

Cool women's sports merch will secure future fans

BY KATIE LABEL Wednesday, September 15, 2021

Women's sports viewership is up. Engagement is through the roof. Broader audiences are being exposed to the phenomenal accomplishments of female athletes and it feels like more people are discovering what has long been a well-kept secret ...

Women's sports are cool.

While fans of men's sport have always had easy access to sport merchandise and memorabilia — brand assets used to solidify fandom — the lack of investment in women's sport merchandise has rendered these taken-for-granted, brand-building tools practically non-existent.

The result? Women's sports fans have been almost completely deprived of opportunities to affirm their fandom. What's more, the traditional pathways to sports stardom have been cut off at the knees for women athletes. This inequity is then used as fodder to push the deeply ingrained narrative that there is no market for women's sports.

The reality of sport merchandise is that it is a \$135 billion market in North America, forecast to grow 24% over the next five years, and designed to cater almost exclusively to men's sports and male sports fans. Many decision-makers prefer to point to numbers that tell them women's products don't sell, or that women sport consumers are fickle and impossible to figure out. They see the women's sport category as a risk, instead of a market opportunity with untapped potential.

But the potential is clear: If media is how you create awareness, and sponsorship is how you fund and promote, merchandise is how you build a fan. So cool women's merch is actually essential to the future of securing an expanding fandom — and business.

We can't just assume fans will find their way in women's sport without cool merch to seal the deal. We have to build, and here's what we need to build.

Unbiased algorithms

Most big brands rely on algorithmic technologies to inform decision-making. The problem: Biases can creep into algorithms, amplifying existing social biases. Algorithms also have a hard time adapting to trends. In fact, trends can increase algorithmic biases — even with evidence of profitable segments, as is the case of women's sport. Historical data is always a part of algorithmic decision-making, making it difficult for marginalized groups to ever escape their past.

We need to build algorithms attuned to the current women's sport space, versus the landscape 20 years ago. Algorithms free of the bias baked into the women's sport merch market will ensure that retailers quit leaving money on the table, and finally overcome the persistent problem of supply overreaching current market demand.

Increased selection

In a study examining the offerings of Fanatics — the world's largest licensed sport website and official merchandise provider for the NBA and WNBA — the quantity of WNBA merch analyzed was shy of 3% of what was available to NBA fans. We also identified a broader range of color and sizing options among NBA merchandise and higher average pricing for WNBA merchandise. In terms of selection, we found an average of 207 shirt options per NBA team versus an average 7 options for WNBA teams. Further, following each league's respective championship, 514 championship branded items were made available after the L.A. Lakers won — everything from celebratory locker-room wear to replica trophies, car decals and lawn dice games. Fanatics featured just 11 championship-branded items to celebrate the Seattle Storm's win.

We need to better develop women's sport merchandise and memorabilia, to allow women's sport fans the opportunity to build their fan identity. Plus, dismantle the dismissive narrative that has left fans of women's sport underserved and undervalued.

Cultural immediacy and accessibility

Do you remember when the U.S. national women's soccer team home jersey became Nike's No. 1 selling soccer jersey, men's or women's? Or when Sabrina Ionescu's jersey sold out within an hour of her being drafted No. 1? Tobin Heath and Christen Press' Man U jerseys outsold all men's jerseys for three days after their signing, and the WNBA's orange hoodie became Fanatics' top selling item, Sport Business Journal's best fashion statement of the year, and a cultural phenomenon that garnered more than 9 million social impressions. (Fun fact: The WNBA selected the orange hoodie as their signature item because it was one of only a handful of WNBA items on the Fanatics site that was available in men's, women's and youth sizes.)

While there may be no market for lackluster, hard-to-access fanwear, cool stuff sells. So build fashionable, well-designed products that authentically serve the women's sport market. And stop underestimating demand. When retail meets the moment in women's sport, there's an enthusiastic audience ready to buy.

Given the swift pace of change in sport consumer demographics and behaviors — and Deloitte's forecast that the women's sport market will soon exceed a billion dollars — the sport retail industry can no longer afford to continue its embrace of the exclusionary, dismissive status quo. It's time to start making decisions based on data, not dated opinions. The women's sport merchandise market has suffered from its blind spot problem long enough.

Open up the gateways to women's sport fandom with cool, accessible merch and watch women's sport brands grow and revenue climb as fans wear their hearts on their literal sleeves.

Katie Label is an assistant professor at the Ted Rogers School of Management, Ryerson University. This piece is crafted in partnership with The Collective Think Tank: a global consortium of academic minds and industry leaders focused on gender parity and improving diversity. The collaboration is led by The Collective, Wasserman's women-focused division.



QUOTE OF THE DAY

Do you know what's at stake? Do you know the tens, hundreds of millions of dollars that are available to you and the opportunities available to you if you are the face of the league in good standing?

— ESPN's Michael Wilbon, speaking to Grizzlies G Ja Morant following a recent series of off-court incidents that has led to him taking time away from the team. "NBA Countdown," ABC, 3/4

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Ourand: Pac-12 has time on media rights, as long as no other schools leave

February 28, 2023 The Pac-12 made a mistake by setting a deadline for completing a media rights deal, but the reality is that it still has plenty of time, said SBJ's John Ourand on this week's episode of The Marchand and Ourand Sports Media Podcast.

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