TROY UNIVERISTY

Fan Engagement: Transitioning through COVID-19

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unpredictable and unprecedented wrench thrown into the works of our definition of 'normalcy' in our everyday lives. The sports world appeared to come to a grinding halt, as did many other facets of life we may have taken for granted. I'll be looking at the sports world's pre-pandemic and the pandemic fan engagement and the driving forces of the whole industry: athletes; organizations; and their fans. We can only hypothesize at this moment regarding post-pandemic life and the return to normalcy, with some tweaks. The sports industry has always been adaptive to the times we live in, but this is one of their largest challenges to date. Everyone is in the same boat, which may allow us to actually strengthen our humanity, and what better conduit than sports?

COVID-19's toll on Fan Engagement

The COVID-19 crisis hit the sports industry so hard it fell relatively dark for several months. Sports outlets, leagues, and organizations were left scrambling to pick-up the pieces. Leagues had to cancel and postpone entire seasons. During such a tumultuous time, people look for ways to relax and find relief, but sports were placed in such uncertainty. A sports fan, wants to check scores and watch their favorite players play at a high level of competition, not stream the newest Netflix documentary to bide their time. Fans could not be engaged with sports even if they wanted to for months; however, leagues, organizations, athletes found other ways to appeal to their loyal consumers. They had to learn how to pivot, which has allowed them to focus on their presence and growth on certain social media platforms. Organizations using social media analytics they collected this past year (2020), improve and adaptive to the constantly changing landscape to become relevant and keep the consumer interested and involved.

Literature Review

In an interview conducted by a member of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, Laura Gentile, Senior Vice President of Marketing at ESPN, spoke on the way ESPN handled COVID-19 in the initial months with little to no sports content being generated. They had to fill the void that was their primary content, so they brought back classic sports games, interviewed athletes, and even moved forward air dates to fill air time. *The Last Dance* documentary about Michael Jordan's life with the Chicago Bulls was originally set to air in the summer of 2020, helped fill the void in the onset of the pandemic. ESPN focused their marketing of *The Last Dance* more than a normal promotion to cast a wide net. It worked; sports fans found solace in the release of each portion of the documentary.

ESPN ran advertisements called 'There is no place like sports,' a play on the saying 'there is no place like home,' attempting to show the consumer they are feeling the same pain as them, until sports return. From no live events to many sports starting their seasons all at once or starting from where they left off, they tried to salvage their seasons with bubble league setups and intense COVID-19 protocols. ESPN as a sports outlet was oversaturated and had to balance the influx of news after months of very little, in addition the social justice and inequalities movements were growing in prominence, with the NBA/WNBA on the forefront.

Social injustice movements gained traction after the murder of George Floyd by a police officer. Subsequent black men and women were also killed by police officers in months to follow. Athletes decided to use their platforms for social justice and racial inequalities that exist in United States. After months of no sports and seeing how the United States value them in their lives for relief, athletes decided to use their leverage as the means to push positive societal change. Oppression and injustice to individuals based on skin color are prevalent still in many

facets of everyday life. Colin Kaepernick's kneeling during the anthem at NFL games was met with unbridled hatred, without fully understanding why he did so in the first place (Cunningham, Dixon, Singer, Oshiro, Young Ahn, & Weems, 2021).

The NBA, at the forefront of leagues addressing social injustice, made clear statements to fans and onlookers, with moves like refusing to play until some movement is made in the right direction. Athletes began placing phrases and statements on uniforms and warmup gear that conveyed social injustice messages (Cunningham, Dixon, Singer, Oshiro, Young Ahn, & Weems, 2021). Athletes like Lebron James understand their social responsibility and move to make the United States and the world a safer place for children of color in which to grow up. Strength in numbers holds true and athletes formed symbols of unity for the changes that need to occur in this country systematically.

Athletes used their platform and continue to use their platform to reinforce social and civic responsibility messages to help aid medical professionals on the frontlines (Filo & Mountifield, 2020). The 'NBA Together,' a social engagement campaign, was created to spread accurate healthcare knowledge and fight misinformation, while also keeping communities connected. Social media became an invaluable tool to educate athletes' followers in important hygiene and social distancing habits. This tool was a strong ally in fund raising efforts for individuals adversely affected by COVID-19, and physical activity challenges. Athletes were promoting focus on self-improvement physically, and other forms of selfcare in activity challenges to their followers. Hashtags became trending topics on social media to reach an even wider spectrum of people (i.e., #IsolationOlympics and #StayatHomeChallenge).

Isolation was rough in many ways, but keeping busy and not remaining idle was extremely important for mental and physical health. Fans engaged with these movements with a

wildfire like effect. Financial generosity from athletes all over the world began to trend exponentially. Organizations and athletes focusing on altruism may pay dividends from their investments in their communities'/fanbase's well-being. "Social media by sport organizations and athletes has, for many, evolved in response to the impact of COVID-19" (Filo & Mountifield).

Athletes had to look for creative new ways to continue to promote their brands and build them in a year with little to no sports. TikTok emerged as a viable simple option for athletes to throw a 15 second video of them participating in dance trends, teaching a skill, learning a new skill, promoting a cause, or just being creative. The athletes provided informal content that fans connected with on a different level, not just game highlights and interviews (Baker, Su, Doyle, & Yan, 2020). Maintaining relationships with fans became that much more challenging with the social distancing constraints placed on everyone. Two billion downloads occurred worldwide with a high exposure to Generation Z and female users to were previously difficult to reach within the usual realm of sport, appealing more to the masses than a niche group of sports fans. In March 2020, TikTok added 12 million new United States users. The consumer on the app is primarily "interested in the real, unmanicured persona of the athlete" (Baker, Su, Doyle, & Yan, 2020). In this day and age, the consumer is educated in distinguishing authenticity from phony/fake content that establishes no real connection with the audience.

Before the pandemic, "sports public relations operated at a superficial level of momentary engagements sustained by creative content rather than deeper relational connections that public relations purport" (Kleinmann, 2020). Fostering a deeper relationship between athletes and fans is what Kleinmann believes should be the goal of sports public relations. She asserts that the one-way communication model sports public relations are built on is failing

organizational stakeholders and their fans. No real relationship is being created, rather inflating the already small connection they may have with one another. With the shared experience of the pandemic and quarantines, athletes and fans were able to connect on a more personal level, creating richer content. Athletes sharing their personal experience allowed fans to connect on a 'just like us' level. Athletes are less seen as a product that is to be sold to the public, but another human being just trying to get through the same struggle.

The shared fear of COVID-19 was a bonding experience; athletes didn't want to put their loved ones at risk by resuming play too early and fans seemed to resonate with that sentiment. While still remaining private individuals, athletes sharing stories about them beating their family at a board game or learning a new skill; like cooking, not related to their profession and brought them closer to fans. These kinds of stories spiked during 2020. Marco Gonzales of the Seattle Mariners said, "these non-sports connections were important ways for people to get to know athletes as people" (Kleinmann). Allowing fans access to athletes' private spaces helps to build symmetrical relationships.

Kleinmann wants public relations personal to take a step back and really absorb the differences in connection between organization and fan during the pandemic. Many challenges will still exist post-pandemic in the sports world; however, this article was not proposing a fix, merely a positive lesson in best practices within sports public relations. Fan engagement can be a more meaningful/valuable metric for organizations to track.

E-sports was already starting to take off pre-pandemic, but with the protocol-friendly flexibility of the 'athletes,' they dominated the sports world for viewership. People started simulating sports games and betting on them, even ESPN aired simulated NBA 2k games at one point, to fill the void. E-sports has had a steady rise in viewership since its inception (eSports:

Fan Market Summary, 2021). The COVID-19 conditions were perfect for e-sports to gain even more prominence and viewership. The NBA even started the investment in and managing of a professional NBA 2k league. The NBA is one of the industry leaders in innovation and investment in furthering their brand and spreading it globally. E-sports will continue its rise to prominence with the ever-developing "advances such as facial recognition, sound recognition, gesture control, graphics, virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR)" (GlobeNewswire, 2020).

International Viewpoint (La Liga Case Study)

Lopez-Carril and Anagnostopoulos (2020) analyzed 3,906 Instagram posts (during a two-month period of March 11th to May 11th) from Spanish soccer league teams in La Liga, they then placed them into categories. The primary categories were based on organizational intentions as philanthropic, sponsorship, or personnel engagement actions. Organizations started focusing more on positive outlook than the negative, looking for ways to strengthen community ties at a time that their intervention was needed most. Organizations claim actions of their athletes, especially if it involves giving back to the community and other charitable acts. COVID-19 brought about the need for corporate social responsibility in a time of crisis and using social media as a conduit seemed like the logical move in times such as these.

After statistical analysis of the 3,906 Instagram posts by La Liga teams' profiles, only about two percent were considered corporate social responsibilities (CSR) activities. Of course, this was a concentrated sampling, but it does appear to be a missed opportunity for these organizations. It is understandable that stakeholders like athletes, organizational administrators, etc. are all taking hits at the time of the study. I'm an AS Roma (Italian soccer league) fan and I follow their Instagram account in which they were posting primarily about health safety, past

highlights, and the goodwill their individual athletes were doing in their communities during the time frame of this study. Fan engagement-wise, they were scrambling like everyone else to project their organizational values and community investment just as much as their counterpart soccer clubs. This study was an under the gun look at how one of the top soccer leagues in the world reacted to the pandemic. Many soccer leagues were mid-season when COVID-19 took the driver's seat.

Discussion

Once COVID-19 is officially in the rearview mirror, I honestly believe fans will return in unheard of numbers to live sporting events. We as fans may have taken live events for granted for years up until COVID-19, but without them for so long there may be a spike in attendance records for years to come. There is a saying that 'absence makes the heart grow fonder.' Even with struggling live attendance numbers in some professional sports leagues ticket sales, games and events popularity steadily climbing before the pandemic (Smartphone Online Activities, 2021). Sports organizations are not sweating live attendance as much anymore due to their increased television rights deals, streaming rights deals, etc., even though empty seats at sporting events isn't the best look for teams (Leitch, 2018). As far as fan engagement goes, the NBA's use of virtual fans Microsoft-teaming into games and being able to control cheering in the NBA bubble facilities was innovative. The NBA, teamed up with Microsoft to promote fan engagement at games, while accounting for protocol (Powell, 2020). Fans enter a lottery process to be a fan projected in the 'stands' at a game. National networks would cut to virtual fans reactions and possible famous/special guest appearances. Many family and friends of players and coaches were about to stream in to support their loved ones (Powell, 2020). I specifically remember Jayson Tatum's son Deuce attending multiple games to cheer on his Dad. COVID-19

may have made those empty seats easier for organizations to pivot in their revenue generation endeavors. Giorgio (2021) stated that fans may feel unsafe to return to live sporting events for at least the rest of 2021, if not, later. In a survey conducted by Deloitte, fans that remain engaged with their teams year-round are more likely to buy products related to the organization. Fan "segmentation allows organizations to strategically target and incentivize different fan groups based on their level of commitment and behaviors" (Giorgio, 2021).

Conclusion

Virtual sports environments (streaming services, e-sports, etc.) may actually be reaching more people since the start of the pandemic (Giorgio, 2021) and monetizing that, while also refraining from alienating the fan/consumer with sponsorships/ads and other over the top revenue boosting avenues that detract from the sport itself. Social media was the game changer in the sports industry's pivot to adapt to COVID-19 challenges. Organizations used avenues that they may not have invested money into prior to the pandemic, but became a floatation device in a drowning sports world. Grass roots public relations was seen as a dinosaur of the past, but we can see clearly that it's worth the extra effort and willingness to open up to a fanbase on a personal level. Social justice movements are here to stay and we as a nation still have a long way to go before these issues can be put to rest. Athletes using their platform for positive society change is not a new practice, but it has become a more unified push across the sports world. The sports industry may be adapting faster to new trends than other businesses, but without COVID-19 they would never have taken as many twists and turns to find other routes for what could work in trying times, revenue generation and brand recognition. Fan Engagement needs continue to change and the sports industry appears ready to adapt to almost any challenge that they may face in the future, as shown by their perseverance through this pandemic.

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