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22 Million Fans Bet on Sports in 2020; More played E-Sports and Smart TVs are the streaming devices of choice

Study of Post-Pandemic Fan Behavior Shows major changes in how we engage with sports

Boca Raton, FL-In a year when fans could not attend games in-person, more than 22 million of them showed support for their teams by betting on them, according to SBRnet's 2021 study of Fan Behavior "Sports Fandom in a Post-Pandemic World."

The study also showed a significant increase in Fantasy Sports participation, reversing a recent downward trend, and a huge jump in people watching E-Sports and moving away from traditional college and professional sports.

In fact, most college and professional sports experienced a decline in fan viewership and attendance, according to the study. The number of fans who watched or attended college basketball games over the past year declined by 16.7% from 2019; fans who watched or attended Major League Baseball decreased 13.9% over the same time period, according to the Fandom report. The National Football League and Major League Soccer were the only two major sports who experienced an increase in fan viewership and attendance increasing by 2.3% and 10% respectively.

"The survey result show that sports that were able to play their seasons in full or close to full were able to maintain a high level of fan engagement," said Neil Schwartz, president of SBRnet. "The NFL stayed on schedule with a full slate of regular season games, playoffs and The Super Bowl and was able to maintain a high level of fan interest. MLS delayed their season but got in their games and playoffs and fans responded."

Other professional and college sports were not so fortunate. The large decrease in fan engagement with college hoops stems from the cancellation of the incredibly popular annual March Madness tournament in 2020. "For many college Basketball fans, the tournament is the focal point of the season," Schwartz said, "and without that, interest declined sharply."

SBRnet's annual fan study historically has analyzed how fans behave at games they attend and how that attendance affects their attitudes toward sponsors. However, with so many events staged without fans in 2020, the study delved deeper on Fantasy sports play, E-Sports, sports betting, as well as streaming and social media habits

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Gambling on Sports has become a major topic over the past year and that is reflected in the results of the study. Currently 19 States and the District of Columbia have approved betting on sports. The NFL and the National Basketball Association rank as the number one and two favorite sports for people that gamble on sports as 12% of fans surveyed placed bets on those sports, according to the Fandom study and 38.2% of all those surveyed said they increased spending on sports gambling since March 2020 when the Covid-19 Pandemic took hold in the United States.

Below is a chart that shows by sport the percentage of fans who increased their sports betting expenditures in 2020.

	2020
MLB	36%
NBA	39%
College Basketball	36%
NFL	37%
College Football	35%
NHL	37%
MLS	48%

Social Media usage by fans also took a big jump in 2020. Twitter and Instagram usage by sports fans surged as fans sought connections with their favorite players and teams in a year when they could not see them in person. All major sports experienced a spike in fans them following them on social media, with more than 50% of the fans of MLS and The National Hockey League saying they used IG and Twitter to follow their favorite teams and players. “All major leagues had experienced a slight decline on social media in 2019, so the study shows a significant bounce back.”

While there is no question that the growth of streaming media options has been good for sports in general, the study showed the pandemic accelerated this trend. While usage rates have increased for all mobile devices, people on lockdown gravitated to their Smart TVs. Streaming on Smart TVs for NFL fans increased to 27% from 14%; Smart TV streaming of NBA games also nearly doubled to 29% from the previous year’s total of 15%. The NHL and MLS enjoyed the biggest increase in streaming activity. The number of NHL fans watching games on streaming services increased to 35% from 17% in the previous year; The number of MLS fans watching games on streaming services increased to 46% up from 24% in the previous year.

During the Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020, the Fandom study showed a huge jump in people moving away from watching their favorite traditional college and professional sports and move more towards watching E-Sports. 26% of those who watched E-Sports in 2020 said they watched traditional sports “less often,” an increase over the previous year’s figure of 15%. 64% of those who watched E-sports said they watched traditional sports “about the same,” only a light dip from the previous year’s figure of 68%.

Games like Call of Duty, Halo, Fortnite and Overwatch continue to lead the pack for these fans. The leading E-sports games were FIFA, Madden and NBA 2K, according to the study.

“Research and data have always been solid predictors of future behavior,” Schwartz said. “But the Covid-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of our lives, including sports. We believe we established some new benchmarks with this year’s report and look forward to exploring these topics further with Part II of the study in Q3 in 2021.”

This study was conducted exclusively for SBRnet by Irwin Broh and Associates. For the past 10 years, SBRnet has asked consumers, 13 years and older about their level of fandom, engagement and interaction with their favorite professional leagues and teams together with college and minor league sports. The results are based on the responses of all consumers 13-years and-older with a sample balanced to the population of the US, based on Age, Income, Gender, Household Income and Geography. The full results of the study are available to SBRnet subscribers. If you're interested in a copy of the executive summary, e-mail: info@sbrnet.com

ABOUT SBRnet: SBRnet was founded in 1998 to provide a one stop hub for all forms of data for the sports business including sales of active lifestyle gear, clothing and footwear, fan behavior and sports participation.

The business was purchased in December 2020 by Neil Schwartz and Mark Sullivan. Schwartz has more than two decades of marketing & consumer research experience in the sports, fitness and active lifestyle categories. Sullivan is a former editor and publisher in sports business and one of the founders of The Running Event, the largest B2B conference and trade show in the world. He sold The Running Event in 2018.

