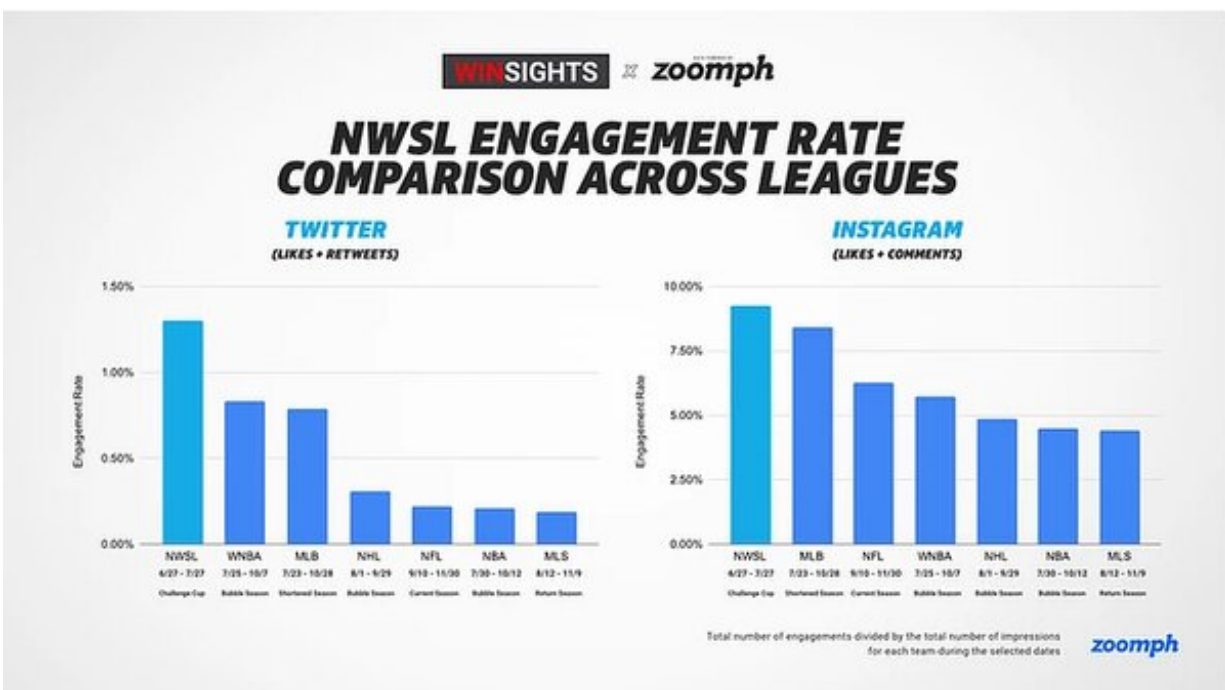


What pro sports should learn from resilient women athletes post-pandemic

December 21 2020, by Katie Lebel, Ann Pegoraro, Dunja Antunovic, Nancy Lough and Nicole M. Lavoie



Social engagement rates across professional sports. Credit: Winsights x Zoomph

Elite women's sports are predicted to generate [US\\$1 billion in revenue in 2021](#).

With just a fraction of the investment dollars and comparatively paltry marketing and promotional budgets compared to those allocated to men's

sports, this is conceivably a conservative estimate. As sport emerges from the challenges imposed by COVID-19, women's sports are becoming a [lucrative business opportunity](#).

Don't believe us? You're not alone.

Despite record-setting momentum, the [sports industry](#) has continued to ignore the economic viability of women's sports.

Many decisions are still based on outdated assumptions. Marketing has largely positioned women's sport as the "right thing to do" as opposed to an exciting investment opportunity, and fans are treated as monolithic. The resulting narrative has left the women's sport market both under-served and undervalued.

Women's sport receives just 4% of media coverage (in the US). That means it would take an entire childhood for girls and boys to see the same amount of sports media coverage for women that they will see for men in just one year. [#WomenInSport](#)

Source: <https://t.co/RutjAuohaK> <pic.twitter.com/QKqWFX7hmj>

— Danielle Warby (@DanielleWarby) [September 17, 2020](#)

Sports fans, however, are telling a different story.

A [Nielsen study](#) found that 84 percent of general sports enthusiasts of all genders are interested in women's sport. If more women's sports were available to watch, 46 percent of fans indicated they'd tune in.

Giving fans what they want

What happens when you give [sports fans](#) what they want? The 2019

FIFA Women's World Cup drew [1.12 billion viewers](#). Viewership for the WNBA this season [was up 68 percent](#); [media coverage](#) of their championship finals increased 15 percent.

National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) viewership swelled 493 percent for their 2020 Challenge Cup and [500 percent year over year](#), LPGA viewership increased 21 percent and this year's U.S. Open tennis final between Naomi Osaka and Victoria Azarenka averaged 2.1 million viewers on ESPN.

Keep in mind this was during a time when many sports were competing simultaneously and [ratings for the NBA, MLB, NHL and NFL all declined significantly](#). What's more, women athletes have also been at the forefront of advocacy [for social](#) and [political change](#).

The bottom line? Women are doing more with less.

They're finding innovative solutions during these most challenging times. They're seizing the moment and exceeding expectations. They're putting on a master class in resilience—because for the past several decades, that's how they've been conditioned to do business.

The changing sport landscape

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented disruption. While the sports sector adapts to these new and uncertain conditions, resilience as a coping mechanism is serving women's sports well.

Through this lens, the distinguishing qualities of persistence, adaptability and agility are assets that women in sport have been fine-tuning for years. As the world of sport continues to mount its recovery efforts and the sports landscape evolves, we argue this innately gives women a leg up in the new normal.

And make no mistake. The sports landscape is in the [midst of a revolution](#).

[Gen Z](#) has rapidly become the most influential generational cohort, commanding US\$3.2 trillion in purchasing power. This demographic has high expectations around diversity and inclusion and they are following sports in very different ways than their predecessors.

With a preference for highlights on Instagram, they're more likely to follow an athlete than a team, and the role of sport in their social life has [redefined their fandom](#).

53% of Gen Zers identify as sports fans, compared to 63% of all adults and 69% of millennials.

Gen Zers are half as likely as millennials to watch live sports regularly and twice as likely to never watch. <https://t.co/NJNySNDdAo> pic.twitter.com/3KKa1Poz0o

— Morning Consult (@MorningConsult) [September 28, 2020](#)

Layered on top of this, we know that women now control a third of the world's wealth, adding [US\\$5 trillion to the wealth pool](#) globally every year. While traditional sport properties are struggling, women's sports have the flexibility to be nimble and adapt to the new, increasingly diverse sport environment.

We're already seeing [early evidence](#) of this, with a [468 percent increase in tweet volume around representation and equality](#). Advertising featuring women in sport is perceived as 148 percent more empowering than similar ads with men.

Twitter has also found sports ads featuring women held viewers'

attention for an average of 6.5 seconds and drove 4.8 times higher ad recall than a control group. When women were featured in non-traditional gender roles, recall was 6.3 times higher.

If we consider merchandise as a proxy for demand, a whole new series of supporting metrics emerge. Nike's 2019 U.S. Women's National Team home jersey became the [No. 1 selling soccer jersey](#) ever, men's or women's. The WNBA's [now-famed](#) orange hoodie has [nine million impressions](#) on social media, 238,000 engagements and US\$250,000 in social media value. According to the online retailer Fanatics, [the orange hoodie was the best-selling item across its website in August.](#)

Pandemic disruptions

We're currently witnessing a continuous series of disruptions exposing the widening gaps in society accelerated by the pandemic.

In sport, these disruptions have exposed the weaknesses of the traditional sports model. As we look towards the future of sport, COVID-19 may well be the catalyst for change that women's sports have been waiting for.

Women in sport understand that success is not easy, convenient or comfortable because it never has been. They're accustomed to coming up with constructive solutions that showcase persistence.

As the sports market reemerges in a post-pandemic world, women's sports may be strategically positioned to not only better adapt to the rapid changes brought about by COVID-19—they may be better prepared to lead the way forward in the development of a new model for sport. The future may be unwritten, but the time to invest in it is now.

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