

Introduction

Social media platforms offer sports teams a medium through which to connect with their fans and establish a sense of community. One of the most popular social media platforms for sports fans is Instagram as it offers a focus on visual media which can captivate fans. NBA teams have experienced substantial growth and engagement on Instagram and we are curious about the extent to which these trends apply to WNBA teams. By using narrative rhetorical criticism, we will be investigating and contrasting the rhetorical narrative trends between the Instagram accounts of two NBA teams and their WNBA counterparts, the Washington Wizards, the Los Angeles Lakers, the Washington Mystics, and the Los Angeles Sparks. By collecting these narrative rhetorical trends from the comment section of the respective teams' Instagram accounts, we can find overarching narratives between the NBA and WNBA. These findings will be useful for social media teams, giving useful information for people managing the social media accounts. These findings also prove useful for insight about basketball culture and how the NBA and WNBA can move forward with social goals to fulfill corporate social responsibility.

Literature Review

The differences between men's and women's sports deals with a wide range of topics, including sports social media relationship marketing, coverage disparities, rising popularity of women's sports, and gendered aspects of athlete representation on social media.

The previous findings of others have allowed us to further our own research and make observations about our topic. Sports social media relationship marketing and

cultivating relationships among brands is an important part of the research. There are findings that demonstrate that social media research in sports management aligns with service-dominant logic and illustrates the role of social media in cultivating relationships among and between brands and individuals. (Filo, Lock & Karg, 2015) The interaction of these accounts plays an important role in cultivation such relationships. It is important to build these relationships to increase the engagement rate rather than having a large follower base but less interaction. These accounts can influence the type of engagement present from their followers for example looking at the difference in coverage between male and female sports. There have been findings that indicate a much larger amount of coverage and bias towards male sports, portraying them as more professional and at a higher level of play (Frideres, & Palao, 2019), similar to how we don't see as much of the WNBA in promotions or mass media compared to the NBA. It gives the idea to the readers and viewers that male-dominated sports are more important. This is significant because it shows how the media treats male vs female sports coverage. This provides valuable insight to our topic. For example, it can show how some platforms might be more willing to promote men's sports for higher engagement from their audience and acceptance from the majority of users.

The coverage of the rise in popularity of women's sports is also important to note, it has been gaining more viewers and more airtime than ever before. In 2022, networks started to take more notice of women's sports and how there was not as much recognition or broadcasts as there were with mens sports, deciding to make a change. Both CBS and ESPN reported increasing their screen time for women's sports by 50%, and the WNBA's coverage on ABC and ESPN rose by about 19% year-to-year. In 2022,

it was the WNBA's most watched year since 2008 (Umstead, 2022). This is important to take note of for our topic when looking at the data, to see if this rising popularity on television is surfacing on social media and how WNBA teams compare to their counterparts. It also denotes superstar influence on the increased interest, which is something we will take note of in our analyses.

We also should be aware of potentially sexist coverage and commentary of women's sports. People as a whole may have become desensitized because of how it has been normal and consistent over time. Only recently with women's sports making more strides in coverage has this trend become more visible. In sports media portrayals reflect males as athletes, and females as women first, athletes second. Bissell and Smith make note that even when women are dominant on the playing field, media commentary and coverage still reflect their status as women rather than athletes, and when the media ignore females in sport, they "construct and actively perpetuate a false narrative that women are not interested in sports and are not very skilled when they do participate" Smith (2019) (p. 233). When looking at our research we can see several instances where women are not viewed as athletes first and negative remarks almost always tend to be sexist or focused on gender. A huge difference from their NBA counterparts where the players are judged/insulted for their lack of skill as an athlete rather than their gender.

Finally it is important to note what has been found in relation to the media and what they put out about their players and teams. Social media and its relationship to sports media is very important, it can indicate the level of intrigue that an athlete's own social media has on consumers, as well as the importance of fan pages in growing a

team or player's content farm. (Emmons & Mocarski, 2014). By looking at what has been discovered in this area it can give us insight into how gendered norms may appear in team media, and if that impacts the engagement or type of engagement.

There have been various approaches in the past, but this topic is still important to learn more about why there are such different reactions between gendered posts in sports, what causes it, and how it can change between teams or organizations. It is a developing research area that deserves to be studied further.

Method

Our method for collecting data for our narrative rhetorical criticism was simply using the Instagram posts we had used in our prior quantitative research and selecting comments from their respective comments sections. We went through all comments, however if there were more than 100, we randomly sampled 25 comments, removing any spam comments in order to avoid non-applicable data.

We then coded these comments into three main types while analyzing trends and commonalities in the comments sections. The first type was a comment with positive content that espoused excitement about the team, congratulations for a player, celebration of accomplishments, well wishes, or anything else that would be rhetorically understood as a positive comment. This would be anything that aspires to the best possible outcome for the team and/or players. Our second type was a neutral comment, or one that did not come with strong negative or positive implications. These could be confusing comments, ones that stated things that are obvious, ones that strictly stuck to "sports talk" as it were, or ones that didn't have much real content in them. Our third and last main type was a negative comment, anything that didn't aspire to influence the best

Positive	Neutral	Negative
Feminine Positive	Feminine Neutral	Feminine Negative
Gender-Neutral Positive	Gender-neutral neutral	Gender-neutral Negative
Masculine Positive	Masculine Neutral	Masculine negative

for the team, anything that denigrated the organization or players, or anything that did not come across positively.

After this we looked to see if there were common trends. While in our research we found that most commenters used typical sports jargon to frame any argument they were crafting (e.g. “she’s a bucket,” “heat check,” “hell yeah”, “he trash”). However we found that gender played a significant role in the content and narrative of the comments. From this we coded comments as either employing gender in feminine, masculine, or gender-neutral content and vocabulary. From there we cross-coded to identify trends with the nature of the comment content and the gender that was employed, and what that said about the narrative of attitudes toward male- and female-presenting athletes. Our final coding is more clearly represented in the table below, with examples in another table following. The examples given in Table 1.2 are not necessarily representative of any comments we cataloged.

Table 1.1

Type of Comment	Comment Content
Feminine Positive	“Queen”
Gender-neutral Positive	“Great team win”
Masculine Positive	“That was a grown man move”
Feminine Neutral	“It’s the puffs/hair”

Gender-neutral Neutral	"This team had a real close game today"
Masculine Neutral	"The King has had such a big influence on the game"
Feminine Negative	"Females are bringing the game down, how are we funding this?"
Gender-neutral Negative	"This team sucks"
Masculine Negative	"How can you call yourself a man after that loss?"

Table 1.2

Results

RQ1: What are prominent narratives in the NBA and WNBA?

One trend we noticed was whether comments were positive or negative, they were mostly constructive and came from a desire to see the teams succeed. A lot of comments throughout the teams came from a place of improving the team for the future, putting their input on what the team should do with the players and games. This was different for each team, the Washington Wizards had a comment section at the end of the season where almost everyone wanted the team to "tank" or lose games on purpose to get a better draft pick for next year.

Another trend is that the users prioritize instagram posts that directly link to games. The users don't care much for superfluous posts such as the player's outfits, advertisements, or who attends the games as much as posts that relate to the games played. Often negative remarks were met in the comments of these posts saying "please play basketball" or "play basketball im begging". On pre-game posts of players' outfits, negativity in the comments can come up saying things like "Fuck!ng ridiculous sh!t show. Stop this circus and play ball, YUCK.", "Now if they could play as hard as

they focus on fashion....”, and “They losers, who cares”. Alongside with this trend of fans not wanting to see posts that aren’t related to the game, posts like National Women's Day or BLM posts often had toxic comment sections that weren’t seen in other posts

Our last significant trend in how comment sections perceive NBA and WNBA players. Notably, NBA discussions contained markedly fewer gendered comments than those in the WNBA. This results in WNBA comments having more gendered comments than the NBA.

RQ2: How does gender influence these narratives, or what role does gender have in these narratives?

The WNBA showed many comments gendered feminine or neutral, and very few masculine gendered comments. Negative comments largely gendered the women in a masculine way or a feminine way. All comments that were gendered masculine were negative, and there were almost exactly the same amount as negative feminine-gendered comments. However there were significantly more positive feminine gendered comments than the negative counterpart.

Both sets of comment sections (NBA & WNBA) treated the players as athletes. When making neutral-gendered remarks, commenters consistently showed mostly sports jargon unless directly targeting a person.

Weaker Trends:

These trends weren’t common enough to be accepted as primary trends and are only mentioned here.

There were a lot of repeated phrases that may have led other players in the comment section to agree and say the same thing. Comments like “lebron is the goat”, “please play basketball”, and “she’s a bucket” homogenized a lot of the comment sections.

A trend of the Lakers’ comments that wasn’t shared by other teams was there was a lot of player loyalty, as this team has all-star players like Lebron James and Anthony Davis. Similarly in the Lakers’ data, the success or failure in a previous game was often perceived to be the fault of one player and even if there are a lot of people saying Anthony Davis sucks in one post, a post after a winning game might be praising him.

The Wizards had a trend of a lot of negativity in the comments as they didnt do well during the season. This led the comment section to be filled with negative comments on the franchise and it led fans in the comments to root for their team to lose during the end of the season for a better draft pick. Also there was a theme of a lot of talk about trading and keeping players to try to help improve the team.

Discussion

The results of our study give us valuable insight into popular trends found in the comments section of NBA and WNBA posts. This gives us further insight into the communities that interact with these pages as well as sports culture in relation to social media. These findings reflect how the community engages with these social media accounts and their attitudes toward the players and teams featured in the posts.

One trend we noticed was whether comments were positive or negative, they were mostly constructive and came from a desire to see the teams succeed. This tells us that these accounts have garnered strong communities and that there aren't a lot of users who come to these accounts with the purpose of spreading negativity. We identified this as a positive trend that builds off some of the background research that we conducted in preparation for our study. In a study in the journal *Communication Research Reports*, the researchers found that the focus of social media in sports is to drive engagement and build a community over simply gaining followers (Filo, Lock & Karg, 2015). Instead of expanding their influence by gaining followers, these accounts hope to deepen the relationship between these teams and their fans. This will, in turn, drive further engagement with other facets of sports culture such as viewership, merchandise sales, and loyalty to their favorite teams.

Another insight revealed by this study is that users prioritize content that directly relates to games, and that they don't care much for superfluous posts such as the player's outfits, advertisements, or who attends the games. There are many similarities between this trend and the conclusions from the quantitative portion of our study. In our quantitative section, where we identified the types of posts that drive the most engagement, pre-game posts and external promotional material were among the least popular across all teams. These pre-game posts often included pictures of the players arriving, the events that are devoted to exciting the audience of live games, and celebrity appearances. The external promotional material included advertisements and the charity functions that these teams contribute to. This suggests that these accounts and their managers should prioritize information relating to the game, updates on player

performance, and exciting moments from games. This information is valuable to social media managers who are looking for ways to optimize their content strategy in order to retain and build relationships with fans.

The final primary trend that our study identified pertains to how comment sections perceive players between the NBA and WNBA. NBA comment sections included far less gendered comments than the WNBA, and any gendered comments were usually negative. In the WNBA, the gendered comments were usually positive and were much more prolific than in the NBA. This speaks to gender biases present in the perceptions of NBA and WNBA players and can reinforce gender stereotypes. This finding builds upon part of our background research conducted in Communication Research Reports that found that NBA players are often seen as athletes first and men second, while WNBA players were seen as women first and athletes second (Smith, 2019). This finding relates to the corporate social responsibility of these social media accounts and the managers of these accounts should be aware of this trend in order to combat these narratives. By tackling these gender-based perceptions, these accounts can promote equality, inclusivity, and the development of more supportive communities.

These trends identify important concepts that can help social media managers to understand what fans prefer to see on the social media accounts of these teams, as well as how to promote more supportive communities by engaging with corporate social responsibility. This will help to strengthen these team's relationships with their fans as well as cultivate loyal fanbases. Social media managers in charge of promoting WNBA teams can also use this information to drive engagement, promote their league to a

similar level of popularity as their NBA counterparts, and break down gender biases towards female athletes.

There were a few limitations that we encountered over the course of our study. One of which was time, as we would have been able to analyze more comments from a wider range of NBA and WNBA teams over a longer period of time. We are confident in the validity of the trends identified in these comment sections, but we believe we would have been able to uncover more about these teams and their communities had this not been a limitation. Our data was also only representative of fan engagement on Instagram. Other social media platforms offer different types of engagements that could be analyzed and also contain different subsets of the community that might provide more insights. An issue we ran into during our data collection was the amount of spam found throughout the comment sections. We found a lot of cases of self-promotion, multiple repeated comments by the same person, as well as posts created by bots. This made it hard to get an accurate read of the sentiments expressed within the comments. Because we randomly sampled the comments that we would be looking at, this portion of our results offered little to no insight about the community.

As a response to some of these limitations, some further research could include a widening of the sample size of both posts, comments, and teams. It would also help to compare our results to other platforms and see if the same trends are supported. Taking a look at how these trends change over time could tell us about the trajectory of the WNBA's popularity and how these trends have changed over time. This way, social media managers can see if the changes that they have made to their strategies are successful or if they are regressing from their goals.

This study into the social media accounts of the NBA and WNBA has offered us many insights that relate to the relationship that sports social media has to their fans, what content fans expect to see, and how these accounts can engage with corporate social responsibility to break down gender biases. We concluded that engagement is a more beneficial goal than reach, that these accounts have garnered strong communities who hope to see their favorite teams succeed, and that there are still gender-based biases in how community members perceive WNBA players. This study is important as social media is a powerful tool used by the National Basketball League to interact with their audience and social media managers want to know how to drive engagement and meet their social goals within the community.

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