

# Exploring Consumer Demand in Women's Professional Basketball

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*This research aimed to conceptualize the relationships between consumer demand and WNBA spectatorship from the Stimulus-Organism-Response perspective to better understand what product features of WNBA events impact consumption. As a league that fully embraces fan engagement through social justices initiatives, we do not know what specific core product features in the contemporary landscape of the WNBA lead to high perceptions of product quality and increased consumer demand. The Conceptual Framework of Consumer Demand for Core Product Features of the WNBA Live Game introduces Interactive Activity and Advocacy Programming as a way to understand the unique environmental features of WNBA consumption.*

*Keywords: consumer demand, core product features, WNBA, spectator, fan strategy*

## INTRODUCTION

In North America, the most popular and longest lasting professional sports league for female athletes is the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). Two major revenue sources for the WNBA and other professional sports teams are ticket sales and broadcasting rights (Lachowetz et al. 2001; Hausman and Leonard 1997). Revenue generation from secondary sources such as parking fees, game-day event merchandise, concessions, and operations, advertisements, licensing, and media rights are also crucial for the financial success of a league. However, all of these items center around spectator retention. As a result, it is critical for WNBA teams to understand and identify contemporary variables that affect game attendance and subsequent consumption behaviors. Even though the WNBA is the most successful and longest running women's league in the sport's history, there are still challenges that threaten the success of the league. These challenges include a lack of financial independence and investment (Johnson et al. 2020; Williamson et al. 2003). In order to combat these challenges that many professional leagues are facing, it is important to understand what drives consumption for fans and supporters of the WNBA.

With the growing commercialization of professional sports, fans want more personalized experiences and activations with team participation to help affirm and communicate their brand loyalty (Obiegbu, Larsen and Ellis 2020). What a consumer perceives is important in their experience has led to more consumption. However, it is not known what specific factors in the contemporary landscape of the WNBA lead to high perceptions of product quality. Knowing what consumers demand from a professional sporting event experience adds a great perspective from marketers and decision makers. Professional sports are now

a part of the attention economy. The WNBA is fighting for people's sustained engagement, and as such should look to fully understand the societal impact that league has and fully embrace it to grow consumption. While traditional factors such as game performance and economic factors have been universally accepted to influence consumption, the WNBA has been on the forefront of embracing its uniqueness. Traditional factors in fan motivation and consumption do not account for live sporting events that embrace LGBT programming and routinely allow players to protest issues that affect their community. This highlights the need to understand what features of live WNBA games impact consumption in the form of live spectatorship. In the marketing literature, the experiences that make up live WNBA games would be considered the core product. To have a comprehensive understanding of the aforementioned topic, the purpose of this study is to develop a conceptual framework to demonstrate what features of attending live professional sports influence WNBA consumption.

Year over year, the WNBA is growing its total spectatorship at an encouraging rate. For example, the 2021 WNBA Champions, the Chicago Sky grew its full season ticket sales 175% and partial season tickets 225% from 2021 to 2022 (Costabile 2023). In 2023, the WNBA will expand internationally by playing in its first ever pre-season game in Canada. This proliferation of growth, along with the leagues commitment to embracing fan connectivity and socially relevant programming justifies the need to understand what features of live WNBA games drive consumer behavior. The major research questions for this study is –

***RQ:*** *What features of attending live professional sports events influence WNBA consumption?*

This will be explored through a literature review of consumer demand and core product spectatorship features and an analysis of WNBA game features through the S-O-R Theory method to uncover any new relevant game experience features not previously explored in the literature.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Understanding Consumer Demand**

Consumer demand can be defined as consumer expectations towards the central attributes and qualities of that core product (Byon et al. 2018; Lee et al. 2020; Zhang et al., 2003). As previously stated for this study, the core product will relate to the in-person game experience of a WNBA game that incorporates the athletes, game play, activations, and fan consumption engagement opportunities while at the arena. The core product of WNBA game consumption includes the entire experience for fans attending live events. The core traditional consumer demand product of professional sports teams is the live game itself. Consumer demand could be referred to as a group of pull factors that are associated with the game event features that an organization can use to entice new and returning spectators with. This is different from internal or intrinsic motivators for spectators. These motives are known as push factors (Qian, Wang, and Zhang 2020). In terms of live game experiences, consumer demand can be defined as spectators' expectations revolving around the core attributes of the game itself (Zhang et al. 1995). The concept of consumer demand incorporates different cognitive-oriented constructs, such as home team and opposing team quality, scheduling convenience for fans, the cost of tickets, and star players (Byon, Zhang, and Connaughton 2010; Zhang et al. 1995). These factors have been proven to predict behavior intentions. Studying WNBA event spectator consumption from a consumer demand perspective can help designate important factors that are directly tied to individuals wanting to consume more games. In order to best understand consumer expectations and marketing strategies, researchers have noted the importance of conducting a thorough analysis of consumer demand variables (Byon et al. 2018; Hansen and Gauthier 1989; Qian et al. 2020; Zhang et al. 1995).

The impact that consumer demand has on sports consumption has been previously studied in sport management research. The categories recently introduced of game attractiveness, game promotion and schedule convenience have all been found to have significant positive relationships with game attendance (Baade and Tiehen 1990; Hansen and Gauthier 1989; Marcum and Greenstein 1985; Zhang et al. 1995). For example, in the variable of economic consideration, discounted tickets have resulted in a positive

relationship to attendance; however, a negative relationship was found between game consumption and the price of tickets (Baade and Tiehen 1990; Hansen and Gauthier 1989; Zhang et al. 1997). This has also been confirmed by Byon, Zhang and Connaughton (2010) where a multi-attribute model of consumer demand was proposed using reasoned action theory.

Previous researchers (e.g., Tsuji, Bennett, and Zhang 2007; Yoshida and James 2010; Wang et al. 2020) have also analyzed the positive and significant relationship of consumers' perceptions of core product quality on their total satisfaction of spectating sporting events. The notion that a product or service provided results in pleasurable fulfillment can be directly linked to a customers' satisfaction level (Oliver 2010). This has been used to effectively increase the number of returning customers, raise profits, and lower marketing expenses with a more focused consumer target (Reichheld and Teal 1996). Ultimately, the relationship between core product satisfaction and marketing outcomes is a positive one that leads to greater purchase intention, consumption, and merchandise purchasing (Bennett, Härtel, and McColl-Kennedy 2005; Greenwell, Fink, and Pastore 2002; Johnson et al. 2020; Lee et al., 2020; Zhang, et al. 2003; Zhang et al. 1998).

### **Traditional Consumer Demand for Core Product Features**

Schofield (1983) conducted the first consumer demand study that identified and proposed the following demand categories: demographic variables, game attractiveness, economic variables, and residual preference. Four consumer demand variables that have been statistically proven to affect professional sport consumption are game attractiveness, game promotion, economic consideration, and schedule convenience (Braunstein et al. 2005; Byon, Zhang, and Connaughton 2010; Greenstein and Marcum 1981; Hansen and Gauthier 1989; Wang et al. 2020; Zhang et al. 1995; Zhang, Lam, and Connaughton 2003). These variables have been found to have a significant positive relationship with attendance (Baade and Tiehen 1990; Hansen and Gauthier 1989; Jones 1984; Zhang et al. 1995). For example, economic consideration variables such as income and ticket discounts have a positive relationship on attendance. However, ticket price, other forms of entertainment, and competition have a negative relationship with game consumption (Zhang et al. 1997). The most common consumer demand factor studied is game attractiveness which includes individual athletes, team records, leagues standing, competition, team history, schedule, convenience, and stadium quality. Game promotion, economic consideration, and schedule convenience have been studied to a lesser extent. This article reflected the uniqueness of the previously reported five live sporting events consumer demand variables: consumer demand functions of home team, opposing team, game promotion, economic consideration, and schedule convenience can determine a fans consumption pattern. To understand these items more closely, a detailed description of each variable will be explained.

#### *Economic Consideration*

Economic consideration incorporates a customer's perception of several economic variables such as the price of tickets, affordability, discounts, and/or good. Previous studies have reinforced evidence of a relationship between various economic variables and game consumption (Baade and Tiehen 1990; Hansen and Gauthier 1989; Siegfried and Eisenberg 1980; Zhang et al. 1997).

#### *Schedule Convenience*

Schedule convenience is represented by the time and weekday assigned for a sport event and the perceived convenience that would entice a consumer to attend. The schedule of any sport event could play an important role in a fan's attendance and consumption decision can be heavily swayed by the schedule of that particular sport. The relationship between schedule convenience and consumer demand for professional sports has been supported by several existing studies (Braunstein et al. 2005; Byon, Zhang, and Connaughton 2010; Zhang et al. 1995).

#### *Home Team*

The definition of a home team dimension is a spectators' perception of the home team's quality in performance. This can be demonstrated by a team's win-loss record, previous reputation given a team's

past record, standing in their league, overall performance, and prominent players. Existing research of this aspect of consumer demand and its impact on sport consumption has been analyzed in previous studies. Home team performance and subsequent factors have been found to be one of the most important factors to drive game attendance (Byon, Zhang, and Connaughton 2010; Zhang et al. 1995).

#### *Opposing Team*

The opposing team dimension incorporates certain factors such as the opposing team's overall performance, overall quality of team players, team performance tradition, rivalry with the home team, team league standing, and the presence of star athletes. Previous studies have discovered a positive significant relationship between opposing team variables and the level of game consumption (Hone, 1984). Previous research has also demonstrated that factors contributing to game attendance include the presence of prominent players, opposing team's quality, team performance history, and league standing (Greenwell, Fink, and Pastore 2002; Zhang et al. 1995; Zhang et al. 1997).

#### *Game Promotion*

Game promotion is a dimension defined by the combination of marketing efforts used by a sports team to attract consumers to their events and products (Kotler and Armstrong 1996). As a consumer demand dimension, game promotion incorporates several variables such as sales, advertising, direct mail communication, publicity, and digital content. It has been used by professional sport marketers as a prominent marketing strategy because of its ability to create consumer demand, interest, and product sales (Fullerton and Merz, 2008).

### **Contemporary WNBA Organizational Characteristics**

To understand if these traditional core product features have the ability to fully define why spectators consume the WNBA, it is important to understand the ever evolving core product features of this particular league. Throughout the history of the WNBA, its players and league personnel have used their platform to influence societal change and provide its fans with an atmosphere that is inclusive of their community of supporters. Attending a WNBA game does not just consist of watching the four-quarter competition. Before a fan even arrives at a game, they are digitally welcomed and encouraged to engage with a team through specialized community groups and ticket offers. The league itself has fully embraced digital collectibles through NFT's and produces consistent content to give spectators a chance to get to know the athletes off of the court. The individual players in the WNBA have led the way for many athletes by embracing their ability to be style icons and develop their own podcasts and media conglomerates. At an arena, fans are provided with opportunities to meet players and coaches and interact with other fans in a community like atmosphere. The orange WNBA hoodie, that broke merchandise records, has become a symbol for all fans in a way that is unique from other professional sport leagues. Local groups such as non-profit organizations, dance teams and musicians are often provided with the opportunity to be a part of the entertainment experience for a WNBA team in their location.

Another major component that is present at WNBA events are in the live game experience portion. Highlights and interactive player segments are digitally shown during the game. A huge grassroots marketing effort for the WNBA is in their commitment to highlight young athletes that often get to participate in scrimmages and skills competitions during a game. Free promotional items are dispersed among fans, leading to the overall atmosphere of a game. Lastly, themed game nights, charity partnerships, and segments honoring community contributors make up the staple of uniqueness of the WNBA. While traditional product feature literature has incorporated the broad term of "Atmosphere of the game", the consumers of the WNBA are given an experience that has not been accounted for in traditional studies. This can be seen in the league's commitment to bettering and connecting the societal issues that impact their athletes and the communities where franchises are located.

Before it is possible to analyze the exact consumer demand of these core products of WNBA games, it is important to truly understand the WNBA's commitment to uplift their community of supporters and create an atmosphere that demonstrates the causes important to the individual players and franchises

(Johnson et al. 2020; Min, Zhang, and Byon 2022). During the detainment and subsequent release of Brittney Griner in 2022, the players and coaches honored her legacy by protesting, incorporating signage and court decals, patches on jerseys, and warm attire dedicated to her. The community of fans who attended games were able to share in their uncertainty with a community of people who refused to be silent about her mistreatment. In 2021, players of the Atlanta Dream helped flip a political election after the majority owner of the team, republican candidate Kelly Loeffler was on record denouncing the players fight for social equity. WNBA players were also the first athletes to protest the killings of unarmed black men, police brutality, and systemic racism.

From examining the traditional core product features, with the current core product features of attending WNBA games, it is apparent that a conceptual framework needs to be developed to understand what contemporary features are currently influencing WNBA consumption. The traditional core product features do not offer insights needed to truly understand today's WNBA and the full essence of the game day attractions and variables that entice fans to buy tickets. While traditional core product features of game attractiveness, home and away team offer insights into the actual game, the WNBA offers a game day experience that encompasses much more than those traditional features.

### **Theoretical Foundations: Stimulus-Organism-Response Theory**

The stimulus-organism-response theory helps organize the theoretical underpinnings needed to justify studying consumer demand features in order to predict WNBA consumption. The S-O-R model reveals that an environmental stimulus (S) influences the behavioral response and attitude (R) through an organism or resulting action (O). In this conceptual framework we propose that are stimuli represent

The S-O-R Method will be the theoretical underpinning for creating a conceptual framework that can add new consumer demand features that coincide with WNBA fans and their desire to engage with live games and events. Discovered by researchers Mehrabian and Russell (1974), the stimulus–organism–response (SOR) theory has increased in wide acceptance because of its in-depth and exploratory process in analyzing human behaviors. The theory demonstrates that behavioral responses (R) such as avoidance or consumption are influenced by aroused emotions and feelings (O), which is initially influenced by environmental stimuli (S). Due to its wide adaptability, researchers have modified the SOR theory in their own research contexts. Cognitive elements have been added and adapted into the framework to help understand perceived relationships between behavioral phenomena such as consumption.

### **Stimulus – A Combination of Traditional and Contemporary Consumer Demand Factors**

Traditional consumer demand factors have been examined using the S-O-R theory to understand consumer attitude changes. This is rooted in the theoretical underpinnings that the stimulus includes the factors that are able to influence the internal emotions and attitudes of an individual. We are proposing that the addition of two new consumer demand factors: programming and activations geared toward social justice and community causes and new mediated ways of interacting with consumers also have the ability to affect the emotions and attitudes of a sports fan. This internal state of being is the organism using this model. It plays a mediating role between these two features of WNBA games and behavioral responses of consumers. In our model, we are proposing that the Response will be defined as consumer satisfaction and consumption.

Mumcu and Lough (2017) examined public opinions of WNBA's Pride campaign, which was the first US professional sports league to publicly seek gay fans to attend their events. They found that LGBTQ fans looked more favorably on these campaigns. However, both heterosexual and homosexual fan consumption intentions were comparable. Jackson et al., (2017) conducted an online survey to understand people's attitude towards the WNBA. They found that while participants were satisfied with the affordability and family-oriented atmosphere, a certain excitement element was missing to retain fans. It was concluded that league executives need to continue to innovate to find new ways to appeal to their fan base.

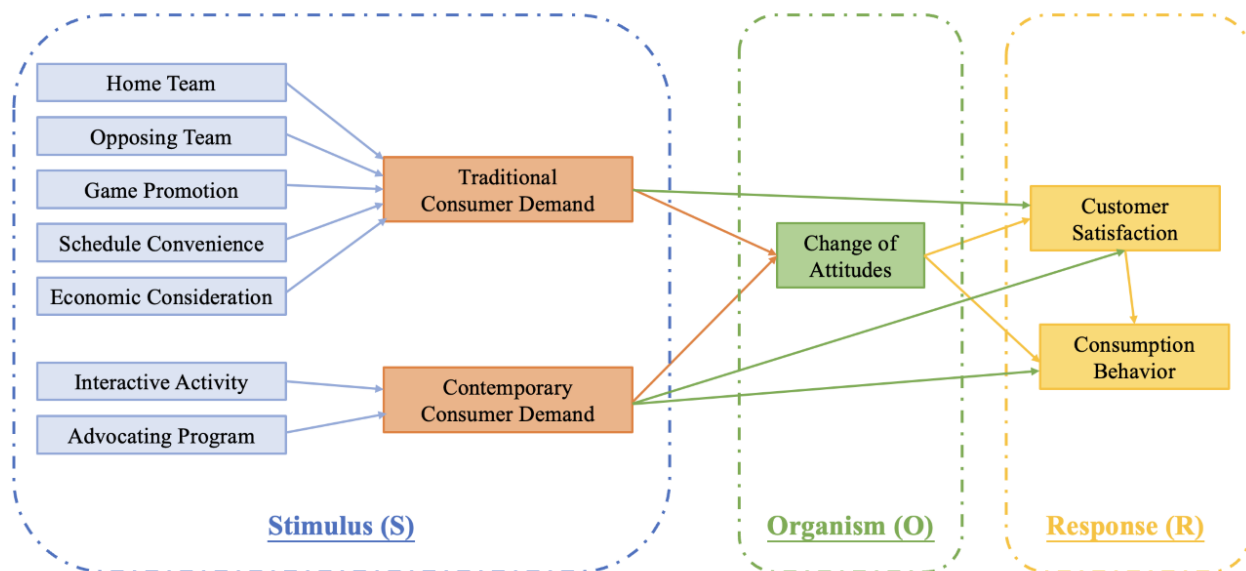
Byon, Zhang and Baker (2013) recently examined the impact of core service, also known as consumer demand and service quality on spectator consumption of professional sport games. This highlighted game support services encompassing the overall experience. This study also used perceived value as a mediating

variable. The results were that among the consumer demand factors, behavior intention was supported by home team, opposing team, game promotion and home team directly influenced a consumer's perceived value. One of the main findings of this study is that perceived value has a direct effect on behavior intentions for consumers. As a result, consumer demand (core service quality) is important for sport organizations who wish to attract and retain both new and existing consumers.

### Conceptual Framework Development

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework. This conceptual model is developed using the Stimulus-Organism-Response model (Mehrabian and Russel 1974). In total, there are seven independent variables that are classified as stimulus. These are broken down to five traditional core product features and two proposed contemporary core product features that include Interactive Activity and Advocating Programming. Changes in Consumer Attitudes by the consumers are categorized as the organism. Customer Satisfaction and Consumer Behavior are categorized as the response.

**FIGURE 1**  
**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF CONSUMER DEMAND FOR CORE PRODUCT FEATURES OF LIVE WNBA EVENTS**



### Research Proposition

#### *Interactive Activity*

Interactive Activity for the WNBA has been a cornerstone of the league and experiences provided for fans. As an extension of the actual game, the game day experience for fans begins with the communication that a team makes to make fans aware of what they can expect when they attend a particular game day. As a part of the fabric of the league, individual teams have players, coaches, referees, and facilities at their disposal to create interactive experiences (Min, Zhang, and Byon 2022; Williamson et al. 2003).

A unique facet of the interaction the WNBA has with their fans is in the availability of their players. Before and after games, players can be seen signing autographs, taking pictures, and meeting fans. Players are incorporated into season ticket holder events that provide exclusive access to the most dedicated of fans. Players are also in attendance for pre-game sponsorship activations where executives can perform on-court basketball activities and meet team personnel. Players and coaches work together to create spaces for young boys and girls to compete before and during the halftime of games. This takes shape in the form of skill clinics and youth teams having the opportunity to scrimmage with the help of official WNBA referees.

Coaches also enhance the quality of the game day experience by conducting interviews and in-game analysis that are shown in real time to the fans present in the arena. Assistant coaches also make themselves available in different parts of the arena such as in the atrium when pre-game shows are being conducted in front of fans. Fans are also provided entertainment options that allow them to get to know players and coaches better through pre-recorded segments displayed on the arena video boards (Johnson et al. 2020; Zhang, Lam, and Connaughton 2003).

Creative game promotions involving fans and these pre-recorded videos create great interaction moments where fans are often given the opportunity to compete for prizes if they can answer questions and facts posed by players (Mastromartino, Zhang, and Wann 2020). During in-game activation opportunities for media timeouts and half-time, the WNBA uses fan participation for interactive entertainment. This involves promotional giveaways, on-court competitions, and opportunities to compete for upgraded ticket packages. Another facet of WNBA game day social interaction is in the content shared and generated by both a team and their fans. WNBA teams have specific filters and hashtags that allow fans to share pictures of themselves at the arena to post online. This turns fans into content creators who become live ambassadors by posting game updates and pictures of their game experiences. Arena interaction also attracts sponsors who attach their logos and brands to social media posts and signage. The success of this in-game event helps increase the likelihood of advertisements and sponsorships featuring WNBA players. While these events add a great experience for attendees, it also helps raise the profile of athletes and coaches by increasing their appearance fees and marketability. These facets of interactive fan interactions point to clear differences from traditional core product consumer demand factors (Johnson et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2020).

***Proposition 1a:*** *Interactive Activity as a contemporary consumer demand factor elicits positive attitudes towards customer satisfaction and increased consumption of WNBA events.*

***Proposition 1b:*** *Interactive Activity directly influences customer satisfaction and consumption of WNBA events.*

#### *Advocacy Programming*

Another core product extension that is proposed in this study for contemporary consumer demand are variables related to social justice and social responsibility initiatives through a new term, *Advocacy Programming* that is currently being integrated into live WNBA game day experiences. These possible variables are related to the commitment that the WNBA has made to support its players, personnel, fans, and community through recognition of issues important to them. Part of the draw of attending WNBA games is knowing that you are supporting an organization that champions inclusivity. This is woven into the fabric of the live game experience by activations and player initiatives that contribute to LGBTQ+, women empowerment, political climate, the fight for racial justice, and other initiatives. The individual fight for these causes by WNBA athletes have been matched by the league's commitment to support their players. LGBTQ+ fans and attendees are a welcomed part of the WNBA family and are specifically targeted with advertisements and engagement. Women empowerment initiatives include honoring leaders in the community and presenting them with awards during games or having fundraisers that provide ticket proceeds to a particular organization. Politically, the athletes of the WNBA have taken a stance that their voice matters and above their athletic ability, they are human beings who speak out against injustices. During the 2020 season, WNBA players spoke up against one of their own team owners who denounced the players' fight for racial justice. The result was WNBA players wearing politically charged t-shirts campaigning for the candidate that best reflected the values that they believed in. The WNBA and its franchises have also been supportive of players sitting out from competition to fight for equality and justice.

Opportunities for the WNBA to capitalize on the synergy created by the players, leagues, and fans are centered around the stand taken on societal issues. In order to truly understand what opportunities and features entice fans the most for consumption, it is important to understand how the WNBA uses its platform to enhance fan and community commitment. For example, the league has implemented various initiatives such as giving fans the opportunity to donate ticket proceeds to different charities, shedding light on female

leaders in business during the #MeToo movement, enhancing physical activity opportunities for women and girls, and having themed LGBTQ+ nights and other theme nights that add additional entertainment features. The former president of the league has stated that the driving uniqueness of the WNBA is in its commitment to diversity and inclusion in society, the workplace, and community. In a live game, this manifests itself by the league initiating different members of the community for pregame and halftime entertainment appearances, fan appreciation nights, and group ticket packages for individuals and partners.

**Proposition 2A:** *Advocacy Programming as a contemporary consumer demand factor elicits positive attitudes towards customer satisfaction and increased consumption of WNBA events.*

**Proposition 2B:** *Advocacy Programming directly influences customer satisfaction and consumption of WNBA events.*

## DISCUSSION

In the context of women's professional basketball, there have been a low number of studies done in comparison to other leagues regarding consumer behavior and in-game product features. The primary research question of this article, what features of attending live professional sports events influence WNBA consumption, was answered by exploring traditional consumer demand factors of live sporting event features, analyzing the current state of the WNBA, and conceptualizing a model to understand consumer motivations. The answer to our research question is that WNBA live game consumption is influenced by traditionally held consumer demand factors and an introduction of two contemporary factors specific to the WNBA. We proposed two new factors to consumer demand and core product literatures that connect the impact that the league is having on society and more specifically its consumers. The Conceptual Framework of Consumer Demand for Core Product Features of the WNBA Live Game that was developed introduces Interactive Activity and Advocacy Programming as a way to understand the unique environmental features that are characteristics of live WNBA competitions. The conceptual model developed included two propositions related to these two consumer demand features. Propositions 1 and 2 add to the over knowledge of WNBA consumption by demonstrating that with the presence of Interactive Activity and Advocacy Programming it is highly possible that consumers will have a positive attitude towards their experience and as a result purchase more tickets at a higher satisfaction rate.

## CONCLUSION

The implications of including Interactive Activity and Advocacy Programming features will be demonstrated in the consistency that the WNBA is able to lean into the social justice initiatives that are important to their players and fan base. This encourages initiatives such as the Kobe and Gigi Bryant WNBA Advocacy award that was created in 2022. Given this conceptual framework, it is also established that the WNBA can increase ticket purchases and satisfaction by integrating new technology and content creation in their fan engagement channels. This will also allow the WNBA to embrace the Metaverse, NFTs, and digital collectables as a way to strengthen their community.

This research adds to the theoretical knowledge of the consumer behavior of WNBA fans, women's sports, and professional sports as a whole. Core product features in terms of a live sporting event will only evolve as new technological advances will be introduced across the industry. The WNBA has been on the forefront of incorporating social justice initiatives and personalized fan interactions to their live events. However, as other professional leagues embrace these features, this conceptual framework will be applicable to other professional sport leagues.



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