

Spring 2021

## The Female Sports Fan Experience: How Women Consume Sports and How Sports Are Marketed to Women

Natalie Elser  
*University of South Carolina - Columbia*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/senior\\_theses](https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/senior_theses)



Part of the [Sports Management Commons](#), [Sports Studies Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Elser, Natalie, "The Female Sports Fan Experience: How Women Consume Sports and How Sports Are Marketed to Women" (2021). *Senior Theses*. 433.  
[https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/senior\\_theses/433](https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/senior_theses/433)

This Thesis is brought to you by the Honors College at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

The Female Sports Fan Experience:  
How Women Consume Sports and How Sports Are Marketed to Women

By

Natalie Elser

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for  
Graduation with Honors from the  
South Carolina Honors College

May 2021

Approved:



---

Khalid Ballouli  
Director of Thesis



---

John Grady  
Second Reader

---

Steve Lynn, Dean  
For South Carolina Honors College

**Table of Contents**

Summary .....	3
Introduction .....	4
Background .....	6
Feminist Theory.....	6
Hegemonic Masculinity and Emphasized Femininity .....	8
The Exclusion of Women from Sports Fandom .....	10
How Women Experience Sports .....	11
Measurements of Fandom .....	11
Fan Behavior .....	15
Gender Performativity .....	18
Notions of Inauthenticity .....	22
Sexuality .....	23
Live Sporting Events .....	33
Marketing to Female Fans .....	36
Promotional Events .....	37
Merchandise for Women .....	43
Advertisements .....	46
What Women Want .....	49
Conclusion .....	51
References .....	53

### **Summary**

This study analyzes the growing subsection of female sports fans. Through a review of scholarly research articles, this study examines female sports fan motivations and behaviors and how they differ from the classic male sports fan. Additionally, this study aims to investigate how sports marketing executives try to appeal to women as sports consumers and how these practices have begun to change in recent years. This study will provide a summary of existing research on female sports fans along with a review of marketing initiatives used to engage female sports fans.

### **The Female Sports Fan Experience: How Women Consume Sports and How Sports Are Marketed to Women**

Academic research analyzing sports fan behavior and experiences is a relatively small field. Much of the existing research focuses on hooligan culture and fan rivalries with an emphasis on sports fans outside of the United States, particularly in the U.K. Research assessing the female sports fan experience is even more limited. The lack of female inclusion in the literature combined with the emphasis on the more aggressive aspects of fandom supports prevailing hegemonic masculinity across sports fandom. As defined by R.W. Connell's gender order theory (1987), hegemonic masculinity refers to practices that legitimize the dominant position of men within society and the subordination of women. The typical Western ideals of masculinity are "centered around authority, physical toughness, strength, heterosexuality, and paid work" (Pilcher, 1999, p. 12). In turn, the Western ideals of femininity are centered around the private domain, focusing on marriage and childcare. Such domains are oriented toward caretaking, accommodating the interests of men, and upholding the dominant position of men. Masculinity is associated with activity, and femininity is associated with passivity.

In general, participation in team sports, which are often the very sports that have the most visibility and popularity, has been designated as a male activity (Dunning, 1994). That is not to say that girls do not play team sports, but from a young age, boys have been more enthusiastically encouraged to become involved with sport be it participating or as a spectator. Men and women have not been equally socialized with regard to sport (Gantz & Wenner, 1995). As girls are not as equally encouraged to engage in sports, some researchers believe that women simply need more time to catch up to men in their fandom. With the assumption that women are less interested in and involved in sports viewership, there is a relative lack of academic research

investigating the importance of sports fandom for women. The female sports fan experience has largely been invisible both in and out of research (Gosling, 2007; Lewis, 2009). Increasing amounts of research have begun to recognize female fans, but women are often just ‘added’ to research rather than made the focus. Even in texts that include women, little to no empirical data is included. Research often labels women as new consumers, ignoring that women have enjoyed sports for far longer than male researchers have realized (Pope, 2013). Women were grouped into a “new fans” category of sport consumers placed in contrast to “traditional fans” also labeled as, “the lads” (King, 1998).

Considering female fans as a whole to be new to sport ignores that the presumed gap between female participation and male participation in sports fandom is far narrower than it appears on the surface. A 2017 study found that women make up 33% of sports fans (Berri, 2017). Gemba, a sport and entertainment data collection agency, assessed the gender balance in fanship across 13 of the most popular sports worldwide in 10 different countries (Roberts, 2020). Across all sports, the percentage of female fans varied from 37% in Japan up to 53% in China and India. The gender gap is narrowing, and it is narrowing fast. The same study found that 47% of “highly engaged and passionate fans” were women (n.p.). This gap is also closing in the United States. Among institutional center sports (those sports that are most commercialized, i.e., American football, baseball, ice hockey, and basketball), women make up nearly half of all fans (Messner, 2002). Female fans comprise nearly 45% of all NFL fans and 47% of MLB fans (Angi, 2014; Hampton, 2017).

Women are not an insignificant minority of sports fans. If time was needed to close the gap, enough time has already passed. Now the focus needs to shift toward acknowledging female fans and recognizing them as legitimate fans. Years of socialization associating sport with men

have excluded women. Sport is heavily dominated by ideals of masculinity that are considered to be at odds with femininity. Inviting women into sports viewership involves legitimizing that their fanship may look different than the masculine norm but is still authentic. Additionally, the women who are already fans need to be properly recognized as a significant portion of total sports fans. Furthermore, the traditions enforcing hegemonic masculinity in sport-related spaces must be broken down for there to be true equality among the genders as sports fans.

The central premise of this study is that female sports fans are not a monolithic mass. Each woman experiences sport differently and has varying motivations and behaviors. A fandom that parts from hegemonic masculinity is no less authentic or valuable. However, gender and social roles and expectations have become nearly inseparable from the experience of sports viewership. This impacts not only women but men as well. Such expectations of gender performativity in fandom have been ingrained by years of upholding the status quo. Only by disrupting the relationship between sport and hegemonic masculinity, can women truly be accepted. Ignoring the female fanbase or only emphasizing overt and stereotypical displays of femininity only seeks to perpetuate the notion that femininity and mainstream sports are at odds with one another. It is in the best interest of sports executives to make concerted efforts to recognize their female fans as authentic. Legitimizing women in what has been a historically male space can attract more fans, increase fan satisfaction, and increase profits from ticket and merchandise sales.

## **Background**

### **Feminist Theory**

While assessing the impact of gender on sports fandom, I will be employing a feminist framework. In using feminist ideologies, it is important to establish the difference between sex

and gender. Sex and gender do not refer to the same thing and cannot be used interchangeably. Sex is used when referring to the biological traits that differ between males and females. As defined by the American Medical Association Journal of Ethics, gender is used when referring to a “continuum of complex psychosocial self-perceptions, attitudes, and expectations people have about members of both sexes” (Tseng, 2008, n.p.). The World Health Organization also makes this distinction between biological sex and gender. With regard to large legal and medical entities, there is a consensus in differentiating sex from gender viewing gender instead as cultural characteristics. It is important to clarify that the perceptions of gender are typically connected with biological sex. Certain expectations are placed upon a person based on their sex. These expectations form the gender roles and stereotypes enforced in a culture.

A prominent idea in feminism is the notion that gender is performed rather than innate. The term “gender performativity” was first used by gender theorist Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1990). Butler asserts that gender is constantly produced by the way we look, the way we talk, and the way we act. Gender is not an internal fact but rather a performance of masculine and feminine. What is considered being a woman or being a man is determined by the roles and expectations assigned to each gender by the dominant societal norms. The characteristics and roles typically associated with each sex vary across different societies. Proponents of gender performativity believe that people ‘do’ woman rather than are woman. Gender is more so a verb than a noun. The idea that gender is performative is a step further than simply gender performance. Performance involves taking on a role, but being performative implies that taking on that role will then produce effects.

I will primarily be viewing gender through a postmodern feminist lens. Postmodern feminism emphasizes the differences that exist among women. Not all women behave the same



way or have the same experience of gender. Postmodern feminists believe that gender is not a universal truth. Viewing gender as a binary that determines a person's experience minimizes individual differences and experiences. Postmodern feminism encourages a reassessment of the expectations placed upon women that are based on masculine notions of how women should appear. I will also be examining the impact of the male gaze in sports fandom and marketing toward women. The idea of the gaze itself was first proposed by philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. He defined the act of gazing at another person as resulting in a subjective power difference felt between the gazer and the person being gazed at. In this situation, the gazer views the other person not as another human being but instead as an object. Sartre's idea of the gaze was later adopted by the feminist movement to describe how discourses of patriarchy are perpetuated by the gaze of men onto women.

### **Hegemonic Masculinity and Emphasized Femininity**

Among feminist sports research, hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity are frequently used terms to describe the dynamics of gender norms and gender performance. Hegemonic masculinity is used to refer to the values created by men in power which organize unequally according to gender (Hearn & Morrell, 2012). The concept of hegemony was initially proposed to explain the dynamics where a specific group is able to maintain dominance by controlling cultural institutions (Gramsci, 1971). Hegemonic masculinity applies this concept to patriarchal structures and practices that benefit men. Certain forms of masculinity are favored over others, and not all men have the same access to hegemony (Cleland et al., 2020). Connell (2005) asserts that most men do not achieve true hegemony by attaining a position atop the social hierarchy, but reaching the top is an aspiration. Those at the top collect the most social and cultural capital. Holding capital and resources allows those at the top to maintain their place and

“legitimize their dominance through everyday encounters with others” (Dixon, 2014, p. 638; Giddens, 1984). Everyday encounters serve to uphold social hierarchies and uphold social rules.

When hegemonic masculinity is threatened, protest masculinity can occur (Connell, 2005). Protest masculinity can take the form of racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. It can also involve violence or other abuse. Such protest masculinity has been described at sporting events, where hegemonic masculinities are becoming less acceptable. The rampant hooliganism and fan abuse at soccer matches in the U.K. exemplify the emergence of protest masculinity (Cleland et al., 2020; Jones, 2008). However, the majority of men are more likely to passively sustain hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). Rather than actively engage in behaviors that assert dominance, most men are simply complicit with existing structures of hegemony. This practice is labeled complicit masculinity. The vast majority of men practice this form of masculinity in which they benefit from male hegemony but do not directly dominate women. Therefore, these men are able to avoid any of the risks that arise from the practice of more aggressive masculinities (Connell, 2005). Despite the prevalence of masculinities that support hegemony, accepted forms of masculinity are changing. In popular media, men who do not fit the White, heteronormative model have been given increasing visibility (Cleland et al., 2020). Therefore, masculinity is capable of shifting and reconfiguring to fit other changing social norms.

Some researchers have used the term hegemonic femininity to describe those femininities that are complementary to hegemonic masculinity. These characteristics are considered the ideal of womanhood as they serve to fit into the social hierarchy rather than challenge it (Schippers, 2007). Hegemonic femininity is more commonly referenced to as emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987). The change in terminology is meant to reflect that masculinity and femininity

are not equal on the social hierarchy; women do not typically achieve hegemony. Emphasized femininity is further described as accommodating to men, focusing on marriage and motherhood. However, just as there are many masculinities, there are more femininities than what is contained within emphasized femininity. Some women may exude behaviors that are more commonly associated with hegemonic masculinity. These could be a sexual interest in other women, aggression, or sexual promiscuity. Such behaviors are considered pariah femininities (Schippers, 2007). Pariah femininities challenge the traditional hierarchy of masculine and feminine and are considered deviant. Subordinate femininities, those behaviors that enforce traditional gender relations, are given greater value for upholding traditional hierarchies and social roles based on gender.

### **The Exclusion of Women from Sports Fandom**

In many societies across the world, sport has traditionally been a male-dominated space. This originates from years of excluding women for sport due to their presumed gentle and passive nature. Meanwhile, men from a young age are pushed into sport to build their strength, activity, and leadership, all characteristics that are more celebrated in men. The exclusion of women from sport is not limited to participation but extends to viewership as well. Women have been systematically excluded from viewing sport. In England, football (soccer) still has a heavily male fan base (Pope, 2013). This in part is due to efforts on behalf of the English Football Association to ban women from playing soccer in 1921 (Cleland, 2015). Soccer was considered unsuitable for women, and thus women's soccer rapidly declined. If soccer was considered unsuitable for women to play, it is not such a stretch to believe that this has impacted female viewership of soccer.

In just 2018, a group of die-hard fans of SS Lazio in Italy distributed flyers stating that women were not welcome in the first nine rows at the stadium (Bacchi, 2018). These rows were referred to as a “sacred place” where wives and girlfriends cannot sit. In reference to sport, women were described solely in their relationship to men signifying that even in recent years sports venues are considered a safe haven of hegemonic masculinity. Such issues of widespread oppression and sex-based discrimination in sport exist across nearly every continent (Cleland et al., 2020). Chants and songs from soccer matches in the U.K. are most well-known and receive the most attention for their tendency to include offensive messages. However, many songs and chants in Zimbabwean football matches also contain messages that degrade women (Chiweshe, 2014). These misogynistic messages dissuade female fans from visiting certain areas of the stadium or even attending soccer matches at all. An additional study conducted on men’s soccer in Denmark discovered that violence and misogyny led to a decrease in female fans (Pfister et al., 2013). There are numerous documentations of experiences of sex-based discrimination among sports fans. However, much of this is excluded from academic research centering around female fans.

### **How Women Experience Sports**

#### **Measurements of Fandom**

In order to understand how women experience sports, it is important to first assess how gender has been discussed in the existing literature on sports fans. One of the central focuses of gender in the research of sports fans is the investigation of their motivations to engage in fan behaviors. Some early research indicated that women were motivated more so by the social aspects of watching sports (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2000). They viewed sports as an opportunity to spend time with family members or friends. More recent research has found that social

interaction was not an important motivation for female or male fans (James & Ridinger, 2002; Ware & Kowalski, 2012). However, a differing study conducted has suggested that both male and female fans, as well as nonfans, *are* motivated by the social aspect of viewing sports (Gantz & Wenner, 1995). Besides social motivations, there is a larger lack of consensus on the motivations of sports fans, particularly women. Fandom can be difficult to study because there is no agreement on what the most accurate way is to measure whether someone is a fan and to what degree they are a fan. Early research pushed for a more quantitative approach, trying to create a standardized assessment to measure fandom. These preliminary assessments were weak in content and construct validity. Trail and James (2001) sought to develop a better quantitative assessment. They created the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption (MSSC).

A potential issue with the validity of the MSSC is that it was created and assessed using season ticket holders only. Pope (2013) found that being a season ticket holder was not helpful as a measurement of fanship. No gender identification demographics were provided in the initial study on the MSSC. Besides the lack of gender identification data, season ticket holders only represent a small subset of all sports fans. In general, much of fan behavior research focuses disproportionately on season ticket holders to represent all fans, or at minimum, all passionate fans (Malcolm et al., 2000). Many cannot afford to be season ticket holders, they may be too busy, they may live too far from the team's venue, or perhaps they just aren't interested in season tickets. The exclusivity of the respondents used to develop the MSSC brings about the issue of what impact gender has on the definition of fanship. Can a quantitative measurement be fully inclusive if there is a lack of census on how different demographics experience fanship? Perhaps studies using quantitative measures have found women to perform lower in measures of fandom because the overall understanding of fandom is based upon generations of associating men with

sport. Because of the long association between sport and masculinity, it cannot be assumed that men and women experience sports viewership in the same way. Without further research to understand the female experience, quantitative assessments may not be accurate measures of fanship for groups beyond the heteronormative male.

Some studies use dimensions of sports knowledge in the assessment of fandom. A study conducted by Dietz-Uhler et al. (2000) used a 20-question sports knowledge scale. The questions encompassed numerous sports including American football, baseball, and basketball. Specific questions included: “In baseball, what does ERA stand for?” and “How many players must be on the line of scrimmage in professional football?” (p. 223). While greater knowledge may indicate high-involvement fandom and repeated exposure to the game, knowledge-based questionnaires may bias results. Football and baseball are largely male sports; women do not have avenues to play them. Women in general have not been equally socialized in these sports as men have. Assessing knowledge about specific rules and statistics may not accurately measure fandom. With a reduced opportunity to grow up with this knowledge, it may not be as readily available for women as it is for men. If this knowledge was not learned at a young age, women may not want to ask other fans about specific rules fearing that they will not be taken seriously. Additionally, knowing every rule of various sports may be associated with high-involvement fans, but many other fans can enjoy the sport without needing to know what ERA stands for or how players must be on the line of scrimmage. Not knowing certain rules does not diminish a person’s ability to appreciate the game. Such knowledge assessments do not fully take into account how gender plays a role in the education of rules in sports.

Several female researchers have pushed for more qualitative measurements of fanship. Sociologist Stacey Pope (2013) measures fanship by asking respondents, “Is being a [insert team

name] fan an important part of who you are?,” “How much are you affected by wins/losses?,” and “How much time do you spend watching/thinking about sport?” (p. 182). Such questions view fandom as subjective and personal. Subjective qualitative measures also allow for a more nuanced understanding of different types of fans. Qualitative data can be conducive to grounded theory in which theory is discovered from the data. As there is little consensus in the understanding of female fanship, utilizing grounded theory through qualitative interviews and surveys shows promise in guiding future research.

Pope, a professor of sport sociology at Durham University in the U.K., is a pioneer in the field of the female sports fan experience. She utilized grounded theory and qualitative measures of fandom in a study investigating the meaning of sports fandom for women. Her study consisted of 85 semi-structured interviews with female fans of men’s soccer and rugby in England. Her respondents were primarily season ticket holders but also included those who attend most home games and fans who occasionally attend home games. The ages of the respondents ranged from 20 to over 60. Pope based her study on Giulianotti’s (2002) proposition of two binary oppositions: hot-cool and traditional-consumer. “Hot” denotes intense forms of identification with a team, while “cool” denotes a less passionate identification. “Traditional” spectators will have a longer and more local identification with their team; “consumer” spectators will have a more market-centered identification focused on consumption of merchandise and televised sporting events.

Pope found within her data that there was little evidence to suggest that the traditional-consumer binary exists or is helpful when evaluating fans. Today, there is too much of an overlap between spectators motivated by a long-term emotional investment in a team and those motivated by financially supporting the team. Previous research by King (1998) grouped women

as consumers and “the lads” as traditional supporters. Such binary groupings marginalize that not all men and not all women have the same motivations as fans and the same fan experience. Generally, female fans do not fit into consumers or traditional fans (Pope, 2011). Nowadays, many fans support their teams through both consumption (of merchandise and television broadcasts) and through long-standing, traditional loyalty (such as attending games). The behaviors that fans engage in have shifted away from neatly defined categories.

### **Fan Behavior**

Female sports fan behavior has traditionally been depicted as the archetypal football widow whose role is providing her husband with food and beverages as he watches (Gantz & Wenner, 1995). She occasionally watches the game, but she rarely reacts to the action while her husband reacts animatedly. Stereotypes of women as sports fans center around the women as an accessory to the man. She is there to feed him. She is there to support him. She is only a fan because her husband is a fan. These notions play off of the perpetual belief that women are not as authentic of fans as men are. So, is there any truth to these stereotypes?

Gantz and Wenner (1995) sought to answer these questions by assessing sports fans through television viewing experiences. The study involved 707 phone interviews with adults in Los Angeles and Indianapolis. The interviews inquired about interest in televised sports, viewing behavior, and motivations to view televised sports. The researchers constructed a fanship index to place the respondents into four groups: female nonfans, male nonfans, female fans, and male fans. Overall, female nonfans were the least involved and invested in viewing televised sports. Male nonfans were statistically more involved than their female counterparts. However, when comparing fans by gender, male and female fans expressed similar levels of engagement in televised sports. Male fans did engage in pre-viewing behaviors (i.e., drinking a beer before the



game, tuning in early) more often than female fans, but the difference was not statistically significant. Overall, female respondents (nonfans and fans) enjoyed the drama and the tension in viewing the sport and felt psyched up while watching. The results of Gantz and Wenner's study (1995) indicate that female fans behave far more similar to male fans than how the stereotypical female fan is represented.

Gantz and Wenner's study (1995) did find that a large number of women are less engaged fans. Ware and Kowalski (2012) similarly found that women were more likely to be low-involvement fans than men. While it is true that many women do view sports passively, this represents only a portion of all women who view sports. Gender had a far greater impact among nonfans than among fans (Gantz & Wenner, 1995). However, it is important to note that the fanship index was controlled among each gender. Therefore, men overall were more likely to be sports fans and were generally more engaged fans. Nevertheless, this study is incredibly valuable in validating the authenticity of female fans. Many women *do* actively engage in television viewership and have similar motives to their male counterparts.

Early research has focused on the number of women who are low-involvement fans rather than assessing the full range of female experience in sports viewership. Some studies have claimed that women don't feel empathy after their team wins or loses in the way that men do, believing that sport provides men with an identity that differs from what women experience (James & Ridinger, 2002). Other surveys have indicated that women do feel empathy in the same way that men do (Pope, 2013). Similarly, Gantz and Wenner (1995) concluded that among passionate fans, both genders experienced the same joys and frustrations with the game. James and Ridinger's study (2002) demonstrates a similarity in experience between men and women, despite a supposed gap in empathy. Both men and women who completed their questionnaire

shared the same primary motives in viewing sports. “The action of sports” and “the opportunity to escape from one’s daily routine” were the strongest motivators (James & Ridinger, 2002, p. 272). However, women appreciated the drama of the game more than men, and men cared more about the beauty of the game, their knowledge of the game, and being associated with a successful team than women. Contrary to other research, social interaction was not a significant motive for men or women (Ware & Kowalski, 2012). Overall, both genders had similar motivations for fandom.

Across the majority of the literature, passionate female fans appear far more similar to passionate male fans than what had been previously thought. Most of the disagreement results from the difference in experience between low-involvement female fans (or nonfans) and high-involvement female fans. While there is debate around the degree to which social interaction motivates sports fans, low-involvement fans are generally more motivated by a desire to be around family and friends (Gantz & Wenner, 1995; Ware & Kowalski, 2012). While in many ways women and men are similarly motivated to watch sports, women tend to have stronger loyalty to a specific team (Ridinger & James, 2002). In contrast, men are more likely to have a loyalty to sports in general. In practice, this difference seems to have a minimal impact on fan behavior. High-involvement female fans bask in their team’s reflected glory (BIRGing) and cut-off reflected failure (CORFing), both well-documented indications of being a die-hard fan, at levels very similar to high-involvement men (Ware & Kowalski, 2012). When each gender is controlled for level of interest, there is no statistically significant difference in their behaviors and feelings as fans (Gantz & Wenner, 1995). On the whole, there is far less of a difference in the motivations and behavior among male and female sports fans. The greatest difference is determined by involvement rather than by gender.

## **Gender Performativity**

Gender performativity and adherence to social norms largely dictate how women experience sport. Ussher (1997) outlined four performances of femininity: “being girl,” “doing girl,” “resisting girl,” and “subverting femininity.” The categories of performance were applied to female wrestlers in a study by Sisjord and Kristiansen (2009). These researchers discovered that the performance of feminine behaviors was driven by context. Junior wrestlers typically held back in asserting more masculine-stereotyped qualities of strenuous training and muscularity. Senior wrestlers had embraced these qualities. The idea that gender performance is contextual supports the theory of gender performativity in which that behavior elicits a certain reaction. These notions of women fitting into different performances of femininity extend beyond women in sports; however, women as sports fans vary their presentations of femininity.

Building upon the prior theories of gender performance, Pope (2013) outlined two types presented among her respondents: masculine femininities and feminine femininities. Masculine femininities were characterized by “doing girl” and “resisting girl,” similar to the senior wrestlers. Women who explored masculine femininities were often “tomboys” while growing up and still tend to identify with men. These women were more likely to be considered hot fans. The majority of women included in the study constituted hot fans. A group of these fans expressed insecurities based on internalized feelings of inauthenticity. They wish to be viewed as “real” fans separate from the women who practiced feminine femininities. The practice of feminine femininities was more associated with “doing girl” and “being girl” just as the junior wrestlers were (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009). These women also aligned more as cool fans. Some of the cool female fans criticized challenging sport as a traditionally male space; many of them enjoyed sport but viewed the domain as male. Not all women experience and present fandom in the same

manner. Pope's (2013) analysis of gender performance in conjunction with the intensity of fanship provides an interesting glimpse into the connection between gender stereotypes and sport. The two appear intrinsically tied together through contexts of participation and spectatorship.

Women perform gender through their fandom, and this performance dictates how a woman experiences sport. Katharine Jones (2008), a professor in gender studies and sociology, also sought to explore how women adjust their gender identities in accordance with their fan identities. Jones bases her research upon Connell's (2005) frameworks of hegemonic masculinity and the idea that people perform masculinities and femininities. She interviewed 38 female fans of English soccer. Her study was aimed at assessing how female fans reacted and were affected by sexism from male fans. English soccer has had a long history of hooliganism fraught with sexist and racist verbal abuse (Jones, 2005). Opposing players are taunted with insults implying that they "play like a girl," and female fans may be told that their ticket is "wasted" on them (p. 521). Such verbal abuse establishes the presence of hegemonic masculinity among some of the most vocal male fans. These comments imply that femininity is not compatible with sport and has no place at a soccer match.

Jones (2008) discovered three strategies used by the respondents in response to the pervasive hegemonic masculinity. The first strategy utilizes feminist ideologies and views abusive behavior in the stands as disgusting. Women who employ this strategy either actively or passively protested such behavior. Some women would confront the heckler while other women would just choose to leave when male fans become obnoxious. These women draw upon a feminist approach to dictate what behavior is appropriate and what behavior is not. In this strategy, femininity and fandom are viewed as compatible whereas fandom and hegemonic

masculinity are viewed as incompatible. Women practicing this strategy place gender stereotypes on their heads. They are not demure and subservient, instead, they challenge the status quo of what makes a fan a real fan. Those who sustain hypermasculinity and verbal abuse are not real fans, it is the very people who challenge these practices that are the most authentic fans. However, the stories of the respondents who fall under this strategy showcase the many obstacles they face in challenging such behavior, especially when it is either passively accepted or encouraged by the majority of the crowd.

The second strategy delineated by Jones (2008) is used among women who downplay sexist and homophobic abuse in the stands. In their interviews, these women negotiated with and would try to reason with the abusive behavior by other fans. In reference to the remarks that the players are “playing like girls,” this group downplayed the comment as sexist because it was directed toward men (p. 521). Women employing this strategy attributed abuse to characteristics that were out of the norm. People who exhibited these characteristics were the ones who such comments would be directed at. These women expressed more concern over racist comments but believed that sexist comments were made in good fun. Overall, the sexist comments were downplayed, as they were seen as occurring on an individual level rather than as an indication of larger structural oppression. This group rejected attempts to prohibit abuse which then allows hegemonic masculinity to continue. However, this rejection is not without inner conflict. These women felt uncomfortable by displays of obnoxious hegemonic masculinity, but they struggled with their belief that it is a central aspect of fandom. Similarly, in a later study by Esmonde et al. (2015), several female fans stated that they had not experienced gender-based discrimination but later described an incident where they were marginalized due to their gender. One of the participants maintained that sports “bring people together,” but just moments before, she shared

an experience where gender slurs were used against her at a sporting event (p. 39). As in Jones's study (2008), these women saw sexism as a product of individuals where the impact was decided by the victim.

The third group of women embraced gender stereotypes as part of the game. In this strategy, women placed their femininity at odds with sport. They would downplay feminine qualities and accept stereotypical definitions of femininity to become "one of the lads" (Jones, 2008, p. 519) These women support traditional views of gender within sport and viewed abuse as an integral aspect of the experience. This strategy is based upon a belief that sexism and other abuse are a core aspect of the game, as well as the idea that the hegemonic masculine ideal of a proper fan is valid. Overt displays of femininity were viewed as illegitimate fandom. Women in this group distanced themselves from women who did not fit the masculine ideal of a fan. Respondents complained about women who wore high heels or makeup to the game or were perceived as going only to accompany their male significant other. Some of these respondents expressed disdain toward these women, calling them "silly little girls" and "bimbos" (p. 528). Several respondents felt that women who emphasized their femininity gave "real fans" a bad name and let all women down (p. 528). However, when questioned about their own expressions of femininity, women in this group implied that they do femininity but in ways that align with sport. In the stands, these women desire to be seen not as women, but as gender-neutral. While women who fall within this group allow hegemonic masculinity to persist, many respondents did recognize that abuse in the context of football appeared sexist or offensive when removed from that context. Sports venues are treated as if exempt from antisexist, antiracist, anti-homophobic movements that occur in the rest of society (Cleland et al., 2020).

From Jones's (2008) observation of three strategies women use to navigate gender identities and fan identities, gender appears to be tied with authentic fandom. Based on the findings of this study and others, there is no widespread solidarity among female sports fans (Dixon, 2014; Esmonde et al., 2015; Jones, 2008). Many female fans seek cultural capital just as their male counterparts do (Dixon, 2014). Certain women will align themselves more closely with male fans while simultaneously opposing their female peers in an effort to join the in-group. Most of the women in Jones's study, except for a subgroup utilizing the first strategy, are complicit with sexism and discrimination. As such, hegemonic masculinity can maintain its hold in the sports community. Female fans who wish to be viewed as gender-neutral or as honorary males passively (or in some cases, actively) uphold the belief that femininity has no place in male sport (Borer, 2009; Jones, 2008). Women may alter their performance of their gender in order to be received as authentic fans by their male counterparts.

### **Notions of Inauthenticity**

Notions of inauthenticity surround the discussion of female fans and ideal fan behavior. Women have been accused of only being interested in the attractiveness of the players (Crawford & Gosling, 2004). The skepticism of the motives of women as spectators of male sports is maintained by both men and women. As previously discussed, some female fans appear to differentiate themselves from the group of female fans perceived to be inauthentic. The idea of authenticity of sports fandom implies the presence of gatekeeping among the in-group of sports fans. Certain behaviors, especially those that align with hegemonic masculinity, are favored. In general, men have been more heavily associated with sports fandom. As a result, women have fallen outside of the historical in-group. Female fans (and other fans who fall outside of the in-group) find themselves needing to justify themselves as legitimate fans. As previously discussed,

a subsection of high-involvement female fans will attempt to distance themselves from those who practice emphasized femininity and do not fit in with the in-group.

The policing and gatekeeping of what is considered true fandom are enforced by both men and women (Toffoletti, 2017). Those who do not fit in will be shamed and left out. Stereotypical aspects of femininity are shunned from sports fandom in favor of ideals that support heteronormative masculinity. Those women who get dolled up for the game are assumed to be disinterested in the game until she has proven that she is passionate and knowledgeable about the sport. There seems to be an inherent belief that emphasized femininity will detract from appearing as an authentic fan. As a result, certain women condemned those who practiced emphasized femininity as highlighting the differences between men and women (Toffoletti, 2017). Appearing and behaving in stereotypically feminine ways were viewed as damaging the legitimacy and perceived authenticity of female fans as a whole.

### **Sexuality**

Heterosexuality and sexuality, in general, are some of the most frequent concerns surrounding the authenticity of female fans. Research has demonstrated the pervasive sexualization of female athletes and reporters by the media (Bruce, 2013; Bruce, 2015; Wensing & Bruce, 2003). Such sexualization posits conflict over whether this is a reflection of hegemonic masculine narratives of women as exploits or if this is a reflection of sexual liberation in which women can freely embrace themselves as sexual beings (Bruce, 2013). With this debate among the sexualization of sportswomen, very little attention has been given to the relationship between female fans and sexuality. An increasing number of studies have begun to assess female fans as both sexual beings with the ability to be sexually attracted to the athletes while maintaining their legitimacy as fans. The concerns of female sexuality are primarily an issue in sport. In



entertainment culture (i.e., music, movies, television shows), a woman's sexual attraction is considered more acceptable and isn't as readily weaponized to critique her interest in such media (Ehrenreich, Hess, & Jacobs, 1992).

With the increasing female fan base in most sports and the increase in attendance of in-person sports by women, these fans have sometimes been labeled as groupies. Specifically, with ice hockey, female fans are sometimes referenced to as "puck bunnies," a derogatory term implying that female fans attend games just to lust after the players on the ice (Crawford & Gosling, 2004, p. 486). Crawford and Gosling's research (2004) investigating the rise in female ice-hockey fans in the U.K. has indicated that even within sports where women are rising as viewers, they are still marginalized within the fan community. Their study consisted of interviews with 37 supporters (male and female) of a Manchester-based ice-hockey team inquiring about their passion for the sport and their opinions about the gender dynamics within the team's supporters. Overall, between female fans and male fans, there were no large differences in their knowledge of the game and their commitment to the team. The attractiveness of the players showed no impact in attracting the new female fans to the sport. Some of the female respondents even expressed greater levels of passion and knowledge about the sport than their male counterparts. Despite this, several male respondents considered female fans uncommitted.

Complaints about uncommitted fans present two significant issues. The first being the existence of strict criteria for being a real fan. Dismissing supporters with less knowledge or commitment implies that the valid fans are high-involvement die-hard fans. This completely disregards the majority of people with an interest in sport who fall somewhere in between nonfans and die-hard fans. The second issue is that even though many female sports fans

demonstrate equal or greater commitment to ice hockey than men, they are still excluded from the in-group of sports fans. This occurs even though Crawford and Gosling's (2004) female interviewees were passionately dedicated to supporting their team while being knowledgeable about ice hockey in general. Crawford and Gosling (2004) concluded that the term, "puck bunny" is largely a myth that emerged as a reaction to more females entering ice hockey fandom. There is no detectable subsection of female fans who are motivated by sexual attraction to the players.

More recent research indicates that female fans may experience more sexual attraction to male athletes than Crawford and Gosling (2004) had thought. Esmonde et al. (2015) conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 female sports fans who were patrons of a small Midwestern sports bar. The bar itself attracted an overwhelmingly male crowd and had a hypermasculine attitude with their menu making references to how "grown men" eat (p. 30). These participants were questioned about how being a woman impacted their experience as a fan as well as detailed questions about the stereotype of female fans being sexually attracted to male athletes. Overall, sexuality was not an important aspect of fandom to the participants. It did not impact their introduction to sport or change how they viewed sports. However, when further asked about the sexualization of athletes, the participants reacted in four different ways.

The first was to claim that attraction has no place in fandom, a reaction similar to Pope's (2013) third strategy in which emphasized femininity was associated with not being a real fan. The second reaction was frustration that sexual attraction is perceived to delegitimize fandom. The third reaction involved downplaying the extent that they experienced sexual attraction to male athletes. These participants would admit sexual attraction but claim that it was simply "an added bonus" (Esmonde et al., 2015, p. 509). The final reaction was guilt or ambivalence relating

to their sexual attraction to male athletes. Participants in this final group acknowledged an attraction to male athletes. Some felt ambivalence toward their feelings and expressed no attempts to embrace nor hide their feelings. Others felt guilty about their sexual attraction. One participant felt as though she was contributing to giving female fans a bad reputation. Another participant felt guilty and called her feelings sexist, as it would be considered unacceptable if a male sexualized a female athlete.

The responses of these participants provide a unique insight into the struggles that women face regarding their sexual identity and their fan identity. The insults “groupie” and “puck bunny” have been weaponized against women perceived to be nonfans. This study focused on female fans with a deep investment in sport. These participants were primarily regulars at a hypermasculine bar, not low-involvement fans or fans simply through association with a male high-involvement fan. While sexual attraction was not a significant motivator for their fandom, most of the women did express some level of attraction to specific male athletes. Females are capable of loving both “the game *and* Aaron Rodgers’ eyes” (emphasis added); acknowledging sexual attraction did not detract from their knowledge and dedication to the game (Esmonde et al., 2015, p. 43). Even though three of the four reactions acknowledged the presence of sexual attraction among female fans, most of the participants still upheld and accommodated sexism in their fan community. In each reaction, there was a theme of needing to prove legitimacy as a fan when sexual attraction is involved. Sexual attraction is therefore used to exclude and oppress women as sports fans.

Sexualization has been used to oppress women in sport and delegitimize their belonging in the sports community (Cooky et al., 2015). The sexualization of men and the sexualization of women in sport are not equal experiences. When male athletes are sexualized, their athleticism is

emphasized, furthering their role as ideal masculine athletes. Female athletes are not sexualized in the same way; their muscles and athleticism may be criticized, and they are presented as less agentic (Toffoletti & Mewett, 2012; Wedgwood, 2008). In this sense, the male gaze is not reversed when male athletes are sexualized. Female fans do not objectify male athletes and dominance is never reversed. When women perceive that their sexual attraction to athletes perpetuates their marginalization, this disregards who is truly responsible for placing women as the other within sport (Esmonde et al., 2018). Such thinking places the responsibility on the woman to correct for her exclusion from the in-group. Acceptance of the perceived incongruence of female attraction and sport further upholds hegemonic masculinity and male control over female sexuality.

The perception of female sports fans by the general population is often in opposition with what empirical research has discovered. Female fans and male fans are far more similar than is commonly thought. Perceptions that women are not as knowledgeable about sports persists despite evidence indicating that knowledge among high-involvement fans does not vary across gender (Farrell et al., 2011). Female fans, even in research, often have their interest pigeon-holed due to the influence of a male significant other. Women are also frequently accused of using sports fandom to find a male significant other (Esmonde et al., 2015; Jones, 2008). Heterosexual expectations in male sport also lead women to be accused of only viewing male sport out of lust (Gosling, 2007; Toffoletti & Mewett, 2012). Such stereotypes are incredibly harmful to improving the legitimacy and acceptance of female fans. These persist despite proof discrediting these stereotypes. A hierarchy exists within the sports fandom with certain behaviors and traits being considered the most desirable. This hierarchy is so heavily ingrained, that even self-

proclaimed female die-hard sports fans will describe the ideal sports fan in a way where they would be excluded from that definition (Esmonde et al., 2015).

Stereotypes of female sports fans often further exclude women from being accepted into the in-group of sports fans. The ideal fan is considered knowledgeable of sport in general, those with more knowledge possess more social capital as fans (Esmonde et al., 2015). Promoting the belief that women are not knowledgeable about sport puts the onus on the woman to prove that she defies the stereotype and is worthy of respect. Men do not experience this same pressure to prove their knowledge (Crawford & Gosling, 2004). Furthermore, women are accused of being introduced to sport through male figures. This notion is used against women to focus their role in sport through the intermediary of a man (Esmonde et al. 2015). Men enjoy sport and share this with women. Women do not enjoy sport in their own right, and they certainly do not share their fandom with men. This is simply an inaccurate view. Both men and women undergo similar processes of becoming a fan where a typically male relative introduces them. For men, this is considered a legitimate process, but for women, this is weaponized to remove their credentials as a fan.

When young girls are introduced to sport through others (typically males), it is seen as “cute” and is encouraged (Dixon, 2014, p. 643). A girl viewing sports with her father is seen as a healthy relationship and viewed positively. At this young age, girls do not experience as much sex-based discrimination as when they become older. One study interviewed 35 female English football fans (Dixon, 2014). The women in this interview viewed their childhood introduction to sports fandom fondly. They felt a sense of gratitude toward the men who allowed them into the world of sport. However, once these women reached their teenage years, their experience began to change. At this point, gender norms become more important to fit in with peers. Teenage girls

were expected to participate in feminine culture and would suffer difficulties in their social life if they did not. One of the participants described feeling like an outcast with her female peers due to her interest in football. Older female relatives would also attempt to persuade the teenage girls to “be normal” and give up on sport (p. 643). In childhood, female fans are not subjected to the same questioning and ostracism that they are in adolescence and adulthood. In these later stages of life, the ability to talk about sport is discouraged by female peers and is met with skepticism by men. Female sports fans find themselves somewhere in between feminine culture and masculine culture, unable to fit into either. This exclusion is perpetrated by men and women who seek to preserve the existing conceptions of gender normative behavior.

Crawford and Gosling (2004) proposed that the reluctance of male fans to accept female fans as legitimate stems from a fear of losing the male-dominated space of sport. A recent study also analyzed male opinions about the influx of female fans in the U.K. (Cleland et al., 2020). Several of the men interviewed in this study confirmed that they felt threatened by the feminization of sport. Such responses give further evidence to the presence of gatekeeping among sports fans as well as the presence of protest masculinity. Across several research studies, groups of male fans feel that an increased presence of female fans trespasses upon their community (Crawford & Gosling, 2004). Labeling these new fans as “groupies” or “puck bunnies” acts as a defense mechanism used to preserve the sports community as a male space. Such terms also indicate the concern that female fans may be sexually attracted to male athletes. This suggests that women as fans threaten the acceptance of the male gaze by switching from the gazer from the man to the woman and the object from the woman to the man (Coddington, 1997). It is the very concept of preserving the male gaze that underlies the myth of the puck bunny (Crawford & Gosling, 2004). Traditional patriarchal standards dictate that the male body

should not be viewed with lust (Van Zoonen, 1994). With this mindset ingrained in social gender norms, some men fear that women as fans may introduce sexual desire into male sports (Coddington, 1997). The male gaze determines how women experience sport.

Balancing gender performance with fan identity proves challenging for female fans. With both men and other women actively policing what is and is not acceptable fan behavior, many women struggle with their presentation of their identity as a fan. Women experience insecurity about the authenticity of their fandom and feel the need to prepare to prove their credentials to be taken seriously. This same insecurity about being seen as a legitimate fan is not experienced by men (Crawford & Gosling, 2004). Some women will downplay their interest in a sport to avoid questioning and tests of whether they are a “real fan.” Female fans take their fandom extremely seriously in case they need to prove to others or just to themselves that they are a “real” fan (Coddington, 1997). Female fans often feel as though they are on trial to prove their authenticity to other die-hard fans and need to make an extra effort to fit with the in-group to be taken seriously (Crawford & Gosling, 2004; Jones, 2008; Toffoletti, 2017). If they emphasize their femininity too much, then they will stand out and be looked down upon by other fans. Women generally feel as though deemphasizing feminine attributes was the best strategy to avoid judgment (Toffoletti, 2017).

There is an increasing push for sexual liberation among women as a whole but also female fans of male sport. Toffoletti (2017) assessed the emergence of “sexy women sports fans” in FIFA World Cup 2014 media content (p. 457). She specifically focused on media that explicitly referenced the appearance of female fans. She observed an abundance of mainstream news content published by The New York Daily News, the British Daily Mail, and the Mirror which focused on the appearances of “sexy” female fans. Much of the content commented on the

revealing outfits certain country's fans wore or which country had the "hottest" fans. These images contrast the old stereotype of the football widow, placing women outside of the traditional narratives of marriage, motherhood, or in some other relationship with a man (Gantz & Wenner, 1995; Toffoletti, 2017). The soccer fans' femininity was emphasized through a traditional desirable feminine body rather than through presentations of passivity and caretaking. In some ways, this marks a shift toward the sexual liberation of female fans and taking women more seriously as sports fans (Wenner, 2012). However, these women are still portrayed in a stereotypical light and objectified through a male gaze by their inclusion in articles that focus on their sexual desirability. While the portrayal has shifted, hegemonic masculinity is still preserved in sport by the objectification of "sexy" female fans.

The concept of sexuality among women exists along a fine line between objectification in the male gaze and female sexual liberation. Women have the agency to embrace their sexuality. Women are capable of choosing how to perform femininities and how to express their gender identity. All women, those who emphasize their femininity and those who attempt to appear as gender-neutral fans, must be embraced within sport in order to reach equality. It is also important to note that displaying women as self-aware of their sexuality modifies the presentation of their sexuality. They become less of an object for the male gaze and are legitimized when depicted cheering for their team or wearing their team's colors (Toffoletti, 2017). Such images represent a new take on the sexualized female fan. Not all female fans who embrace their sexuality can be called a groupie, who have a limited interest in the sport itself. These women are passionate fans who also embrace their sexuality thus demonstrating that femininity and sport do not represent opposites. A feminine woman can also authentically enjoy male sports. However, the fine line between objectification and sexual liberation masks the progress toward gender equality in sport.



Toffoletti (2017) asserts that depictions of “sexy” fans by sports media simply represent a new form of sexism that promotes hegemonic masculinity and traditional gender hierarchies. Framing such women as sexually liberated does not diminish the impact of the male gaze by sports media and other fans.

The notion of sexual liberation and empowerment among female fans does not apply to all female fans. It is important to remember that gender is separate from biological sex, not all female fans identify as women. However, in much of the existing research, participants are either not asked or not given the opportunity to express their gender identity. Additionally, sport exists in an overwhelmingly masculine environment but also a heterosexual environment. The sexual empowerment of female fans presents an issue to certain male and female fans because there has always been an assumption of heterosexuality among athletes and fans (Hoerber & Kerwin, 2013; Messner, 2002). The male gaze upon male athletes is not seen as threatening because it is justified through overt overcompensations of heterosexuality. However, when women gaze upon male athletes this is accused of bringing sex into the sport because of presumed heterosexuality. Such notions completely exclude the spectrum of sexual preferences outside of heterosexuality. Those who are not heterosexual are completely marginalized. The “sexually empowered female fan” only applies to young, White, heterosexual, and cisgender women (Toffoletti, 2017, p. 457). Those who do not fall within this description have experienced even more significant exclusion from the in-group and have further been almost completely excluded from sports research on fandom (Esmonde et al., 2018). Future research must investigate how the intersectionality of race, gender identity, and sexual preference further hinders progress toward equality. The sexually empowered woman is already at odds with hegemonic masculinities, but those who fall

outside of the heteronormative female are considered an even greater threat (Esmonde et al., 2018).

It is clear that perceptions of gender within the sports community are changing, but even in 2020, a subsection of male fans fully believe that “women have no place in football” (Cleland et al., 2020, p. 370). However, such harsh opinions appear to be focused within those sports that are deeply ingrained in a particular culture. Football (soccer) has a long-established masculine tradition in the U.K., while ice hockey is considered an imported sport from North America. Many of the women in the U.K. who have begun attending men’s ice-hockey games find the venues to be a more welcoming environment for women (Crawford & Gosling, 2004). They feel less hostility and experience less abuse than when they attend a soccer match. While there is still hostility toward female hockey fans, it is less pervasive than the sexism present in English football. In the U.S., more women play soccer than men, and soccer is less steeped in American history (Cleland et al., 2020). With this in mind, future research may provide useful insights on the effect of sport’s cultural history on gender parity among fans.

### **Live Sporting Events**

The culture is shifting, but hegemonic masculinity remains a significant aspect of sports culture. Most of the oppressive forms of discrimination against female fans come from experiences at sports venues (Cleland et al., 2020; Jones, 2008). Explicit discrimination against women in sport has been seen in numerous countries from Denmark to Zimbabwe to Turkey (Chiweshe, 2014; Erhart, 2011; Pfister et al., 2013). Some of the most documented instances of sexism at live sports occur during football (soccer) matches in the U.K. (Jones, 2008). At these games, sexism primarily takes place in the form of verbal abuse. That verbal abuse is directed toward several different groups. Oftentimes, sexist remarks are hurled at the male athletes. They

are harassed for looking like girls or being “tarts” (p. 521). Such insults equate womanhood to poor play, that a woman playing football would lack skill and strength. Some male fans also hurled abuse at certain players that involved their female relatives or female significant other. These remarks occurred more frequently when the player’s wife is famous or if there was public drama in the relationship. Most notably, David Beckham was harassed with offensive chants asking, “does she take it up the arse?” referring to his wife, Victoria Beckham. While these types of abusive comments are not directed explicitly at a woman, they foster an environment of hostility toward women in the venue. Stereotypically female qualities and relationships with females are insulted and used as a point of weakness. Such abuse perpetuates the notion that certain sports venues are a space reserved for men.

At English Premier League games, sexist abuse is often directed toward several types of women who are connected with the game. These can include assistant referees, footballers, half-time performers, police officers, ball girls, and stewards (Jones, 2008). Groups of male fans direct chants including, “get your tits out for the lads” and “get your kit (clothes) off” toward these women (p. 521). Such chants are not only offensive and crude, but they are hostile and indicative of the pervasive male gaze. These groups of male fans feel a sense of invincibility and entitlement to sexually harass and objectify women connected to the game. Fans of Aston Villa have been known to sing a sexually explicit song directed at a female Managing Director of a rival team (p. 527). These kinds of verbal abuse are not only directed at those women directly involved with the game or those women in relationships with male athletes but also at female fans.

Some of the female fans in Jones’s study (2008) stated that they had been told to “stop commenting on the game” by other male fans, indicating the certain male fans don’t respect a

woman's opinion (p. 521). Other female fans had been told that their ticket was "wasted" because it was not being used by a man (p. 521). One woman recounted a time where she became passionate and yelled at a game; this resulted in her receiving dirty looks from the people around her (Dixon, 2014). She believes that she was given these looks because of her gender; she observed that men who did the same thing did not receive the same treatment. In other cases, women were generally verbally or even physically harassed at the game (Jones, 2008). These venues are purposely made unwelcoming and uncomfortable to women by groups of vocal and aggressive male fans. Such men strive for hegemony, and anyone who is not biologically male, White, and heterosexual, threatens their dominance. With the majority of other fans complicit in such abuse, many female fans feel completely outnumbered.

One of the central concerns of increasing female fans is that women will bring sex into the game (Cleland et al., 2020). Women who get dressed up, wear heels, and put on makeup for a sports game are seen as inappropriately displaying their sexuality (Jones, 2008, p. 528). Female fans have faced ridicule and accusations that their interest in sport is simply out of lust (Crawford & Gosling, 2004). By dressing femininely or feeling sexual attraction to a male athlete, some men worry that this sexualizes the game. However, such opinions ignore that sexuality has always been present in sport cultural practice. Only heterosexual male desires are permitted, anything that deviates is considered unacceptable. Some researchers theorize that the recognition of female sexuality among sports fans will force male fans to confront the presence of the male gaze and homoeroticism in sports (Crawford & Gosling, 2004; Gosling, 2007). Heterosexual male fans often admire and talk about the physical features and abilities of male athletes. When a female fan does this, it is attributed to lust. Male fans emphasize that sport is nonsexual while simultaneously benefiting from the promotion of male heterosexual desires at sporting events.

Sporting events have long embraced heterosexual male desires (Esmonde et al., 2015). When attending a sporting event, it does not take much time to see the rampant sexual objectification of women. Many sports have cheerleaders, dancers, or women who shovel snow from the ice in hockey. These women are almost exclusively scantily clad. Of course, these women take great pride in their role and likely view themselves as sexually liberated rather than objectified. However, professional cheerleading was created to use a woman's visual sex appeal to attract men (Hanson, 1995). Cheerleaders and other related roles serve to enhance the dichotomy between men as dominant and women as sexual objects. Besides sexualized female performers, the cameras, whose images are displayed on screens throughout the stadium, often focus on young or "sexy" women (Toffoletti, 2017). Young women are frequently spotlighted for "honey shots" (Crawford & Gosling, 2004, p. 488). Sexuality is present in sporting events, but only male heterosexuality is permitted. Even then, it remains largely invisible to those very men who claim that sport is a de-sexualized space (Esmonde et al., 2015). Fundamentally, the issue is that the male gaze is normalized within sport-related spaces. Allowing men to sexualize women but prohibiting the reverse perpetuates hegemony and a hierarchy of power in which men hold the most social capital in sport-related spaces.

### **Marketing to Female Fans**

Central to the evaluation of the present state of the female sports fan experience is understanding how women are included and marketed to by sports franchises and related businesses. Women do not just represent a marginalized but growing fan group, but women are an incredibly valuable target market for professional sports leagues. Besides the ethical obligation of sports franchises and leagues to welcome a diverse fanbase, it is in their best financial interest to capitalize on the growing number of female sports fans. Consumerism has

been on the rise in sport; teams are selling a wide variety of branded merchandise from jerseys to dog toys and even calculators. In 2018, North American sports merchandise sales brought in 14.57 billion U.S. dollars in revenue (Gough, 2019). That number is expected to grow by nearly a billion by the year 2023. In general, women control 60% of the money spent on men's clothing as well as 80% of the money spent on all sports apparel (Holland, 2013). A separate study found that women are responsible for 70% of the purchases of licensed goods (Brennan, 2012).

Consumption plays a significant role in the behavior indicative of team identification. Team identification is used to describe how fans feel "psychologically connected to a team" (Wann et al., 2001, p. 3). Those fans with high identification will make more of an effort to attend their team's games and events as well as purchase team merchandise (Ahn et al., 2013). Therefore, highly identified fans will spend more money on their team. Considering the capitalist implications of tapping into growing female fandom, it is difficult to imagine that sports leagues will reject gender parity. The NFL's former chief marketing officer Mark Waller believed that women are the ones who make the decisions for the household (Kitroeff, 2013). He understood that women make the purchasing decisions, and he even maintained that it is women who help ritualized Sunday football within the family. It is becoming increasingly recognized that women represent a very important target market to grow individual sports and professional leagues.

### **Promotional Events**

Sports fans with high team identification are inclined to attend games and events related to their favorite team more frequently (Ahn et al., 2013). In the past few decades, there has been a push to increase engagement and identification of female fans and nonfans with sports teams. One of the first prominent efforts to attract a female audience to the NFL was in the creation of Football 101 courses. Other sports have also created introductory 101-types courses for new

fans; however, the NFL's clinics have seen the most widespread success (Clark et al., 2009). These courses are not exclusively limited to women, but they were designed specifically to tap into the female market. Some research has indicated that knowledge about a sport is correlated with strong team identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1995). 101 courses are designed to attract new fans through education. Through their increased understanding of the game, these new fans will become more committed fans. The clinics focus on basic rules and strategies in the sport. Anyone who wishes to partake in the event must first pay a fee. Then they will receive access to instruction about the game. Various members of the team's personnel, ranging from players to management to broadcasters, may attend and even be available for question-and-answer sessions. The event also involves giveaways, stadium tours, and opportunities for photos and autographs.

In 2008, half of the teams in the NFL offered a 101 clinic, and over 10,000 women attended Football 101 clinics annually (Clark et al., 2009). The popularity of these programs has significantly decreased in recent years; however, the Carolina Panthers hosted a clinic in 2019. In the MLB, the Atlanta Braves and the Philadelphia Phillies each organized Baseball 101 clinics for women in 2019 and 2020 respectively. 101-style courses can offer a unique way of learning the basics of a sport, but the scope of the events is limited. Only a handful of cities across the country host these types of events, meaning access is very limited. Additionally, these events are specifically targeted at women who are not already fans of male professional sports. The near 50 percent of MLB and NFL fans who are women likely don't need an introductory lesson about the rules and strategy of the game.

In 2014, the MLB launched a series of events designed with female fans in mind called Fields of Fashion. According to a press release from the league, there would be twelve events in ten different locations, mostly ballparks on game day, across the country. One of the events was

scheduled during All-Star Week and another was held at the MLB Fan Cave located in New York City. While the events were centered around stereotypical female interests of beauty and fashion, each event was advertised as unique to the location and hosting team. The Fields of Fashion events featured fashion shows, manicures, and fashion gift bags. There would be live music and the opportunity to meet players. Numerous brands that produced licensed products for the MLB would be featured. Some of the brands advertised include Hello Kitty, Alex and Ani, Victoria's Secret PINK, and OPI Nail Polish. The event is heavily centered around stereotypical aspects of femininity.

As Angi with SBNation puts it, the event is just "too on-the-nose" (2014, n.p.). The promotion of events with such over-the-top feminine qualities further supports the belief that femininity does not fit within sport. However, with such a large number of baseball fans being female, this belief isn't true. Besides painting women as caricatures of pink and glitter, the Field of Fashion event comes across as one big advertisement of MLB licensed products. There seems to be an underlying motive to get women to spend more money on MLB products that isn't very well hidden. The entire event is just a showcase of things for women to buy. The event isn't truly centered around an interest in baseball, it is centered around a presumed interest in shopping. Fields of Fashion seem to have largely disappeared in favor of other events catered toward female interests.

One of the most prominent ways professional sports teams have tried to engage their female audience is through some variation of a Ladies Night. Events encouraging women to attend sporting events have a long history. Ladies Nights have been primarily associated with professional baseball teams. This is not surprising as Ladies Days have existed in baseball since before 1883 (Getzenberg, 2017). One of the first teams to initiate a day specifically for women to



attend was the St. Louis Browns (present-day Cardinals). On Ladies Days, women were encouraged to attend the game for free but with a male escort. As teams began to believe that they'd sufficiently built a female fanbase, Ladies Days were phased out. However, a female Cardinals owner reinstituted Ladies Days but removed the requirement to attend with a man. Other teams followed this example. By the 1960s, Ladies Days had transitioned into baseball clinics for women to learn how to play. Such events saw enough success that Ladies Days still exist in some form to this day.

In 2013, the Houston Astros baseball team hosted a notable Ladies Night event. The event was promised as a place for women to learn about baseball, listen to music, and mingle with other female fans. Advertisements for the event on Twitter received a barrage of opinionated comments. Many women felt as though the event insinuated that female fans are not already knowledgeable about baseball. Several women accused the Astros of being condescending and misogynistic. However, the execution of the event resulted in even more backlash. In an article with SBNation, one woman described her experience as the event (Berry, 2013). She expected a day focused on baseball, but it was not what she was met with. When she first arrived at the event at Minute Maid Park, she was given a light pink Astros nylon drawstring bag. Inside was some information about the day ahead and a pink Astros makeup bag. Berry already felt stereotyped by the amount of pink that she was immediately experiencing. She also didn't understand the connection between baseball and makeup. When she entered the room of the event, she noticed a massage chair and a complete hair salon set up. Once again, Berry was confused by the connection to baseball.

Berry (2013) observed that most of the women in attendance were season ticket holders. Although, she also labeled some women as "cleat chasers," who were there because of the

promise to meet a player (n.p.). One of the main events of the day was a panel with two of the Astros radio announcers and two people from the Astros front office, one of whom is a woman. Excited to learn about inside opinions and what it is like being a woman in the front office, Berry was disappointed when the panel ended up being one large advertisement for State Farm. During the Q-and-A portion, only five questions were answered. The only thing Berry learned was which player on the team wears the tightest pants.

Later in the event was the “Diamond, Bling, and Glittery Things” happy hour. This is where the attendees would have the opportunity to meet a player. However, meeting the players entailed taking pictures with them in a photo booth, rather than talking to them. This portion of the evening featured a DJ and the opportunity to dance with the mascot. Berry left the event disappointed that she didn’t learn anything about baseball and was stereotyped throughout the entire event. She felt as though it was simply for season ticket holders rather than the average female fan. The event also was designed for new fans wishing to learn about the game. The Astros stated their goal was to draw in people who don’t normally attend games and give women a safe place to learn about the game. This event didn’t seem to do either of those things. One of the radio announcers said that the event “will be a chance... to try and create interest... There are a lot of passionate female fans... but there aren’t as many female fans as male fans” (n.p.). While it is true that men outnumber women as baseball fans, women still make up 46 percent of fans (Berry, 2013). This already is not an insignificant minority. Overall, the event seemed out of touch and designed without the interests of the average female fan in mind. The event played on the stereotypes that women like pink, makeup, and lusting after players.

Other MLB teams have organized similar events as well. The Atlanta Braves hosted a “Girls Night Out at Turner Field” in 2015 (Berr, 2015). This event included a pre-game party,

and the attendees were given feather boas and a silver Alex and Ani Braves logo bracelet. In 2014, the Chicago White Sox hosted their version of Ladies Night which featured makeup, manicure, massages, and even a ZUMBA class (Angi, 2014). These iterations of a Ladies Night seem as though they were designed by taking stereotypically female interests and placing them against the backdrop of baseball. It reinforces the idea that women cannot simply like sports in a traditional manner, they must like sport through a feminine filter. These events further place women as the other, implying a need to cater baseball to feminine interests rather than embracing a female appreciation of baseball.

More recently, teams have seemed to move away from stereotyping female fans as “girly” with their women-focused events. In 2017, the Seattle Mariners hosted a “Women in Baseball” panel (Anderson, 2017). The event offered the opportunity for fans to learn from women who work in the industry. The panel was specifically designed to feature diverse perspectives. Additionally, the event sought to celebrate the contributions women have *already* made to baseball and the commitments female fans have *already* made. This event stands in stark contrast with other event targets toward women that emphasize their physical appearance over their knowledge and interest in the game. A Ladies Night in a more traditional format can still be successful among women without being patronized.

The Pittsburgh Steelers have hosted several successful events catered toward their female fans (McCarthy, 2019). One of the events was called a traditional Ladies Night; however, this event was vastly different from the aforementioned MLB Ladies Nights. During the event, women had the opportunity to meet current and former players. They were able to get autographs and ask questions. The main features of the night were the opportunity for attendees to run mock drills on Heinz Field and the ability to tour the locker rooms and player facilities. In another

event hosted by Steelers, women also got to run drills but were also able to experience the process of analyzing game film with the coaches. These types of events provide an experience that most fans (and especially women) never get the chance to have. Women can learn more about football at the event by actively participating. These events can please both new fans and longtime fans. Teams like the Steelers and the Mariners are moving past “pink it and shrink it” strategies by instead focusing on women in active roles within sport. This approach has a greater opportunity of being inclusive to a variety of female fans while avoiding condescension. These events have the ability to reach a previously marginalized subsection of fans without viewing them solely through that marginalized identification.

### **Merchandise for Women**

Purchasing and wearing team merchandise is a practice correlated with team identification (Ahn et al., 2013). Wearing the apparel of a favorite sports team is a public representation of a fan’s identification with that particular team. Women’s sports apparel often plays into traditional notions of femininity. Much of the apparel available to women has been pink, covered in glitter and sequins, and in a cut meant to flatter the female body. A common sentiment in marketing toward women has been “pink it and shrink it,” implying that shrinking a product and producing it in pink will appeal to women. The New York Times article “The Problem with Pink Sports Jerseys” (2017), addresses the issues surrounding the phenomenon of highly gendered sports apparel. In the article, Mallory Edens recounts her experience as a child visiting the Yankees’ team store. The girls section was entirely pink. She had hoped to get a Derek Jeter jersey but remarked that “Derek Jeter wears blue when he plays,” not pink (n.p.). Edens later went on to intern with the Milwaukee Bucks and sat in on a meeting with merchandising representatives. She recalled that their idea for merchandise for girls was all pink.

She questioned “why pink?” but she was the only woman in the room, so her concern fell on deaf ears (n.p.). Edens was told that pink was what the demographic (women) wanted; however, at the height of the “pink it and shrink it” era, pink was all that was available. The emphasis on pink plays on the rudimentary stereotype of pink being feminine. The selection of pink apparel differentiates female fans from male fans. The pink almost serves to differentiate women from the “real” fans. Pink merchandise seeks to further place women as the other.

In recent years, the “pink it and shrink it” approach has become less prevalent in marketing toward female sports fans. Most, if not all, major sports teams and leagues offer female jersey options in the team’s colors. However, the merchandise selection available for women is still in other ways infantilized, hyperfeminized, and hypersexualized (Esmonde et al., 2015). In an effort to reach the increasing female audience, the NFL and the MLB partnered with Victoria’s Secret PINK to create a new line of apparel options for young female fans. Many of the designs feature rhinestones, glitter, and metallic accents. One particularly controversial item sold by PINK contained licensing of the New York Mets; the item was a pair of lace-lined underwear with the phrase “TAKE ME HOME.” This item exemplifies the hypersexualization that permeates women’s apparel. The double-entendre also highlights the presence of the male gaze in sport. It is designed for a man to view sexually as opposed to a representation of the woman’s fandom.

The Dallas Cowboys even opened a PINK store in their stadium in 2012. The Cowboys’ owner, Jerry Jones claimed that the store was “cute as a bug and very in place” (McMahon, 2012, n.p.). The team’s executive vice president echoed this opinion stating that: “We clearly get that our female fans are our consumers. They’re the ones that really make our business tick” (Angi, 2014, n.p.). This notion that women are the consumers implies that the Cowboys are

trying to reach women through their dollars instead of through the game experience.

Additionally, Pope (2013) found that women do not fit neatly into the consumer category as the lines between traditional fans and consumers are blurred regardless of gender. Outside of partnerships with PINK, other women's apparel items are hypersexualized and hyperfeminized. Nearly every NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL, and MLS team sells a licensed thong for women. Besides numerous underwear options available for female fans, most women's t-shirts are tight-fitting V-necks often with more basic and more limited designs compared to those available for men. Other women's items often include descriptors such as shine, bling, glitz, diva, and lovely. Such descriptions highlight the hyperfeminization of women's apparel (Clark et al., 2009).

Sports apparel designed for women has increasingly begun to acknowledge that female fans are not homogenous. Limited options that are diminutive of the male version appear to be slowly phasing out. Infantilized, hypersexualized, and hyperfeminized apparel options are losing their appeal. Such options are a reflection of hegemonic masculinity in sport culture. Women as fans had not been prioritized and were viewed as a collective mass of who enjoyed pink and glitter. The new attention given to female fans is largely driven by capitalist desires to gain sales from relatively untapped markets. Though the motivations may be primarily profit-driven, progress must still be recognized. Women now have increasing amounts of designs and styles available to them. More women's clothing brands have partnered with professional sports leagues to design unique options. Female fans are no longer relegated to pink versions of the authentic designs. The shift in approach to merchandising no longer positions women as the other among sports fans; they can now express style and individuality while also wearing their team's logo and colors. Sports fans with a high identification with their team tend to engage in consumption behaviors more frequently (Ahn et al., 2013). These consumption behaviors most

often involve purchasing merchandise from their favorite team. Sport team identification has been linked with self-esteem; team identification can enhance the collective self-esteem of a fanbase which can then boost the personal self-esteem of an individual fan (Lianopoulos et al., 2020). Being able to purchase team merchandise that doesn't place women as the other can enhance team identification and belonging thus boosting both collective and personal self-esteem of sports fans. Furthermore, being able to purchase and wear "correct" symbols and colors of their team helps to reassert women as real fans (Borer, 2009).

### **Advertisements**

Television advertisements are a highly visible medium to represent what the modern sports fan and specifically, the modern female sports fan, looks like. Historically, women appeared in sport-related advertising in roles that diminished their interest in a sport and instead focused on their relationship to a male fan (Toffoletti, 2015). They appeared as archetypal football widows who served their husband's every need while he focused intently on the game. Such depictions also focused on women who were opposed to sport as their male significant other was overly obsessed with it. Women have also appeared as token fans amongst larger groups of sports fans (Toffoletti, 2015). Other common representations of women as sports fans position them as merely a supporter of a male sports fan or as a new and uninformed fan. Such portrayals of women in sport-related advertising lack narrative constructions (Wenner, 2012). Many ads promote the assumption that being a consumer and a shopper is more important to women than their fan identity (Wenner, 2012). In the past decade, television advertisements have begun to feature female fans as more authentic and passionate; however, diverse characterizations of women are still very limited (Gieseler, 2017).

Very few journal articles address advertising focused on female sports fans. However, a recent study analyzed television advertisements depicting women that aired during the 2015-2016 NFL playoffs and 2016 NCAA tournaments (Gieseler, 2017). One of the most well-received advertisements was the “Like a Girl” commercial by the feminine care company Always. The commercial aired during Super Bowl XLIX and depicted women of all ages as strong and powerful. The “Like a Girl” campaign was widely considered to be the best ad shown during that year’s Super Bowl (Beltrone, 2015). The study also assessed the Nissan Altima ad titled, “Drive to the game.” The ad depicts a couple dressed in Tennessee Titans apparel driving in a car. The woman is driving the man to a mystery location, and in the meantime, they discuss their opinions about the team. The man initially speaks patronizingly to the woman until she gives her own detailed commentary. As she surprises him with her knowledge, she also surprises him by pulling up the home stadium of the Titans.

The “Drive to the game” advertisement depicts a knowledgeable female fan. Instead of adhering to passive stereotypes, she takes full control during the scene. She determines the conversation and the destination. She displays both knowledge and passion for her team. However, the advertisement was criticized for seeming inauthentic. Her insightful commentary wasn’t based on reality. The ad did take strides in placing women in active roles, but the idea of a woman needing to prove her legitimacy as a fan was central to the plot. The commercial made light of the trials that female fans experience to prove that they belong (Coddington, 1997). Just as in real life, men in commercials do not have to prove themselves before being initiated as a real fan.

Another television advertisement highlighted in the study was Visa’s “Fanwagon” commercial (Gieseler, 2017). In this ad, a woman invites a male coworker to an upcoming



football. The typical gender stereotypes are reversed. The woman is a knowledgeable fan, and the man is clueless about sport. He frantically studies up on football and buys the apparel for one of the teams. When he arrives at the game, he is covered in face paint and an extravagant costume to support his adopted team. He realizes that the woman is actually a fan of the other team, so he quickly changes and washes away the face paint. The story resolves with the couple kissing while wearing apparel for the woman's favorite team. Just as with the Nissan ad, this commercial confronts stereotypes about women being disinterested in sport head-on. While the ad seemingly defies stereotypes, the woman is only depicted as a fan in contrast with her clueless date. She isn't shown as a fan in her own right.

Recent television advertisements that provide a greater focus on women as fans indicate that great strides have been made toward mainstream recognition of the large portion of female sports fans. These ads provide more of a narrative than before; however, in each of the ads discussed by Gieseler (2017), women are still shown in heteronormative contexts as girlfriends and as mothers. Confining women to these roles still supports aspects of hegemonic masculinities by asserting heterosexuality and caretaking roles for women. When women in the advertisements are characterized as passionate fans, they are often juxtaposed by a particularly clueless man. The assumption is that the woman can only seem authentic when compared to an abnormally disinterested man. Such ads base their representations of fandom through the male lens. The women must practice passionate fandom just as the ideal male fan does. Nevertheless, giving women in active roles and narratives in sport-related advertising is extremely important for legitimizing female fans. Mainstream depictions of female fans increase the visibility of the growing female fan base and erode associations between sports fans and masculinity.

### **What Women Want**

Research has thoroughly described how spectator sports are catered to a male audience (Cleland et al., 2020; Crawford & Gosling, 2004; Esmonde et al., 2015). Studies regarding sports fans have just begun to investigate what women appreciate most in their experience as a fan. A recent study surveyed 14,000 season ticket holders across 12 Australian Football League (AFL) teams (McDonald et al., 2018). While research investigating fan behavior has been criticized for focusing too heavily on season ticket holders, this survey was intended to assess how the rising number of female season ticket holders compared to their male counterparts. Among a handful of NFL and AFL teams, 40 to 50 percent of season ticket holders are female (Deutch, 2012). Season ticket holders are commonly understood to be composed of high-involvement fans. High-involvement female fans have already been commonly ignored by empirical research, so even less is known about female season ticket holders.

The survey indicated that women value high-quality service and facilities (McDonald et al., 2018). An earlier study of female soccer fans in the U.K. also observed that women desire female-friendly facilities in stadiums (Pope, 2011). Having accessible and clean bathrooms was important. A dirty hard-to-find bathroom alone isn't going to deter women from sporting events, but it contributes to their overall experience. Limited female bathrooms indicate that the stadium was not designed with women in mind, and therefore makes some women feel less welcome. Overall, though, male and female season ticket holders desired the same things from their experience (McDonald et al., 2018). The only significant difference between the genders was that women attained greater satisfaction from positive customer service experiences. McDonald et al. propose that women may greatly value quality service and facilities because their voices and needs had historically been ignored.

Though female season ticket holders place greater importance on customer service and facilities, the data did not suggest that season ticket holders should be approached differently based on gender (McDonald et al., 2018). The idea of creating a unique package to encourage women to purchase season tickets does not seem necessary. With growing numbers of season ticket holders, there does not seem to be a need to target women. Fostering a female-friendly environment appears to be a promising attractor of women to sporting events. Ensuring that women have easy-to-use facilities, are not subject to sexist abuse, and feel valued can increase female attendance (Pope, 2011; Pope & Williams, 2011). It has also been suggested that women tend to enjoy the overall entertainment factor of a game while men are focused on whether their team wins or loses (Wann, 1995).

To assess how gender affects opinions about different aspects of the Super Bowl Broadcast, Clark et al. (2009) surveyed over 1,000 viewers. Women were more likely to enjoy entertainment-related aspects of the game such as the halftime show, other celebrity appearances, and the introduction of the players. However, these elements did not significantly motivate women to tune into the Super Bowl. Both men and women indicated the same primary motivations to watch the game: “the teams playing in the Super Bowl” and “the competitiveness of the game” (p. 176). While women enjoyed entertainment elements more than men, the game was still the most important part of the viewing experience. Having a multi-faceted experience with elements of entertainment was most enjoyable for female fans. Elements of spectacle could be used to entice nonfans to watch, especially considering that entertainment is generally valued by high-involvement female fans as well. However, men and women still placed the most importance on the game itself. Entertainment can be used to attract nonfans and satisfy female fans, but it must not detract from the quality of the game. Recognizing and implementing

features of the sports fan experience that are most important to women is critical toward making female fans feel valued and breaking hegemonic masculine traditions of sports fandom.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to 1) identify and describe how women experience fandom in men's sports, and 2) assess how female sports fans have been targeted through various marketing initiatives. Sport has been described as "an institution steeped in sexism" (Fink, 2015, p. 337). It has traditionally been *by* men, *for* men, and *about* men (Bruce, 2013). Though female fans are gathering greater recognition in sport-related areas and an increasing number of women consider themselves to be sports fans, there remains push-back because the space has historically been so gendered. Traditional perceptions of femininity and masculinity have historically deemed that sports are not suitable for women either to participate in or to watch (Clelend et al., 2020). As a result, how women are included in sport culture is always affected by gender. How a woman performs gender dictates how she is received by other fans. Hegemonic masculinity still permeates sport. If a woman emphasizes her femininity as a fan, she is not taken seriously. To fit in, female fans must be acutely aware of how to conform to the normative behaviors of male sports fans (Crawford & Gosling, 2004). Not only does gender determine how women are publicly viewed as fans but gender also shapes how women perceive themselves as a fan (Esmonde et al., 2015).

Through this literature review, it was apparent that research focusing on female sports fans is incredibly limited. Most research studies have analyzed female fans in the United Kingdom and have focused on soccer fans (Jones, 2008; Pope, 2011; Pope, 2013). Research investigating female fans in the United States and fans of other sports is essential to provide more accurate and nuanced insights into female sports fan experience in more diverse settings.

Beyond needing a wider geographical scope of female fans, more consensus is needed in how to properly assess fandom. Knowing that gender stereotypes can alter how women view themselves as fans and that women have been differently socialized in sport compared to men, traditional assessments and understandings of fandom may not be accurate. Qualitative measures that assess fandom open-endedly seem to demonstrate the most promise in evaluating what it means to be a female sports fan.

While fan demographics are reaching gender parity, this does not mean female fans have truly become accepted as sports fans. Masculine presentations of fandom are still heavily favored, and most female fans experience sexism (Pfister et al., 2013). The equality in the number of female fans must not be assumed to disrupt established cultural discourses (Esmonde et al., 2015; Messner, 2002). Subordination and stereotyping are still issues at the forefront. Within this past decade, professional sports teams have attempted to reach female fans through hyperfeminized attire and patronizing events centered around fashion and makeup. These marketing initiatives do not value women as equally authentic fans to men. The efforts emphasize heteronormative feminine stereotypes further place women into the category of other. Motivations to consume sport do not significantly differ by gender; therefore, treating women as a completely separate category only further supports hegemonic masculinity in sport (Wenner & Gantz, 1998). Research assessing how women should best be targeted in marketing initiatives is virtually nonexistent. Women already make up a large portion of sports fans; therefore, understanding how gender impacts their experience is imperative in order to tap into this marginalized market.

### References

- Ahn, T., Suh, Y. I., Lee, J. K., & Pedersen, P. M. (2013). Sport Fans and Their Teams' Redesigned Logos: An Examination of the Moderating Effect of Team Identification on Attitude and Purchase Intention of Team-Logoed Merchandise. *Journal of Sport Management*, 27(1), 11–23. <https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1123/jsm.27.1.11>
- Anderson, R. J. (2017, August 14). Mariners having a 'Women in Baseball Night', hopefully beginning a new MLB trend. Retrieved from <https://www.cbssports.com/mlb/news/mariners-having-a-women-in-baseball-night-hopefully-beginning-a-new-mlb-trend/>
- Angi, C. (2014). *Baseball still doesn't understand women*. SB Nation. Retrieved from <https://www.sbnation.com/mlb/2014/6/17/5816758/baseball-promotions-fields-of-fashion-marketing-to-women>
- Bacchi, U. (2018). Italy probes Lazio football fans who warned women to stay away. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-soccer-sexism/italy-probes-lazio-football-fans-who-warned-women-to-stay-away-idUSKCN1L61MH>
- Beltrone, G. (2015). “Ad of the Day: Girls Are Unstoppable in Next Phase of Always ‘Like a Girl’ Campaign.” *Adweek*, July 8. <http://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/ad-day-girls-are-unstoppable-next-phase-always-girl-campaign-165784/>.
- Berr, J. (2015, April 10). Baseball's pitch to put more women in the stands. Retrieved from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/baseballs-pitch-to-put-more-women-in-the-stands/>
- Berri, D. (2017, October 9). Think Women Don't Know Sports? You Don't Know As Much About Sports As You Think. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/davidberri/2017/10/09/think-women-dont-know-sports-you-dont-know-as-much-as>

-you-think-about-sports/#7fd92fb874ed

- Berry, L. (2013, October 04). One night with the ladies in Houston. Retrieved March, from <https://www.sbnation.com/2013/10/4/4802638/one-night-with-the-ladies-in-houston>
- Borer, M. I. (2009). Negotiating the symbols of gendered sports fandom. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 72(1), 1–4. doi: 10.1177/019027250907200101
- Brennan, B. (2012). Marketing to the Female Fan. Retrieved February 2021 from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/bridgetbrennan/2012/12/27/marketing-to-the-female-fan/>
- Bruce, T. (2015). Assessing the sociology of sport: On media and representations of sportswomen. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 50(4–5), 380–384. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690214539483>
- Bruce, T. (2013). Reflections on Communication and Sport: On Women and Femininities. *Communication & Sport*, 1(1–2), 125–137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479512472883>
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Chiweshe, M. (2014). One of the boys: Female fans' responses to the masculine and phallocentric nature of football stadiums in Zimbabwe. *Critical African Studies*, 6(2–3), 211–222. doi:10.1080/21681392.2014.940077
- Clark, J., Apostolopoulou, A., & Gladden, J. (2009). Real Women Watch Football: Gender Differences in the Consumption of the NFL Super Bowl Broadcast. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 15(1/2), 165–183. <https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1080/10496490902837510>
- Cleland, J. (2015). *A sociology of football in a global context*. London, UK: Routledge.

- Cleland, J., Pope, S., & Williams, J. (2020). "I Do Worry That Football Will Become Over-Feminized": Ambiguities in Fan Reflections on the Gender Order in Men's Professional Football in the United Kingdom. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 37, 366–375. <https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1123/ssj.2019-0060>
- Coddington, A. (1997) *One of the Lads: Women who Follow Football*. London: Harper Collins.
- Connell, R.W. (1987). *Gender and power society: The person and sexual politics*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Connell, R.W., & Messerschmidt, J. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829–859. doi:10.1177/0891243205278639
- Cooky, C., Messner, M. A., & Musto, M. (2015). "It's dude time!" A quarter century of excluding women's sports in televised news and highlight shows. *Communication & Sport*, 3(3), Chicago; 261-287
- Crawford, G., & Gosling, V. K. (2004). The Myth of the "Puck Bunny" Female Fans and Men's Ice Hockey. *Sociology*, 38(3), 477–493. <https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1177/0038038504043214>
- Deutsch, J. (2012). *How branded merch, affinity teams help teams court female fans*. Retrieved February 2016, from <http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Journal/Issues/2012/11/26/Opinion/From-the-Field-of-Marketing.aspx>
- Dietz-Uhler, B., Harrick, E. A., End, C., & Jacquemotte, L. (2000). Sex Differences in Sport Fan Behavior and Reasons for Being a Sport Fan. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 23(3), 219.
- Dixon, K. (2015). A woman's place recurring: Structuration, football fandom and sub-cultural subservience. *Sport in Society*, 18(6), 636–651. <https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1080/17430437.2014.982541>



- Dosh, K. (2016, February 23). The Evolution of Marketing to Female Sports Fans. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kristidosh/2016/02/22/the-evolution-of-marketing-to-female-sports-fans/?sh=4fb281437fc3>
- Dunning, E. (1994) Sport as a male preserve: Notes on the social sources of masculine identity and its transformations. In: Birrell S and Cole C (eds) *Women, Sport and Culture*. Leeds: Human Kinetics, 163–179.
- Edens, M. (2017, October 26). The Problem with Pink Sport Jerseys. Retrieved March, from <https://time.com/4981828/sexism-sports-marketing-mallory-edens/>
- Ehrenreich, B., Hess, E., & Jacobs, G. (1992). Beatlemania: Girls just want to have fun. In L.A. Lewis (Ed.), *The adoring audience: Fan culture and popular media*. 84-106 New York, NY: Routledge.
- Erhart, I. (2013). Ladies of Besiktas: A dismantling of male hegemony at İnönü Stadium. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 48(1), 83–98.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690211427986>
- Esmonde, K., Cooky, C., & Andrews, D. L. (2015). “It’s Supposed to be About the Love of the Game, not the Love of Aaron Rodgers’ Eyes”: Challenging the Exclusions of Women Sports Fans, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 32(1), 22-48. Retrieved Feb 25, 2021, from <https://journals.humankinetics.com/view/journals/ssj/32/1/article-p22.xml>
- Esmonde, K., Cooky, C., & Andrews, D. L. (2018). “That’s Not the Only Reason I’m Watching the Game”: Women’s (Hetero)Sexual Desire and Sports Fandom. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 42(6), 498–518. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723518797041>

- Farrell, A., Fink, J. S., & Fields, S. (2011). Women's Sport Spectatorship: An Exploration of Men's Influence. *Journal of Sport Management*, 25(3), 190–201.  
<https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1123/jsm.25.3.190>
- Fink, J. S. (2016). Hiding in Plain Sight: The Embedded Nature of Sexism in Sport. *Journal of Sport Management*, 30(1), 1–7. <https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1123/jsm.2015-0278>
- Gantz, W., & Wenner, L. A. (1995). Fanship and the Television Sport Viewing Experience. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 12(1), 56–74.  
<https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1123/ssj.12.1.56>
- Getzenberg, A. (2017, August 14). 'Ladies day' connected women to baseball. Retrieved from <https://www.mlb.com/news/ladies-day-played-role-in-women-in-baseball-c248371644>
- Giddens, A. 1984. *The Constitution of Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gieseler, C. M. (2017). 'Raise Her Right': (mis)representing authentic women sports fans in US advertising. *Sport in Society*, 20(11), 1765-1779. doi:10.1080/17430437.2017.1346613
- Giulianotti, R. (2002) Supporters, followers, fans, and flâneurs. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 26(1), 25–46
- Gosling, V. (2007). Girls allowed? The marginalization of female sports fans. In J. Gray, C. Sandvoss, & C. L. Harrington (Eds.), *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, New York: New York University Press. 250-260.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). Selections from the Prison Notebooks. New York, NY: International Publishers.
- Gough, C. (2019, December 10). Sports merchandising market size in North America from 2009 to 2023 (in billion U.S. dollars). Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/194226/revenue-from-sports-merchandising-in-north-america-since-2004/>

- Hampton, L. (2017). *Women comprise nearly half of NFL audience, but more wanted*. Reuters. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nfl-superbowl-women/women-comprise-nearly-half-of-nfl-audience-but-more-wanted-idUSKBN15J0UY>
- Hanson, M. E. (1995). *Go! Fight! Win!: Cheerleading in American Culture*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.
- Hearn, J., & Morrell, R. (2012). Reviewing hegemonic masculinities and men in Sweden and South Africa. *Men and Masculinities*, 15 (1), 3–10. doi:10.1177/1097184X11432111
- Hoeber, L., & Kerwin, S. (2013). Exploring the experiences of female sport fans: A collaborative self-ethnography. *Sport Management Review*, 16, 326-336.
- Holland, S. (2013). *Facts on women*. Retrieved February 2021 from <http://www.she-conomy.com/facts-on-women>
- James, J. D., & Ridinger, L. L. (2002). Female and male sport fans: A comparison of sport consumption motives. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 25(3), 260–278. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psyh&AN=2002-15685-004&site=ehost-live>
- Jones, K. W. (2008). Female Fandom: Identity, Sexism, and Men's Professional Football in England. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 25(4), 516–537. <https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1123/ssj.25.4.516>
- King, A. 1998. *The End of Terraces: The Transformation of English Football in the 1990s*. London: Leicester University Press.
- Kitroeff, N. (2013). NFL hones message for its female fans. *New York Times*.

- Lewis, R (2009). 'Our lady specialists at Pike Lane': Female spectators in early English professional football, 1880–1914. *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 26(15), 2161–2181.
- Lianopoulos, Y., Theodorakis, N. D., Tsigilis, N., Gardikiotis, A., & Koustelios, A. (2020). Elevating self-esteem through sport team identification: a study about local and distant sport fans. *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship*, 21(4), 695–718. <https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1108/IJSMS-10-2019-0115>
- Major League Baseball to conduct "Fields of Fashion" events geared toward women. (2014, June 13). Retrieved from <https://www.mlb.com/news/major-league-baseball-to-conduct-fields-of-fashion-events-geared-towards-women/c-79566972>
- Malcolm, D., I. Jones, and I. Waddington. 2000. "The People's Game? Football Spectatorship and Demographic Change." *Soccer & Society* 1: 129–143.
- McCarthy, M. (2019, September 19). How the Pittsburgh Steelers Attract Female Fans. Retrieved from <https://frontofficesports.com/steelers-women/>
- McDonald, H., Leckie, C., Karg, A., & Zubcevic-Basic, N. (2018). Female season ticket holders: How their satisfaction is derived differently from males. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 18(2), 156–174. <https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1080/16184742.2017.1332668>
- MacMahon, T. (2012, September 27). Victoria's Secret at Cowboys Stadium. Retrieved from [http://www.espn.com/dallas/nfl/story/\\_/id/8433134/victoria-secret-pink-store-opening-cowboys-stadium](http://www.espn.com/dallas/nfl/story/_/id/8433134/victoria-secret-pink-store-opening-cowboys-stadium)
- Messner, M. A. (2002). *Taking the field: Women, men, and sports* (Vol. 4). U of Minnesota Press.

- Pfister, G., V. Lenneis, & S. Mintert. (2013). "Female Fans of Men's Football – A Case Study in Denmark." *Soccer & Society* 14(6), 850–871. doi:10.1080/14660970.2013.843923
- Pilcher, J. (1999). *Women in contemporary Britain: An introduction*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Pope, S. (2011). 'Like pulling down Durham Cathedral and building a brothel': Women as 'new consumer' fans? *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 46(4), 471–487. <https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1177/1012690210384652>
- Pope, S. (2013). "The Love of My Life": The Meaning and Importance of Sport for Female Fans. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 37(2), 176–195.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723512455919>
- Pope, S., & Williams, J. (2011). Beyond irrationality and the ultras: Some notes on female English rugby union fans and the 'feminised' sports crowd. *Leisure Studies*, 30(3), 293–308. doi: 10.1080/02614367.2011.566626
- Ridinger, L., & James, J. (2002). Female and male sport fans: A comparison of sport consumption motives. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 25(3), 260-278.
- Roberts, C. (2020, March 6). Closing the Sports Fan Gender Gap. Retrieved from <http://thegembagroup.com/news/closing-the-sports-fan-gender-gap/>
- Schippers, M. (2007). Recovering the feminine other: Masculinity, femininity, and gender hegemony. *Theory and Society*, 36(1), 85–102. doi:10.1007/s11186-007-9022-4
- Sisjord, M., & Kristiansen, E. (2009). Elite women wrestlers' muscles: Physical strength and a social burden. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 44(2), 231–246.  
doi:10.1177/1012690209335278
- Toffoletti, K. (2017). Sexy women sports fans: femininity, sexuality, and the global sport spectacle, *Feminist Media Studies*, 17(3), 457-472.

- Toffoletti, K., & Mewett, P. (2012). *Sport and its female fans*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Trail, G. T., & James, J. D. (2001). The Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption: Assessment of the Scale's Psychometric Properties. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 24(1), 108-127.
- Tseng, J. (2008, July 01). Sex, Gender, and Why the Differences Matter. Retrieved March, from <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/sex-gender-and-why-differences-matter/2008-07>
- Ussher, J. (1997). *Fantasies of femininity: Reframing the boundaries of sex*. London, UK: Penguin Books.
- Van Zoonen, L. (1994) *Feminist Media Studies*. London: Sage.
- Wann, D. L. (1995). Preliminary validation of the sport fan motivation scale. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 19(4), 377–396. doi: 10.1177/019372395019004004
- Wann, D. L., & Branscombe, N. R. (1995). Influence of identification with a sports team on objective knowledge and subjective beliefs. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 26(4), 551–567
- Wann, D. L., Melnick, M. J., Russell, G. W., & Pease, D. G. (2001). *Sportfans: The psychology and social impact of spectators*. New York: Routledge.
- Ware, A., & Kowalski, G. S. (2012). Sex Identification and the Love of Sports: BIRGing and CORFing Among Sports Fans. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 35(2), 223–237.
- Wedgwood, N. (2008). For the love of football: Australian rules football and heterosexual desire. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 32, 311-317.
- Wenner, L. (2012). "Reading the Commodified Female Sports Fan: Interrogating Strategic Dirt and Characterization in Commercial Narratives." In *Sport and Its Female Fans*, edited by Kim Toffoletti and Peter Mewett. New York and London: Routledge. 135-151.

Wensing, E. H., & Bruce, T. (2003). Bending the Rules: Media Representations of Gender

During an International Sporting Event. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*,

38(4), 387–396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690203384001>

World Health Organization. (2012, November 30). What do we mean by "sex" and "gender"?

Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20150818074425/http://apps.who.int/gender/whatisgender/en/index.html>