

Solving the mystery of the WNBA ‘IsoFan’

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At WNBA All-Star weekend and beyond, there’s opportunity to connect to fans watching solo

A powerful fan experience took center stage at the WNBA’s recent All-Star weekend. For the second year, the league hosted the WNBA Live fan festival. Those at home were heavily engaged too, as the All-Star Game was the most watched in more than a decade. As the league enters the back half of its season, continued investment in fans is more important than ever.

That’s specifically because -- compared to those attending games with friends or family -- engagement looks different for the 28% of WNBA fans who answered “no one” when we asked who they go to games with, watch games alongside, or talk to about the league.

You read that right. More than one in four WNBA fans -- those we call “IsoFans” -- indicated they don’t have a single person with whom to share their fandom.

And yet for decades, the sport industry has operated under the assumption that fandom is something people do with others, whether family members, friends, colleagues, or even people they hardly know but nonetheless with whom they share sports banter.

Our peer-reviewed research study surveyed nearly 700 WNBA fans during the 2019 season, representing all 12 teams in the league. Sixty-two percent of those who took our survey identified as female, 36% as male, and 1.6% as nonbinary.

Coming out of All-Star break, the league, its teams, and partners would do well to consider how to create positive experiences for IsoFans.

Identify IsoFans

While IsoFans may be difficult to identify, given by definition they are disconnected from fan communities, the effort to locate them should pay off.

The more people and more types of others (e.g., friends, family, coworkers) a fan shares their fandom with, the more likely a fan is to stay engaged. For example, social fans (non-IsoFans) attended and watched more games than IsoFans. They also reported higher levels of identification with their favorite WNBA teams. In other words, having others with whom to

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watch, attend, or discuss the WNBA matters for engagement. But IsoFans lack those connections.

Start finding them at time of purchase, when a fan buys only one ticket to either a game or season-ticket package; the representative can ask the fan about who they generally watch games or discuss the team with. Next, teams could add questions into fan surveys they already distribute to ask about with whom they share their fandom. Then, teams could analyze social media data, paying attention to users whose posts or comments are not responded to or engaged with at meaningful levels.

Find them, then invite them to experiences tailored to their needs.

Create Targeted Experiences and Communities for IsoFans

Leagues, teams and brands should collaborate to create opportunities to ensure IsoFans feel welcome, which may include connecting them to other fans. This can happen both virtually or through in-person events.

Social media or other virtual platforms can help reach IsoFans who are geographically dispersed or don't want to attend a game solo. For example, the WNBA streams several games on Twitter, where intentionally curated Spaces could connect fans for each team.

As IsoFans do often attend games, teams can create reserved seating sections for people who buy a single ticket and want to meet others, host in-stadium social spaces, or develop a “seat buddies” program that introduces IsoFans to one another. Watch parties, fan meet-ups, or other team-sponsored events can also help foster connection, if teams intentionally consider the needs of IsoFans and make it comfortable for people coming solo to meet others.

Given that fans of women's sport are known to recruit new fans, teams could consider enlisting ambassadors who may be interested in taking on a community leadership role of connecting IsoFans to the broader fan community.

These activities may even be lucrative if teams can develop partnerships with brands that believe in the power of building community and increasing connection. Indeed, 15 brands activated at WNBA Live's two-day fan festival. What could it look like if partners leveraged that momentum and focused their efforts on increasing connection over the rest of the summer and even offseason?

Challenge Assumptions about Fandom

Lastly, finding so many IsoFans in the WNBA challenges us to consider the unique experiences for fans of women's professional sport overall.



While our study did not include fans of other women’s sports, IsoFans are four times more common in the WNBA than in a comparative NBA sample. In a follow-up study, only 6.5% of NBA fans were IsoFans.

The emergence of IsoFans only underscores the importance of considering women’s sport as its own business enterprise. Indeed, the preponderance of IsoFans is just one way fans of women’s sport have different experiences and exhibit different behaviors than fans of men’s sport. Research has established that fans of women’s sport are more loyal, engage in unique promotive behavior, and connect their fandom to social causes like, gender, racial, and LGBTQ+ equality.

At the end of the day, fans are one of the most important stakeholders for sport organizations. Leagues and teams must accordingly challenge broader industry assumptions about who fans are and how they engage with sport.

By embracing new thinking and empathy, sport organizations can revolutionize the fan experience, foster community, and shape a future where genuine connection and inclusivity define the sport experience.

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