How the NWHL uses Twitter to *#GrowTheGame*

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Abstract

Four men's sports largely dominate the U.S. sports industry. The National Football League (NFL), the National Basketball Association (NBA), the Major League Baseball (MLB) and the National Hockey League (NHL) combined brought in about $31 billion in revenue in 2016, placing them all in the top 5 leagues with the most revenue worldwide (Kutz, 2017). But, other leagues now have a chance of finding their own audiences through online media. Indeed, social networks allow leagues and teams to communicate directly with their target audience without the need for traditional media. As such, social media plays an increasingly important role as sports marketers use them for various purposes, including promotions (Hambrick and Mahoney, 2011), public relations (Waters et al., 2011) and endorsements (Brison et al., 2013). The possibility of building an online community has become a key strategy for sports brands and organizations to develop greater loyalty. Using a grounded theory approach, the proposed study employs a digital participant observation, following the netnography (Kozinets, 2002; Muniz and Schau, 2007) process, of how the National Women's Hockey League's four teams used Twitter during their first and second seasons. Modeled on the ethnographic method, a netnography requires the researcher to study an online community over an extended period of time, identifying the field and taking notes to then analyze the data. This study seeks to answer how new (minor) sports organizations use social media to build brand communities and what types of messages build fan engagement. This study furthers social media research by exploring how communities are established online — an essential part of advertising, public relations, and marketing. It will help social media practitioners, particularly those in niche markets, including those involved in sports competing with "the Big Four," as they build and maintain social relationships online.

Keywords: Sports, Social Media, Branding, Women's Sports, Netnography.