce inequities and negativity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter provided an overview of digital fandom. First, it discussed how, although sport fans use digital media for a variety of reasons, it serves an important role in fandom expression and strengthening. The chapter then discussed digital engagement, explaining how fans exhibit offline behaviors online, such as BIRGing and CORFing or engaging in rivalries. This research can inform sport marketers who might take note of the fact that fans who use digital platforms to follow sport more frequently exhibit high levels of enjoyment when watching both televised and live sport. Next, this chapter overviewed the shifting role of sport consumers with respect to their digital fandom, highlighting how sport fans have become increasingly involved in value co-creation. This chapter concluded by acknowledging potential dark sides of digital fandom and discussing the future of digital fandom. Collectively, this chapter overviewed more than a decade of digital sport consumer behavior research to provide many salient contributions to inform both academic literature and industry practitioners.

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