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Beyond the Game: Analyzing the Evolution of Men's and Women's NCAA Basketball Twitter Coverage during the 2023 and 2024 March Madness Seasons

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Abstract

This study investigates the evolution of Twitter coverage surrounding men's and women's NCAA basketball tournaments during the 2023 and 2024 seasons. The analysis focuses on major shifts in media attention and public engagement related to the March Madness tournament. The research aims to uncover patterns in tweet volume, sentiment, and disparities in coverage and conversation between genders. The findings shed light on the changing landscape of social media representation of collegiate basketball, providing insights into potential factors influencing the differential attention given to men versus women tournaments. Understanding these dynamics contributes to a broader discussion about gender equity in sports media and further media coverage regarding the women's March Madness tournament.

Introduction

Every year, there are hundreds of thousand March Madness brackets that are created for the NCAA basketball tournament. Basketball fans around the country sit down and try to curate a winning bracket with various college teams. Before the 2023 March Madness basketball season, fans would typically only fill out brackets for the men's side. This was happening even though the women's and men's tournaments took place at the same time. Many individuals had no idea that the women's teams also participated in the tournament until recently. It was thought to be just the men's side participating in the large tournament. Times have changed drastically. People are tuning in and interacting more with the women's side of college basketball, which has never been seen before.

Women helped drive the conversation of the tournament in the 2024 March Madness season. Names such as Caitlin Clark, Angel Reese, and Dawn Staley are just a few of the women that have made an impact on the game and continue to do so. Basketball connoisseurs have spoken up about knowing more female players and their growing interest in that side of the game. This is a big deal, because usually female players are overlooked and not recognized as much for their accomplishments. Viewership increased for the tournament, showing numbers that have never been there before. For example, the 2024 South Carolina vs Iowa women's championship game drew an audience of 18.9 million viewers. For example, the men's Purdue vs. Uconn men's game

reached 14.82 million viewers. Comparatively, the 2018 Notre Dame vs. Mississippi State women's game drew an audience of 3.9 million viewers. This is a significant difference in viewership in just a short amount of time. It also should be noted that the women's games were not broadcasted on major networks like ABC until 2023 and was only available on ESPN platforms. The game is growing and there are more women's basketball fans than ever.

It is apparent that women's sports have had the talent but not the coverage. The 2024 March Madness season was unlike any other, but the reason for this growth remains unknown. Little is known on what made that season so different and where that shift is coming from. This led researchers to the questions: "How has the Twitter coverage surrounding men's and women's NCAA basketball tournaments shifted from 2023 to the 2024 March Madness seasons? What patterns in tweet volume, sentiment, and disparities in coverage and conversation between genders can be identified?". This study will focus on the online Twitter coverage and conversation of the March Madness tournament for both men's and women's basketball.

Literature Review

Women in sports have traditionally been overlooked and marginalized when compared to their male counterparts. When looking at sports coverage in the past there are significantly more stories covering male athletes than female athletes. In the past, journalists have been told not to cover women's sports because it wasn't as important as the men's stories. This creates disparities that place these genders on different levels. When women are covered in the media, oftentimes their performance is not the topic of discussion. Instead, it's about what's going on in their personal lives. Not only is the quantity of this coverage little to none, but the quality of these stories is also not adequate.

Federal law, known as Title IX, banned sex-based discrimination in educational programs receiving federal funding. It was passed in 1972 as a part of the Education Amendments. The Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act (EADA) was introduced in 1994, and requires colleges and universities to disclose information about their Title IX compliance in sports programs (Prachyl, et al, 2024). In the past, many schools had little to no athletic programs for women. Women's sports teams were not funded well and lacked good facilities to play their sport. Female participation in college sports was not encouraged to the same extent as their counterparts. After Title IX was in place it created better opportunities for female involvement in sports. There were more funding and proper facilities for them to do so as well. Title IX laid a foundation for female athletes and continues to pave the way for opportunities.

Looking at media coverage through the internet or social media adds to the conversation. The Twitter platform has allowed many individuals to join the conversation. "Twitter has provided sports broadcasters an additional avenue to reach their audience beyond the few minutes provided on a sportscast" (Hull, 2017). In Hull's research, they were trying to determine whether the broadcaster's gender or market size where they work has an impact on the amount of coverage given to women's sports. They found that "all 201 local sports broadcasters were devoted solely to women's sports (4.3%), with the vast majority discussing solely men's sports (77.3%)" (Hull, 2017). Although this is low when compared to major highlight shows, these numbers are still significantly higher. This revealed that the discussion on Twitter regarding female sports was slim to none. There is evidence that these athletes are being overlooked in the media significantly.

Men's sports are typically the main highlight and central focus of most broadcasting. Even when women are being discussed there are usually news tickers at the bottom of the screen casting news about male athletes (Messner, et al, 2010). Those news tickers take away from any important news and information that could potentially be shared about female athletes. There are major distracting components in place that take away the attention from female athletes. On major networks the disparities in coverage for women is noticeable and affects audience and viewer perceptions.

Going beyond media coverage, the incentives and perks of being a NCAA student athlete are comparatively different as well. During the March Madness championship tournament of 2021, Oregon women's basketball player Sedona Prince revealed how athletes were treated while involved in the tournament. Her TikTok video showed how the women's workout equipment was reduced to a rack of dumbbells, while the men had a full gym equipped with racks, weights, swag bags, food, and other amenities. Consequently, "CBS/Turner paid a combined \$850 million to carry the tournament," illustrating that the NCAA may not have money to provide both groups with all of the perks, but that is far from true (Diaz, 2021). Once this was made public it brought more attention to women's basketball and their treatment.

Methods

I conducted a content analysis of the conversation on Twitter. The researcher used a mixed-methods approach. This was important because finding both the qualitative and quantitative data would help find the shift. The sample population was limited to tweets sent by Twitter users engaged in the March Madness conversation between the dates of "Selection Sunday" and the championship tournament (March 12 - April 3, 2023 and March 17- April 8, 2024). To retrieve this data, an algorithm website named Keyhole was used. Keyhole organizes the sentiment, key themes, tweet volume, and coverage that are needed to analyze the data. Sentiment indicates whether a Twitter

post was positive, negative, or neutral. Key themes show if there is something in common among the posts. The tweet volume identifies if the posts are reaching the audience and how well it's doing. Finally, coverage will show if female players are being discussed. By retrieving this information, it could show if NCAA women's basketball athletes were being talked about, if the posts were reaching audiences, and how those audiences felt about the posts. Potential impressions also play a part in finding if these posts reached these audiences effectively. They are the estimated sum of followers from Twitter data. It also should be noted that a single user can deliver multiple impressions just from themselves. I wanted to determine the volume of discussions concerning NCAA women's basketball, evaluate audience participation, and discover public opinion regarding these topics and hashtags by utilizing these techniques.

Results

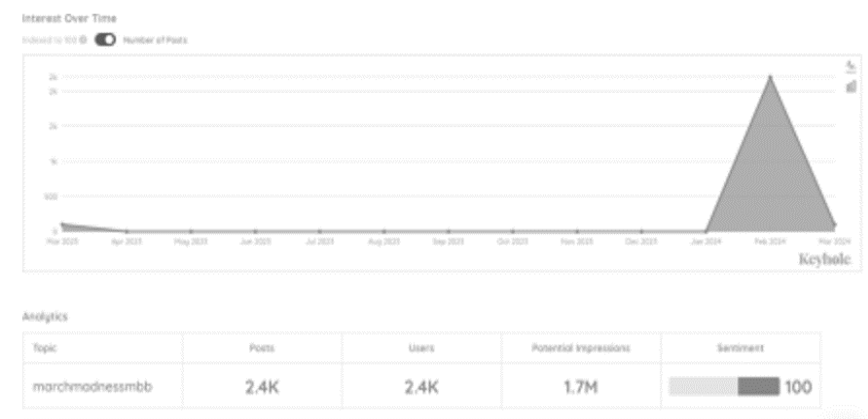


Figure 1

Represented is the timeline of March 12, 2023 to April 12, 2024 with the topic March Madness men's basketball. Accumulating 2.4K posts by 2.4K users on twitter. Potential impressions are to be seen at 1.7 million. The sentiment shows that there were 38% posts positive, 63% neutral, and 0% negative. As of March 2024, the number of posts for this topic were at 100 posts.

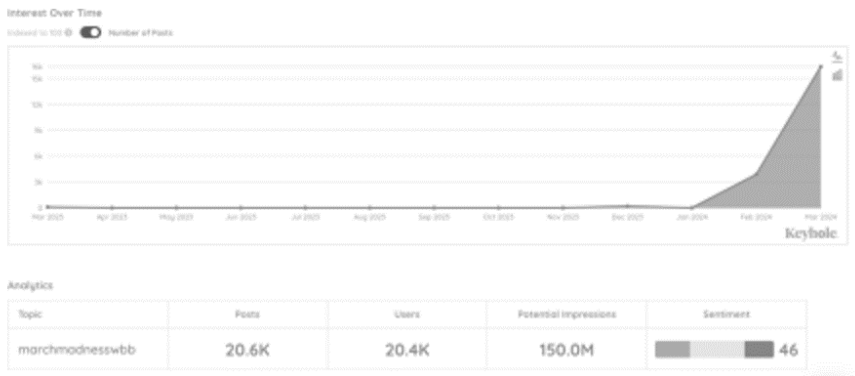


Figure 2

Represented is the timeline of March 12, 2023 to April 12, 2024 with the topic March Madness women's basketball, accumulating 20.6K posts by 20.4K users on Twitter. Potential impressions are to be seen at 150 million. The sentiment shows that there were 25% posts that were positive, 46% neutral, and 29% negative. As of March 2024, the number of posts for this topic were at 16,400 posts.

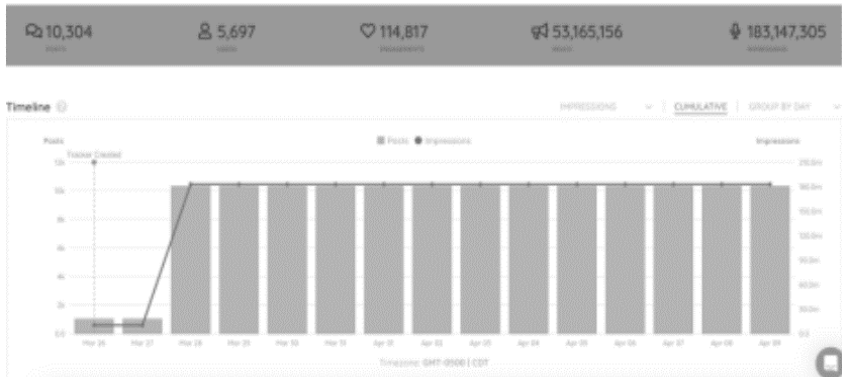


Figure 3

Represented is the timeline of March 26, 2024 to April 9, 2024 with the topic of March Madness, accumulating 10,304 posts by 5,607 users on Twitter. The potential impressions are to be seen at over 183 million impressions.

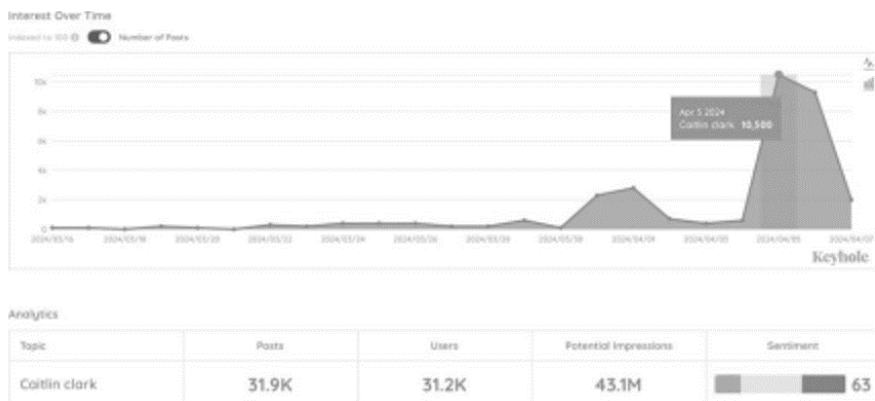


Figure 4

Represented is the timeline of March 16, 2024 to April 9, 2024 with the topic Caitlin Clark, accumulating 31.9K by 31.2K users on Twitter. Potential impressions should be seen at 43.1 million users. It also shows that April 5, 2024 alone there were 10,500 posts about the topic on Twitter.

Discussion

After examining the data, the results suggest that the individuals who are posting and seeing content regarding the women's side of March Madness basketball are creating more of a conversation over the women's side than the men's side this year, which has never been done before. The results showed the dramatic increase in posts and coverage on Twitter regarding the women's side. Content on Twitter revealed that there was a wide variety of engagement regarding the women that surpassed the men this year.

The start of Name, Image, and Like (NIL) deals for collegiate athletes have played a major part in this change due to the increased online presence of various content. In addition to providing players with an income, NIL deals have raised public awareness of women's sports and boosted media coverage. NIL partnerships have given female athletes more chances to demonstrate their abilities and receive praise equal with their male counterparts. Females have reached audiences that they have never encountered before with these platforms. This trend in coverage started in 2021 but has seen a rise in the previous 2023-2024 basketball season. The 2021 season sparked a debate and conversation regarding the equal treatment for the men's and women's athletes during the March Madness tournament. After this was uncovered, Twitter users were engaging more with female basketball athletes and it has drastically increased since then.

Limitations, Implications, and Future Research

There are a few limitations from this research that need to be addressed. For example, the hashtag “March Madness” has primarily been used to address only men’s basketball. This means all the data pulled for the topic might only address the men’s side. Also, for this topic the maximum amount of data pulled stopped at 9,303 posts, which limits the amount of data that could be received. Another limitation is that the Keyhole database’s sentiment is not always a hundred percent accurate. Some posts that were pulled were perceived as negative but were actually positive. Lastly, Twitter users would use the hashtag “March Madness Women’s Basketball” even when they were talking about men and vice versa, which makes it difficult to separate all of the posts from one another.

The goal of the research was to examine the media attention and coverage of March Madness and discover the changes within it. As evidenced by the data shown, there has been a drastic leap of media attention and coverage for the women’s teams competing in the tournament. Key figures, such as Caitlin Clark, were instrumental in pushing this discussion. Along with other well-known individuals, Clark, a former top player at the University of Iowa who was selected as the first overall draft by the Indiana Fever in the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA), has broken multiple college records and sparked a change in public perception. Their efforts have successfully brought women’s basketball the much-needed attention it deserves. There is work to be done to examine if the shift in March Madness was because of certain players. This can be analyzed by researching the 2025 March Madness season and its trends. Also examining the WNBA and seeing how the coverage is transitioned into the professional league. The WNBA currently has 12 teams with 144 roster spots. This means even if players are drafted, they do not officially have a spot on the team. The new media attention could spark conversations over expansion and more funding.

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