Women's Professional Sport and Stigma

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Women’s Professional Sport and Stigma

A Dissertation Presented

by

RISA F. ISARD

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2023

Mark H. McCormack Department of Sport Management
Isenberg School of Management
DEDICATION

To those who have fought for women’s sport

and those who will no longer need to
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Getting a Ph.D. was the dream ever since I learned there was a path that would let me read, think, write, and talk about the things I care about most—but I never really knew if I was cut out for the task. It is obvious to me that I would not—or could not—have made it to this milestone alone. I am so lucky to have so many people to thank on an occasion like this.

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ABSTRACT

WOMEN’S PROFESSIONAL SPORT AND STIGMA

MAY 2023

RISA F. ISARD, B.A., DUKE UNIVERSITY

Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor E. Nicole Melton

Women’s sport has recently seen historic growth across the United States as new leagues launched and existing leagues reached new heights. Despite notable wins, sport remains a male-dominated institution and women’s sport does not always receive the respect it deserves. Indeed, evidence suggests women’s sport is devalued, enduring a unique stigma. Thus, the purpose of this dissertation is to explore the impact of stigma on fans of and employees working in women’s sport. I do this through three studies.

In Study 1, I use reflexive autobiography to begin to develop a theoretical understanding of women’s sport fans’ experiences with stigma and empowerment. I document vignettes from a decade of fandom, focusing on my experiences with the Phoenix Mercury. In doing so, I identify how I observed structural stigma and experienced enacted, felt, and internalized stigma, as well as how my fandom facilitated a sense of optimal distinctiveness.

Study 2 builds on the understanding of stigma in women’s sport to explore employees’ experiences working in an occupation that may be considered ‘socially dirty.’ Using a case study methodology, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 employees in women’s sport. I find that women’s sport employees observe structural stigma and personally experience enacted,
felt, and internalized stigma. I subsequently identify strategies women’s sport employees use to navigate this work-based stigma, finding they utilize a necessity shield, as well as engage in and with meaningfulness, job crafting, and social weighting.

Study 3 builds on the earlier studies to examine the labor of being a women’s sport fan. This labor is in part a function of women’s sport operating outside the broader cultural consciousness—a form of stigma to which these fans are well attuned. Thus, I conducted a multi-wave field study of sport fans to understand the influence of structural stigma on fan emotions and behaviors. I find that fans of women’s sport engage in loyal boosterism, a process mediated by perceptions of structural stigma and subsequent experiences with stigma-related stress.

Collectively, these studies help further develop an understanding of the unique theoretical context of women’s sport, given the stigma with which it contends.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview of the Research

Women’s sport has seen historic growth across the United States in recent years as new leagues have launched and existing leagues have reached new heights. Since 2020, Athletes Unlimited has re-envisioned the professional sports model, unveiling a network of women’s leagues for basketball, volleyball, lacrosse, and softball (Athletes Unlimited, n.d.). Meanwhile, the United Soccer League (USL) launched the USL W League, a pre-professional league that fielded more than 40 teams in its first year in 2022 (USL W League, 2022). Growth has also characterized existing leagues. In 2022, the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) saw its viewership numbers hit a 15-year high (Thames, 2022)—less than a year after raising a record $75 million from investors (Jennings, 2022). Elsewhere, the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) expanded into two new markets and set attendance records in 2022, as team valuations soared from a then-record $3.51 million in 2019 to $35 million in 2021 and most recently to $50 million (Kassouf, 2022; Toonkel & Bachman, 2023).

Despite these notable wins, women’s sport does not always receive the respect it deserves as sport remains a male-dominated institution (Burton, 2015; Chalabaev et al., 2013, Fink, 2016). Indeed, though there are few differences between motives and behaviors for fans of different genders (Fink et al., 2002; Ridinger & Funk, 2006), fans who are women are subjected to negative treatment from friends and strangers alike (Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016). Additionally, women who work in sport face negative treatment from both colleagues and external stakeholders (Hindman & Walker, 2020).
As fans, women regularly have their fandom questioned, are treated differently, are excluded from conversations, and/or experience sexism (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016). That is, women are deemed to be inauthentic fans (Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016; Sveinson et al., 2019). Sveinson and Hoeber (2016)’s work observed as much, as they noted that women experienced marginalization because men’s sports fans did not expect women to be fans. These findings echo Hoeber’s reflection from her collaborative self-ethnography, as others in her life expected her to choose shopping over attending a baseball game (Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013). Though scholars have laid a foundation for understanding the experiences of men’s sport fans who are women (e.g., Gaylon & Wann, 2012; Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Pope, 2012; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016; Wann et al., 2001), very limited research has sought to understand the perspectives of fans of women’s sport (Delia et al., 2021b; Delia et al., 2022). This oversight is regrettable, as research over the years has suggested fans of women’s sport have unique experiences and perspectives and that understanding such is important (Delia et al., 2021a; Doyle et al., 2021; Fink et al., 2002; Guest & Luijten, 2018; James & Ridinger, 2002; Ridinger & Funk, 2006). Indeed, the differences between experiences of fans who are men and women may be fewer than the differences between fans of men’s and women’s sport (Fink et al., 2002). Despite this, far less research has considered fans of women’s sport. As such, in this dissertation, I aim to add to this literature and help build an understanding of the experiences of women’s sport fans.

Similar to fans who are women, women who work in sport face also face marginalization. Research suggests that a variety of factors at the societal, organizational, and individual levels influence their experiences (Burton et al., 2011; Burton, 2015; Hindman & Walker, 2020; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). For instance, societal norms about women’s
aptitudes, interests, and roles create taken-for-granted assumptions that preclude women from even being considered for roles seen as men’s work (Burton, 2015; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). One example is that women were considered less likely than men to be hired for the athletic director position (Burton et al., 2011). Such may be the result of “impermeable cognitive institutions” that characterize sport, a hypermasculine, gender exclusive, and resistant to change field (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013, p. 312).

When working withing sport organizations, women contend with organizational cultures that diminish, objectify, differently evaluate, and exclude women employees (Hindman & Walker, 2020; Katz et al., 2018; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003). Consider research documenting the access and treatment discrimination facing women executives working in college sports. In a network analysis comparing senior women administrators (SWA) to athletic directors (AD) scholars found SWAs to face a double-edged sword of exclusion. Women were largely excluded and marginalized among ADs, limiting their access to leadership resources. Meanwhile, the SWA network—an exclusively women’s network—was far less cohesive than the AD network, suggesting additional barriers to information, resources, and other leaders (Katz et al., 2018). SWAs also experienced incivility as they were excluded from making key decisions, subjected to sexual innuendos, and assigned to marginalized roles (Wells et al., 2021).

At the individual-level, women face self-limiting behaviors that are the result of the societal- and organizational-level factors (Burton, 2015). In other words, women start to internalize the messages they have received on the job, leading them to feel they have to prove themselves to others, diminishing their interest in senior leadership positions, and prompting them to expend energy to fit in (Burton, 2015). As research has well-documented the gendered
experiences of women employees leaves much to be desired, seemingly little scholarship has studied the experiences of employees in women’s sport (Allison, 2016; Isard et al., 2022). However, a distinct institutional field, women’s sport faces unique opportunities and barriers (Isard et al., 2022; Micelotta et al., 2018; Morgan, 2019) that could shape employees’ experiences. As such, in this dissertation, I explicitly focus on women’s sport to better understand how the unique positioning of women’s sport influences employees' experiences and organizational outcomes.

1.1.1 Stigma within Women’s Sport

Evidence suggests women’s sport is devalued and endures a unique stigma. For example, consider the treatment of women athletes. Regardless of athletic pedigree, women athletes receive less investment, face pay inequity, are treated unequally in the media, contend with stereotypes about which sports are gender appropriate, receive scrutiny for winning by too much, and are subjected to abuse (Allison, 2019; Berri, 2019; Cooky et al., 2021; Cunningham, 2019; Fink et al., 2014; Isard & Melton, 2021; Krane, 2001). Just as the sport’s stars are devalued, it is reasonable to assume those who work in women’s sport might experience a stigma by association. For example, consider the pay gap between head coaches of Division I men’s and women’s teams. In 2020, women’s head coaches took home an average salary of $114,039—while the average men’s head coach salary was more than three times as much, at $379,109. Indeed, only five universities out of nearly 350 Division I members paid the head coaches of their women’s teams more than the head coaches of their men’s teams (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). These pay disparities exist outside of the coaching ranks, too, fueling the perception (and financial reality) that a job in men’s sports is a step-up from a job in women’s
sport (Walker & Melton, 2015a). Those working in women’s sport also face ridicule and derision from friends and strangers alike—and sometimes even in the course of fulfilling their job duties (Isard et al., 2022).

Sport management scholars may also unintentionally be complicit in devaluing women’s sport, given the limited research concerning these teams and leagues (Allison, 2016; Delia et al., 2021b; Delia et al., 2022; Lough & Geurin, 2019). For example, in a twenty-year span, only 57 peer-reviewed English language papers explicitly focused on women’s professional sport—an average of fewer than three articles per year (Thomson et al., 2022). Three years saw a drought without papers published, while the best-ranking year saw eight published papers. Taken together, evidence suggests women’s sport faces institutionalized sexism (Cunningham, 2008; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013).

The relative dearth of scholarship on women’s sport is regrettable, as it is an important field to study and one known to be characterized by unique qualities (Delia, 2020; Doyle et al., 2021; Isard et al., 2022; Lough & Geurin, 2019; Micelotta et al., 2018). For example, though scholars assumed team identification—a foundational principle in sport consumer behavior—would operate the same in men’s and women’s sport (Delia et al., 2021b), research found important differences between them (Delia, 2020). Team identification in women’s sport included gender equality as a central element, in contrast to men’s sport where such does not apply (Delia, 2020; c. f., Fink et al., 2002; Ridinger & Funk, 2006).

Scholars have recently noted other differences between men’s and women’s sport on key consumer behavior and organizational behavior dimensions. For the former, these include unique approaches to sponsorship (Morgan, 2019) as well as fans’ brand associations (Doyle et al.,
motives (Guest & Luijten, 2018; James & Ridinger, 2002), and intentions (Fink et al., 2002). For the latter, scholars have noted different logics operate in women’s sport (Allison, 2016; Isard et al., 2022) and different barriers hinder women’s sport organizations’ successes (Micelotta et al., 2018). In addition, though research suggests sport employees benefit from a positive social identity resulting from their work in an attractive and highly valued occupation (Todd & Kent, 2009), if or how this manifests for workers in women’s sport—an occupation influenced by institutionalized sexism and heterosexism (Cunningham, 2008; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009)—remains unknown. As such, in this dissertation I seek to further develop an understanding of the unique theoretical context of women’s sport. Specifically, I use stigma theory (Goffman, 1963; Herek, 2007) as well as literature on stigmatized work—known as dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999)—to explore fan and employee experiences and outcomes in women’s sport.

1.2 Theoretical Foundations/Frameworks

1.2.1 Stigma Theory

Stigma refers to the devaluation of a person based on a trait that is undesirable, especially if the attribute is incongruent with the stereotypes and expectations of how a person should be (Goffman, 1963). Given the reliance on stereotypes, stigma is contextually specific. That is, what is stigmatized in one setting may not be stigmatized in another. However, Goffman explains that when a trait is stigmatized, a person who would have otherwise been socially accepted may instead be socially rejected. Thus, stigma is as much about a devalued trait as it is about the relationship between people—those who are stigmatized and those who are not, whom Goffman calls “normals” (Goffman, 1963, p. 5).
Stigma exists at individual and structural levels (Herek, 2007). At the individual level, stigma manifests through enacted, felt, and internalized forms. Enacted stigma refers to behavior that shuns others on the basis of a stigmatized trait. Felt stigma refers to the anticipation of potential enacted stigma (c.f., Goffman, 1963), also known as an identity threat (Major & Schmader, 2018). Internalized stigma refers to a stigmatized person incorporating a negative evaluation on the stigmatized trait into their own self-concept. Lastly, structural stigma refers to ways that societal institutions and systems codify and perpetuate the devaluation of a trait.

1.2.1.1 Sexism and a Lesbian Stigma

Women’s sport contends with unique conditions as it is organized expressly for those who are outside the norm in sport (e.g., able-bodied, white cis-gender men; Fink et al., 2001). Sexism—a gender-based stigma—is one distinct challenge facing women’s sport. Notably, sexism in sport may be accepted as just par for the course (Cunningham et al., 2009), at times being so normalized as to be “hiding in plain sight” (Fink, 2016).

Sexism manifests in women’s sport in many ways. Consider the organization of women’s sport, which at times is predicated upon an assumed inferiority of women athletes (Fink et al., 2016; Kane, 1995). Organizational practices may actively inhibit women athletes’ performances, as organizations expect gendered labor from women athletes (Chahardovali & McCleod, 2022) and regularly require athletes to travel in conditions that take tolls on their bodies (Hansen, 2022). Subsequently, when women athletes excel at their craft, media coverage diminishes their achievements (Cooky et al., 2021). These are some examples of a sport system that uniquely penalizes women’s sport (Micelotta et al., 2018).
Women’s sport also contends with a lesbian stigma as a form of sexism (Griffin, 1992; Krane, 2001; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). Scholars understand that some sports are seen as more gender appropriate for women (Krane, 2001; Melton, 2013). Specifically, individual sports and those that emphasize feminine attire and aesthetically pleasing movement are seen as appropriate in the eyes of society. In contrast, team sports as well as those that prioritize physical domination of an opponent are categorized as inappropriate for women (Fink et al., 2014; Metheny, 1965). A woman athlete who steps outside the bounds of a sport deemed gender appropriate may face assumptions that she is a lesbian—a label that has been used to stigmatize women in sport (Griffin, 1992; Krane, 2001; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). The potential to be stigmatized—along with the financial and other consequences of this stigmatization—is so strong that it influences how women athletes choose to portray themselves and what opportunities they purse in sport (Fink et al., 2014; Krane, 2001; Melton, 2013; Sartore-Baldwin, 2013).

The lesbian stigma facing women in sports also affects fans and employees (Griffin, 1992; Melton & MacCharles, 2021; Melton et al., 2022; Mumcu & Lough, 2017; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009; Sartore & Cunningham, 2010). For example, before the WNBA became the first professional league to host a Pride Night in celebration of LGBTQ+ fans, the league hesitated to market to LGBTQ+ fans (Dolance, 2005; Mumcu & Lough, 2017). As Muller (2007) wrote, early WNBA games were “predicated on the erasure, or at least containment, of the lesbian participant, be it fan, athlete, coach, or administrative personnel” (p. 10). Such hesitation—or outright refusal—was the result of existing stereotypes about the league, from
which the league hoped to distance themselves (Mumcu & Lough, 2017). Notably, the WNBA was not alone in navigating a lesbian stigma.

Research with coaches and administrators in sport has also found anti-LGBTQ+ stigma heavily influenced the experience of employees (Borland & Bruening, 2010; Walker & Melton, 2015b). Specifically, Black women coaches in women’s college basketball named heterosexism as a more explicit barrier to their career advancement than their race and gender (Borland & Bruening, 2010). Importantly, the lesbian stigma runs deep in sport and transcends basketball—even women faculty in sport-affiliated academic disciplines must contend with the stereotypes (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010). As such, Sartore and Cunningham demonstrated how entire organizations can be given a stigmatized labeled.

1.2.1.2 Stigmatized Work

Work that is stigmatized—like working in women’s sport—is sometimes termed dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Dirty work can be physically dirty, morally dirty, or socially dirty—and often features components of more than one of these categories. Physically dirty work is associated with filth or dangerous conditions (e.g., trash collectors, miners). Morally dirty work is associated with sinful industries or methods (e.g., exotic dancer, telemarketing). Socially dirty work is associated with groups that are stigmatized or with work that serves others (e.g., AIDS worker, customer complaints clerk). Even work that does not cleanly fit into one of these categories can be understood through a dirty work lens, as all occupations and organizations face at least occasional threats (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Dirty work is not a matter of prestige; rather what dirty work occupations have in common is that they are devalued in the public eye (Asforth & Kreiner, 1999). Like stigma, dirty
work is contextually specific (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). This is especially true for socially dirty work, which is uniquely influenced by sociocultural and historic norms (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b). In this way, dirty work is subjective (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b). That is, “dirt exists when people think it does” (p. 85). When a critical mass of society acts as if the occupation is stigmatized or less than, the profession may be deemed dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b).

Those who participate in dirty work are known as dirty workers (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Dirty workers are keenly aware of the stigma facing their occupation (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Indeed, they often enter their professions knowing others have stigmatized it. Once in the job, they continue to see it disparaged through media and public discourse and often engage with members of the public who act in ways that disparage it (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Notably, the stigma is “sticky,” staying with the worker even after they leave work for the day (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b). These experiences with stigma can lead dirty workers to experience an identity threat (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b). Importantly, dirty workers who engage in counter-stereotypical work face heightened stigma, exacerbating the identity threat with which they must contend (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014a). Ultimately, the stigma of dirty work is a form of chronic stress facing these workers (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

1.3 Structure of Dissertation

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the impact of stigma on fans of women’s sport and employees working in women’s sport. In Study 1, I use a reflexive autobiography to begin to develop a theoretical understanding of women’s sport fans’ experiences with both stigma and empowerment (c.f., Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016). As a method, a reflexive autobiography presents an opportunity to leverage my intimate knowledge of a setting and
experience to draw informed theoretical conclusions about a complex phenomenon that touches thousands of others (Delia, 2014). Autoethnographic forms of inquiry (e.g., reflexive autobiography) may be especially appropriate when studying a topic about which little research exists (Delia, 2017), as is the case in a study about experiences of women’s sport fans (c.f., Delia et al., 2022). Specifically, in Study 1, I document vignettes from a decade of fandom, focusing on my experiences with the Phoenix Mercury (Women’s National Basketball Association). I subsequently engage in deep reflexivity to make sense of these memories and advance theoretical understandings. In doing so, I identify how I observed structural stigma and experienced enacted, felt, and internalized stigma. I also identify how being a fan of women’s sport facilitated a sense of optimal distinctiveness.

Study 2 builds on the understanding of stigma in women’s sport to explore employees’ experiences working in an occupation that may be considered socially dirty. Using a case study methodology, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 employees in women’s sport. I employed deductive analysis based on dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999) and stigma theory (Goffman, 1963; Herek, 2007) to explore the role of stigma in their work experiences. I find that women’s sport employees observe structural stigma and personally experience enacted, felt, and internalized stigma. Because the stigma they face is based on their occupation (i.e., working in women’s sport), I contend that these employees are dirty workers—and that given the current conditions and cultural context, working in women’s sport is a form of dirty work. Thus, I subsequently identify strategies women’s sport employees use to navigate this work-based stigma. I find they use a necessity shield, as well as engage in and with meaningfulness, job crafting, and social weighting.
Study 3 builds on the earlier studies to examine the labor of being a women’s sport fan. Indeed, women’s sport fans are known to be especially loyal (Fink et al., 2002). This loyalty may in part be a function of women’s sport operating outside the norm and outside of broader cultural consciousness—a set of circumstances to which these fans are well attuned (Delia, 2020; Delia et al., 2021a; Sveinson & Allison, 2021; Sveinson et al., 2022). Fans’ observations of the cultural devaluation of women’s sport may be stressful and prompt them to consider present and historic mistreatment facing women’s sport. As a result, often fans go above and beyond to do what they can to help women's sport be successful (Delia, 2020; Delia et al., 2021a; Sveinson et al., 2022).

To better understand these possible relationships, I conducted a multi-wave field study of sport fans to examine women’s sport fans’ perceptions of structural stigma, stigma-related stress, and fan behavior. Specifically, I administered a questionnaire to 535 sport fans (338 fans of women’s sport and 197 fans of men’s sport), asking about their experiences with stigma and its associated consequences. I find that fans of women’s sport engage in loyal boosterism more than men’s fans through a mediated process with structural stigma and stigma-related stress. Specifically, I find that fans of women’s sport are aware of the structural stigma facing women’s sport. These observations cause stress for fans, who subsequently engage in behaviors to help boost women’s sport.
CHAPTER 2

IN THE SHAPE OF AN “L” ON HIS FOREHEAD:

A REFLEXIVE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A WOMEN’S SPORT FAN

2.1 Introduction

Fans can be stigmatized (Cohen et al., 2017). For example, enthusiasts of anime (Japanese animation and comic books) may face negative evaluations based on their fandom (Reysen et al., 2017). In contrast, popular culture research suggests sport fans are generally characterized as prototypical fans and seen as unstigmatized (Cohen et al., 2017; Tague et al., 2020). Despite this prototypicality, some sport fans—in particular, women who are men’s sport fans—may deviate from the fan archetype (Galyon & Wann, 2012; Wann et al., 2001). Accordingly, women who are fans of men’s sport often experience marginalization based on their fandom, as the legitimacy of their fandom is questioned (Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016; Sveinson et al., 2019). However, there may be other sport fans who deviate from the prototype—and who have experiences that deviate from the typical fan experience, including facing stigma.

Stigma—a devaluation of someone based on a characteristic that renders them different—can be found in interpersonal relationships and institutional arrangements (Goffman, 1963; Herek et al., 2009). As it relates to the former, sport consumer behavior research has at times addressed questions about the role of interpersonal relationships. For instance, the first conception of team identification noted that a potential friend’s fandom is not an important factor when selecting friends (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Others have noted that peer group acceptance may be an important benefit for casual fans, even if not for highly identified fans.
(Gladden & Funk, 2002). Both, however, overlook the possible role of rejection, or a peer’s expressed negative (i.e., stigmatizing) beliefs about one’s fandom, including possible shaming behavior. Further, these studies do not consider the role of others who play an everyday part in someone’s life, like teachers, coaches, and peers.

Stigma also manifests in sport via institutionalized stigma. Institutionalized stigma refers to the how “stigma-based differentials in status and power are legitimated and perpetuated by society’s institutions and ideological systems” (Herek et al., 2009, p. 33). Notably, research has established that gendered and heterosexist power structures characterize sport (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009), creating environmental conditions for stigma. This may be especially true for women’s sport (Griffin, 1992; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009), which is the focus of this study. Notably, professional women’s team sport is negatively influenced by structures that continually deem it less worthy than men’s sport—from disparities in athlete pay (Berri, 2018), to omission and sexualization in the media (Fink, 2015), to second-class status in scheduling for arena time (Simon, 2021), to persistent homophobia (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). By centering women’s sport, this research answers calls to understand how these fans are perceived (Wann et al., 2001). Additionally, I answer calls to extend research on marginalization and empowerment to teams and leagues not previously examined (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016), focusing on women’s sport fans and those outside the prototype (Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Sveinson et al., 2019).

Sport fans who experience marginalization may also experience empowerment (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016). For example, women fans of men’s sport who had their fandom questioned explained that their fandom also made them feel good about themselves, was something in which
they took pride, and made them feel powerful (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016). Fans who are women have also found empowerment through team merchandise (Sveinson et al., 2019). However, only limited research has addressed the gendered dynamic of empowerment in sports (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016). Thus, the purpose of this research is to identify sources of both stigmatization and empowerment for women’s sport fans. Specifically, I draw from both stigma and social identity theory and conduct a reflexive autobiography to explore the experiences of being a women’s sport fan.

The insights from this research make several contributions. First, this study is one of the first to explore stigma and empowerment based on women’s sport fandom. This is important, as only limited research has explored the experiences of women’s sport fans despite known differences between fans of men’s and women’s sport (Thomson et al., 2022; Fink et al., 2002). This oversight is regrettable as it limits scholarship’s theoretical understanding of sport in its entirety (Delia et al., 2022). Second, this study contributes to both the scholarship on stigmatized popular culture fandoms and to research in sport management, which has yet to widely consider experiences of stigma and empowerment among sport fans who are not part of the prototypical majority (c.f. Melton & MacCharles, 2021). By focusing on women’s sport, this study extends the literature base on this population (Thomson et al., 2022), which is critical to theory given the features of fandom known to differ between men’s and women’s sport fans (Delia, 2020; Doyle et al., 2021; Guest & Luijten, 2018). Understanding women’s sport fans’ experiences is also vital to sport managers’ efforts to grow the game, as positive experiences of fandom predict revenue-generating behaviors (Ross, 2006) and can also benefit society (Cohen et al., 2017). Negative
experiences likely buffer these benefits, with consequences for women’s professional sports
teams and leagues.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

I draw from stigma theory and social identity theory in this study to explore experiences
of stigma and empowerment. Below I review these theories as well as existing literature on
stigma in fandom and social identity threats.

2.2.1 Stigma Theory

Individuals who are different from the norm may be stigmatized by those perceived to be
“normals” (Goffman, 1963, p. 5) in society. This stigma can be experienced at the individual
level, including through enacted and felt stigma (Herek, 2007). First, enacted stigma refers to
behavior carried out by those in the majority (Major & Schmader, 2018) and includes epithets,
shunning and ostracism, discrimination, and violence (Herek, 2007). Calling a woman a “bitch”
or excluding women from participating in a group event are examples of enacted stigma. Second,
felt stigma refers to the general knowledge that an attribute may be the basis of stigma (Herek,
2007), leading someone to anticipate stigma (Major & Schmader, 2018). Felt stigma is
experienced by both those who are stigmatized and those who are not (Herek, 2007; Sartore &
Cunningham, 2009). For the stigmatized, felt stigma may be based in uncertainty about how
others will receive them (Goffman, 1963). This awareness of stigmatized status is known as
stigma consciousness (Cunningham, 2019)—a common experience among fans who experience
bias (Reysen et al., 2017). For those in the majority, felt stigma may be based in fear that others
will mischaracterize them as a member of the stigmatized group (Herek, 2007; Sartore &
Cunningham, 2008).
Felt stigma can lead individuals to modify their behavior to avoid experiencing enacted stigma (Herek, 2007; Major & Schmader, 2018; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). These modified behaviors are known as stigma management strategies (Herek, 2007); they seek to remedy what is known as a social identity threat. A social identity threat is “the situationally triggered concern that one is at risk of being devalued, discriminated against, or negatively stereotyped because of some self-relevant characteristic” (Major & Schmader, 2018, p. 86). Social identity threat is often studied in the context of a trait-based identities (e.g., race, sexual orientation), but it can apply more broadly to any attribute that is stigmatizing (Major & Schmader, 2018). For example, Goffman explained that “blemishes of individual character” (p. 4) are common bases for stigmatization. As I explore below, this includes being a fan of women’s sport.

2.2.2 Social Identity Theory and Stigmatized Fandoms

Much research on stigmatized fandom in popular culture has used social identity theory (Cohen et al., 2017; Reysen et al., 2017; Reysen & Shaw, 2016; Tague et al., 2020), which focuses on group level identities. This may be because fans who experience stigma based on their fandom are being judged based on their group identity (c.f. Reysen et al., 2017). Social identity theory posits that people have a need for a positive self-evaluation and that the groups to which one belongs have positive or negative associations that reflect on the individual (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). When belonging to one’s group does not achieve a positive evaluation, people may attempt to leave their existing group (social mobility). Alternatively, group members may redefine or change the basis of comparison (social creativity), or they may seek to compete directly with a higher-status group to gain an edge over them (social competition; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Ultimately, social identity theory suggests people only remain members of groups
that they perceive as positive or that confer benefits. As such, what can researchers learn from the experiences of those who opt-in to communities that are stigmatized?

2.2.3 Prototypical vs. Stigmatized Sport Fans

2.2.3.1 Sport Fans as Prototype. Not all fans are stigmatized. Popular culture researchers have concluded that sport fans are the prototypical, normative fan compared to others like science fiction or fantasy enthusiasts (Cohen et al., 2017; see also Reysen & Shaw, 2016 and Tague et al., 2020). When asked to describe a fan, undergraduate students mentioned sport fans more than three times as often as the next most common fan group (Reysen & Shaw, 2016). They also ranked sport fans as more normal and receiving of warmth than any other type of fan, including those with strong allegiance to a musical artist, passion for a hobby, or enthusiasm for a television show or movie (Reysen & Shaw, 2016).

However, there is variability within sport fans (Reysen & Shaw, 2016)—based on sport and based on fan gender. For example, undergraduate students ranked football, basketball, baseball, and soccer fans high on prototypicality and normality, with tennis, golf, and volleyball fans much lower (Reysen & Shaw, 2016). Notably, these lower-ranked sports are known in the United States for being more gender appropriate for girls and women (Fink et al., 2014; Metheny, 1965; Sartore-Baldwin, 2013), compared to the highest rated sports. Even so, as the study did not explicitly ask about fans of women’s sport, little is known about their standing.

Additionally, fan gender impacts experience (e.g., Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016; Sveinson et al., 2019). Women are deemed to be inauthentic fans of men’s sport (Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016; Sveinson et al., 2019). Hegemonic masculinity creates sport spaces that marginalize women fans, wherein their fandom is
questioned, they are treated differently, they are excluded from conversations, and/or they experience sexism (Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016; Sveinson et al., 2019).

None of these aforementioned fan studies addressed experiences of women’s sport fans (i.e., fans of sports played by women). Where gender has been invoked, research has largely addressed the fan’s gender, ignoring the settings in which women are the athletes competing (Delia et al., 2022). Indeed, only seven percent of empirical articles published in sport management’s top journals included fans of women’s sport (Delia et al., 2022). This neglect from research alone is enough to reasonably conclude that fans of women’s sport are not the prototype.

2.2.3.2 Social Identity Threat and Sports Fan Stigmatization. Fans who fall outside the norm may experience a social identity threat (Mansfield et al., 2020). Social identity threat research in sport has sought to understand how fans maintain their relationships when the positivity of their identity is endangered. Past research has explored how fans react to team relocation (Foster & Hyatt, 2007); losing (Doyle et al., 2017; Mansfield et al., 2020); scandal (Delia, 2017) and seemingly conflicting identities (Delia, 2015). A less-explored identity threat may be the prevalence of stigma against a fan group.

Some fans experience derogation based on their fandom (Mansfield et al., 2020). For example, Mansfield and colleagues documented that some fans of the Buffalo Bills receive nasty comments based on the Bills’ record. Such comments can be a source of identity threat for fans, especially considering that fans may be subjected to derogatory comments on a regular basis. The frequency only increases the threat’s salience (Mansfield et al., 2020). Mansfield and colleagues limit their conception of negative feedback to rivalry situations, but it is conceivable
that fans experience derogation in other settings, too. Specifically, the experiences of fans of women’s sport offer an opportunity to explore stigma in sport as experienced by historically, socially marginalized groups.

Like the teasing that Bills fans faced for their under-performing team, women’s sport fans face frequent reminders (“micro threats”) of the supposed inferiority of women’s sport. A micro threat refers to a singular event that jeopardizes a fan’s positive self-concept and is experienced within the context of a broader, macro threat (Mansfield et al., 2020). Unlike the Bills fans, however, micro threats facing women’s sport are experienced within the context of a historically marginalized identity (a “macro threat”). Less is known about the relationship between fan identity threat and historically marginalized identities. Thus, this study explores harassment of a women’s sport fan and its relationship to gender-based discrimination.

2.3 Women’s Sport Context

Women’s sport in the United States is a new phenomenon compared to men’s sport. While the National Basketball Association (NBA) is more than 75 years old, the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) is the longest-lasting professional women’s league in U.S. history at 26 years old (Anzidei, 2021). This discrepancy in longevity is both the result of and antecedent to inequities. The relatively recent advent of big-time women’s sport in the U.S. is the result of long-standing ideals about women’s bodies and their place in society (Gregg & Taylor, 2019). Women’s sport’s young age has also led to business differences between men’s and women’s sport—sponsorship investment, media rights, and athlete pay among them (Delia, 2020; Lough & Geurin, 2019; Micelotta et al., 2018).
Given these differences, women’s sport presents an opportunity to investigate gender in fandom, focused on the gender of the sport (as opposed to gender of the fan). For example, women’s sport teams can take on a meaning of gender equity for fans (Delia, 2020; Fink et al., 2002; Guest & Luijten, 2018), which may suggest that fans of women’s sport teams either personally identify as or are perceived as feminists. This relationship between feminism and a women’s sport fan is important for exploring possible experiences of stigma. Prejudice against feminists is seen as excusable (Crandall et al., 2002), and this may be especially true in sport where sexism is deemed acceptable (Cunningham et al., 2009).

Scholars have also long documented a lesbian stigma facing women’s sport (Borland & Bruening, 2010; Griffin, 1992; Sartore-Baldwin, 2013; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009; Walker & Melton, 2015b). This stigma is based on ideas about muscularity and femininity in women, and serves to maintain the subordination of women, limiting their status, power, influence (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). The stigma has shaped professional leagues’ marketing strategies (Dolance, 2005; Mumcu & Lough, 2017) and public relations initiatives (D’Arcangelo, 2021), as league decision-makers simultaneously have shied away from acknowledging the lesbian community and emphasized the presence of straight fans and athletes. These actions only perpetuate the stigma, influencing individuals’ actions (e.g., to disclose a queer identity or not, to associate with or advocate for queer inclusive practices or not) and well-being (Melton, 2013). Less is known, however, about the stigma by association (Melton, 2013) facing fans of women’s sport.

2.4 Methodology

2.4.1 Autoethnography and Reflexive Autobiography in Sport
Autoethnography relies on researchers’ first-person experiences to connect personal thoughts, feelings, and observations to cultural-level phenomena that live outside the researcher and are experienced widely (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The method was born out of ethnography, which embraces “direct contact” (Atkinson, 2016, p. 50) as the best way to derive theory about culture. In autoethnography, direct contact is easily attained as the researcher puts the self at the center of exploration. In centering the self, researchers must also engage in reflexivity—a self-awareness that acknowledges our dual position as both researcher and participant (Delia, 2017). As such, scholars who use autoethnography must continuously question our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the past and present as we interpret them with a theoretical perspective (Delia, 2017). The methodology is one way scholars have responded to calls for use of a wider array of qualitative methods in sport management (Shaw & Hoeber, 2016).

Feminist researchers, who have long advocated for starting research from personal experiences, have greatly influenced the autoethnography as a method (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Feminist autoethnographic work in sport management has resulted in a greater understanding of women’s experiences. Specifically, the method has opened new ways to explore complex relationships of power that assert control on people’s lives (Schaeperkoetter, 2017). Notably, this understanding emphasizes that though autoethnography starts with the self, it ends with cultural insights that extend beyond one’s own experiences (c.f., Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013). Researchers have used forms of feminist autoethnography to understand experiences of women referees (Schaeperkoetter, 2017) and women fans of men’s sport (Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013).

Reflexive autobiography is a form of autoethnography. As the name suggests, reflexivity is a key feature of this method. Specifically, researchers must open themselves to “heightened
self-awareness” (Carrington, 2008, p. 426) as they problematize the way the self, the other, and cultural norms interrelate (Carrington, 2008). Autobiography refers to the self-narration of personal experiences (Carrington, 2008). In putting the two together, reflexive autobiography “turn[s] the analytical gaze back on the researcher” (Carrington, 2008, p. 426) to problematize their experiences to glean wider insights. Unlike other forms of autoethnography that chronicle experiences as they occur, reflexive autobiography focuses on a researcher’s past experiences.

2.4.2 Procedure

I borrow from Carless (2012) to develop this reflexive autobiography. I started by noting the memories from my fandom that evoke strong emotions, that have details and feelings coupled together. I share these fragments as moments in time that informed my experiences as a fan of women’s sport (specifically, the Phoenix Mercury). In the process of writing this reflexive autobiography, I noticed a strong overarching sense of stigma. Inspired by Sveinson and Hoeber (2016), I challenged myself also to identify moments of empowerment. I subsequently reflect on these moments, too.

Collectively, the experiences below holistically represent a decade of my fandom. For example, below I recount an experience with my high school coach who teased me about the lesbian reputation of women’s sport. While I felt uncomfortable with his teasing at the time, through this reflexive autobiography I have come to understand this encounter as an example of enacted stigma (Herek, 2007). Further, I now see the relationship between this experience and others that conveyed women’s sport was less-than. However, I also know that this exchange was more extreme than others—and that plenty of my experiences as a fan were positive. Thus, I also
sought to identify ways the Mercury made me feel empowered, at times through connection. As one example, below I recount experiences of sharing the Mercury with my dad.

2.4.2.1 Research Context: My Childhood

This reflexive autobiography focuses on my childhood years. Two events bookend these reflections. I start with the WNBA’s inaugural season in 1997 when I was seven years old. The league’s launch also marks the birth of the Phoenix Mercury, one of the WNBA’s original teams. I conclude with the Mercury’s 2007 championship when I was a high school senior. This championship season marked an end to a chapter in my fandom, as I worked for the Mercury the follow summer and soon after moved away from Phoenix.

Women’s sport has been my passion for as long as I can remember. Growing up in Phoenix, Arizona, this mostly manifested as a highly identified fan of the Phoenix Mercury. As a fan, I went to at least one Mercury game (and often many) every year between 1997 and 2007. At the stadium, I became known by the stadium ushers and players alike. At home, my bedroom featured an entire wall dedicated to autographs, posters, and other memorabilia. I eventually used money I earned babysitting to buy partial season tickets and attend as many games as possible.

2.5 The Reflexive Autobiography

My memories and reflections are being a women’s sport fan are below. I organized them loosely chronologically, however some have overlapping elements. In doing so, I hope to help the reader travel alongside me in my journey as a fan as I chronicle experiences that left me feeling marginalized and/or empowered. As prior experiences inform future interactions and perceptions (Cavalier, 2011), going chronologically helps make sense of my holistic experience
as a fan. I engage in reflexivity immediately following each vignette, represented by *italics*. A theoretical discussion and managerial implications follow.

### 2.5.1 My First Mercury Game and My Second “Mom”

I have known Batya for as long as I have had memories of my family’s social life. Her oldest son and my older brother became best friends in preschool before I was born. In no time, Batya became “Mom #2” to me and my brother.

Batya, who had been a Mercury season ticket holder since the inaugural season, is the reason I went to my first Mercury game. I was seven years old. One night during that historic season, she had two extra tickets. She called my parents to ask if one of them wanted to take me. This phone call happened often over the next many years: “I have extra tickets; do you want them? I have an extra seat, does Risa want to come with me?” Mercury games with Batya were a blast. She cheered hard, danced in the stands, and would be my buddy during the ritual time-out when the public address announcer invited fans onto the court. She developed a community of seat buddies that became my seat buddies, too. I grew up in those seats, thanks to Batya.

*While at the time I thought games with Batya were fun—and they were—today I understand how having the Mercury in common with Batya helped me develop an empowered sense of fandom. Batya was unapologetic about being a Mercury fan, which gave me permission—and a safe person with whom—to lean into and develop my passion. Additionally, I see how sharing the Mercury with Batya made me an active participant in our family’s bond. Contributing to our family friendship through a personal relationship with Batya helped me feel a sense of purpose and belonging, which were not always readily available to me as a child.*
our relationship was largely based on the Mercury, it was really my (our) fandom that brought purpose and belonging into my life (c.f., Delia et al., 2021a).

2.5.2 Me and My Dad

My dad traveled a lot for work as I was growing up. While his work schedule meant we did not always have ample time together, we did seem to always have sports. In the summer after first grade, he took me to that first Mercury game (using Batya’s tickets). We went to many together thereafter.

The Mercury became a big part of our relationship. Every game, we had the drive to America West Arena (later renamed the US Airways Center). We had the warmups, when I would maneuver around the stadium like a second home, knowing I could always come back to find him in our seats for a pre-game chalk talk. We had the games, where he would teach me about the intricacies of the rules. And we had the drive home to rehash all the hours prior, dissect the game and the box score, and listen to the recap on the radio. We repeated this ritual regularly for more than a decade as women’s sport took on a central role in our relationship.

Growing up, I did not understand the role the Mercury played in my relationship with my dad. He was a logistical necessity—my ride and my benefactor (at least in the early years, before I used money saved from babysitting to buy tickets). But today it is impossible not to recognize the importance of the Mercury in our relationship. Unfailingly, my dad understood me as a sports fan. He related to my passion for a team; was impressed with my knowledge of the league and ability to procure autographs and gear; and understood the importance of women athlete role models for his very sporty daughter. I felt seen and supported in these moments, which my Mercury fandom made possible.
2.5.3 Role Models

I did not have just one role model growing up. I had an entire team of them—an entire league of them. As a girl athlete, the Mercury were important to me in ways I knew and could not know. I wrote about this for my fifth-grade teacher (in 2000): “Before, I had been into sports but now a real, live, person showed me girls and women can do really cool things…From now on I remember I just need to keep trying and I can always do it.” Mercury games showed me, up close and personal, the power of women—as athletes and more broadly. I absorbed this message like a sponge. The more games I attended, the more shots of the Mercury’s implicit girl power message I received. The players meant much to me—their high fives, winks, autographs, and gifts of sweaty hand bands and old playing shoes. More than any individual, the collective role modeling of the Mercury and the WNBA made an impact.

I knew back then I looked up to the players. But in the moment, I could not know how that would influence me for years to come. Today I am still an athlete, have worked for women’s sport teams and athletes, written for major popular press outlets about women’s sport, and created a career devoted to studying and advancing women’s sport. So much of my life is the result of being a girl who grew up spending my summers watching the best women’s basketball players in the world compete. Being a Mercury fan then set me on the path I am on now.

2.5.4 The Only One I Knew

Growing up, I was the only women’s sport fan my age that I knew. At home in Phoenix, I did not have peers who could be conversation partners. During the school year, I could not talk about the Mercury on the school bus, at lunch with friends, or during playdates. This collective ignorance of the Mercury did not seem to be a function of the season overlapping with summer
break. Even in summer months, my local friends did not follow the Mercury. The Mercury operated outside of communal consciousness, despite being a primary consciousness of mine.

While at Jewish sleepaway camp for a few weeks each summer, I similarly did not have anyone with whom to swap news, talk stats, or even develop friendly trash talking banter. I watched as Major League Baseball (MLB) fans at camp shared in such experiences together; as camp listed the scores of MLB games in the dining hall; and as people wore gear from their favorite college teams, developing relationships around even out-of-season sports. None of this was available to me, a women’s sport fan. Moreover, when I would receive mail from home and open the envelopes to find newspaper articles about the Mercury, my peers could not relate to my enthusiasm to news of big wins or my sadness about a favorite player who was cut or traded. I was on my own to experience and process the highs and lows of being a women’s sport fan.

In many ways, this reflection is based on noticing what was absent: peers, scores, banter. While I was aware of some of this at the time (not seeing scores posted at camp memorably made me mad), this void is largely a realization I had in the process of writing this reflexive autobiography. I knew when I started writing that I felt othered for being a Mercury fan, but outside a few key moments, it was less obvious to me why that was such a strong memory. It was then I realized that a lack of relationships could be just as significant in influencing my experience, especially as it signified I was outside the norm as a fan of the Mercury.

2.5.5 Disclaimer: Lesbians

Occasionally I brought friends with me to Mercury games. I loved inviting friends to all kinds of things, because I loved sharing moments and experiences together. So, these moments were exciting. But especially when I was in elementary school, these experiences heightened my
feeling that the Mercury was different. Because the fan base was largely gay (specifically, gay women)—and this was in Arizona, a conservative stronghold in the late 1990s and mid-2000s. I sensed this tension and understood the implications. The only option I saw was that I needed to give my friends a disclaimer before the game: “Um, I guess, just so you know, there’s like a lot of people of alternative lifestyles\(^1\) at the game. But like, it’s not really a big deal. Like, it’s totally fine. But also, you should just know. Okay?” Ultimately, inviting a friend into this space was both socially exciting, and politically difficult.

*At the time, offering a disclaimer to friends felt obvious. Today, however, I cannot help but see this routine as absurd. The “need” for a disclaimer emphasizes that Mercury games were not like the other spaces where friends might tag along, like a dinner or Diamondbacks game, because those experiences did not require a warning about the other people who would be there. Those experiences did not leave me feeling anxious on the inside about how to help a friend navigate what would surely be a new experience for them: lesbians, en masse. Heated debates about same-sex marriage and civil unions were common and many people in my community—friends, their parents, and teachers—vocally opposed them on religious grounds. Even at home, where my parents supported LGBTQ+ rights and taught me everyone deserves respect, there was a sense that doing so was unpopular and perhaps best avoided as a topic of conversation. But taking a friend into America West Arena for a Mercury game made it unavoidable. There would be lesbians there. And I sensed this might be a problem.*

**2.5.6 Mighty Mercury, Mercury Mine**

\(^1\) I use the phrase “alternative lifestyles” here because that is what I remember saying. Today, I would not use the phrase “alternative lifestyle” to describe members of the LGBTQ+ community.
2.5.6.1 The Toiletry Drive

In fourth grade I helped start a toiletry drive at my elementary school for a local women’s shelter. Batya was the head of the organization that ran the women’s shelter. She told me what they needed to support the women and children they served. She also called a friend at the Mercury to ask if they would support our efforts. They agreed to send a player to school to meet the classroom that brought in the most donations.

My friends and I promoted the drive throughout school, including on the announcements, advertising that the winning class would have a chance to meet a Mercury player. At the end of the drive, the player came to meet the class, sign autographs, and help load the toiletries into the van that would take them to the shelter. As we wrapped up, Batya started a cheer that combined my school’s name (Mercury Mine) with the Mercury’s marketing campaign (Mighty Mercury): “When I say ‘Mighty,’ you say ‘Mercury;’ when I say ‘Mercury,’ you say ‘Mine.’” We went through a few rounds of this, screaming and celebrating our school and our local WNBA team.

I was on cloud nine that day. I was so excited to have the chance to show the player my school and tell them about what we did. Around school, teachers and administrators knew that I had organized this drive and coordinated the Mercury’s appearance. I was excused from class for a lot of the day to help prepare and be part of the festivities. This attention from school leaders and special privileges to be out of class, wandering the halls on a mission, made me feel special.

The Mercury played an integral, celebrated role in the toiletry drive: they were the prize. This stood in stark contrast to the rest of the school year, when the Mercury were largely ignored. While it now feels problematic that the Mercury’s shining moment was predicated upon involvement in a community event (Chahardovali & McLeod, 2022), at the time that was
irrelevant. Instead, my experience of this moment centered on others recognizing my Mercury fandom as an asset. Indeed, the toiletry drive may have been the first time I got to truly celebrate the Mercury among peers. In this way, for at least these few weeks, my Mercury fandom provided me with feelings of distinction.

2.5.6.2 Overlooked or Only at Games

The Mercury’s representation at school was confined to a specific time and purpose—a community service initiative. This was different than the treatment the local men’s teams received, as they were celebrated and front of mind on a regular basis. For example, the teacher who had perhaps the most social capital at school was known schoolwide for his love of our local sports teams. His classroom was painted to match the Phoenix Suns (NBA) colors, he wrote a song dedicated to a Diamondbacks player that was sung schoolwide, and he even “auctioned” off prizes including official team merchandise during his famous end-of-the-year ritual. Elsewhere in the building, another teacher was known and revered schoolwide as the school’s “Number One” Arizona Cardinals (National Football League) fan. The Mercury were missing from these high-profile rituals in celebration of Arizona’s professional sports teams. In this way, the school’s day-to-day culture overlooked the Mercury. Similarly, no teacher at school was heralded for their Mercury fandom—but it was not for lack of a teacher who was a (big) fan.

Ms. Okus joined the faculty of my elementary school as our physical education (PE) teacher when I was in second grade. She was petite and lean in stature, had short hair, and wore a single rainbow flag earring stud. She was also an exceptional athlete, competing locally in ultramarathons, which I really admired as a young girl in sports. I felt a fondness toward Ms. Okus that was only amplified the first time I ran into her at a Mercury game. She and her partner
were season ticket holders and visiting them in their seats at halftime became a ritual for me. As the Mercury season coincided with summer break, saying hi at games felt like a fun way to stay connected to someone I counted as a role model. Our game encounters and shared fandom were not things we talked about during the school year, though—an unspoken understanding that separated her personal life as a queer person and her role as the school’s PE teacher. Indeed, in the dozens of times we saw each other at Mercury games, Ms. Okus never once introduced me to her partner. Though we never explicitly acknowledged it, I assumed she knew that I knew she was queer. I felt a responsibility to respect her privacy, not sharing with friends that I would see her at games or that I knew she had a partner.

At the time, I was aware of the sensitivity around Ms. Okus’ fandom and queer identity. However, before writing this reflexive autobiography I had not considered the effects of men’s sport fans being celebrated openly at school. That men’s sport was such a part of our school culture, and that I accepted this as a given until now, feels significant. Indeed, it shows what was possible for sports fans—even if such recognition was only available for men’s sport fans. As such, perhaps even more important than these observations in isolation is the juxtaposition between them, which paints a stark picture about what was communally valued and what was hidden away or ignored. As teachers help set school culture, seeing men’s sport fans lauded and the women’s sport fan ignored modeled that women’s sport fans belonged on the margins.

2.5.7 A Kid Among Adults

I shared my Mercury fandom mostly with adults—with my dad and with Batya. Other adults made a difference along the way, too.

2.5.7.1 SuperFan.com Message Boards
I was definitely not supposed to be on the message boards as a pre-teen. Technically, I, was not. Sk0rch1nM3rcury was, though. Through the click of a few buttons, a misrepresentation of my age, and an anonymous username inspired by the Mercury’s mascot (“Scorch”), I had a place to talk about the WNBA. I read the posts voraciously, sought feedback on my fantasy line ups, tried to make sense of the lesbian inside jokes, and at all costs tried to cover that I was a minor.

The message boards gave me a community of people with whom to talk about the WNBA. On the forum, I was just another fan in a space where being a WNBA fan was normal. If anything, I learned more from others than I offered myself. A platform of conversation partners was a happy reprieve from most other spaces, where I lacked others with whom to talk about the league. Even better, these were superfans—they were knowledgeable, opinionated conversation buddies. They did not just tolerate me talking about the Mercury, or engage in the conversations because it mattered to me—it also mattered to them.

But I was also not just another fan. Because I was a minor, I often worried about what I was saying on the message boards to not give away my age. The internet was still fairly new and the best practice back then was to cover your identity. My parents stressed this was especially important for kids, so they could not know I spent my days on a WNBA message board. Others on the message boards could also not know I was a young superfan. No one was any the wiser—except for my fantasy line ups, which got much better.

Despite how easily I fit in behind the anonymity of the early 2000s internet, I still felt apart. This apartness made me feel special. I was “hanging out” with adults. I was a real fan who knew her stuff. I was in a (virtual) place I was not supposed to be. But this apartness also made
me aware of my differences. Namely, I was just a kid who did not understand the lesbian culture inside jokes prevalent on the boards. I felt left out—and sometimes even like a fraud as I did not know how to maneuver the informal social norms. As Sk0rch1nM3rcury, I fit in but never really belonged.

Though I knew being on the message boards as a minor was ‘wrong,’ I ignored those warnings as I searched for a fan community that I had not found anywhere else. As I made myself at home, the boards simultaneously provided me with experiences of empowerment and marginalization as a fan. This illustrates the potential messiness of being a women’s sport fan. On one hand, finally finding others “like me” was an empowering experience, as was slyly participating as a minor. On the other hand, participating as a minor necessitated playing a role that was inauthentic and made me unlike other fans on the board. In this way, though I was no longer outside the norm for being a WNBA fan, I was still outside the norm as a young superfan.

2.5.7.2 2004 Draft Party

It was the end of eighth grade for me, and the end of Diana Taurasi’s senior year at the famed University of Connecticut. It was a forgone conclusion that Phoenix would take her with the top pick in the Draft. In honor of the moment, the Mercury hosted a party at a local sports bar that I attended with my dad. At some point, I caught the attention of the Mercury’s General Manager (GM). For what felt like a lifetime, the GM talked with me about the team’s business strategy. I had recently grown more interested in what went on behind the scenes of my favorite thing and had unknowingly prepared for this conversation. Just prior to the draft party I finished my bedtime reading of the league and players’ association’s Collective Bargaining Agreement. Talking with the GM about draft picks, salary caps, and marketing strategies was like a dream.
For one thing, I felt like what I said might matter. For another, nobody knows the ins and outs of the team strategy better than the GM. The inspiration from this conversation propelled me for years.

*The draft party stands out as a uniquely empowering experience. The party created a space that normalized—and celebrated—being a dedicated fan. Specifically, it was a space other than a game where I was surrounded by highly-identified Mercury fans as my full self (in contrast to the message boards). In addition, the chance to engage in more strategic conversations about the team gave me an outlet for parts of my fandom that extended beyond cheering for a good play. Lastly, the GM giving me his time made me feel like I mattered.*

2.5.8 *In the Shape of an L on His Forehead*

I ran cross country in high school. When I joined the team, the head coach (Coach Zote) was well-liked by the girls on the team who mattered—those who were popular, had official (captain) and unofficial social status within the team, and were the best runners. They talked frequently about how he was a father figure to them. It was a refrain I would repeat, as if it were the script to follow, but that did not fully reflect my feelings.

I brought up the Phoenix Mercury to Coach Zote after practice one day. We were standing outside of the school gymnasium, on the cement where our team gathered. The sun shined bright, as it does in Phoenix, where the cross country season regularly coincides with 100-plus degree days. We had just finished stretching, our team ritual after our training run. I mentioned I was excited about going to that night’s Mercury game. Without missing a beat, he made his thumb and index finger into the shape of an L. He moved this gesture to his forehead, playing off the symbol for ‘loser,’ where he pulsed it—moving it forward and back in space to
emphasize it. The motion visually mimicked a siren, an alarm sounding as he moved this L. With his lips, he repeatedly mouthed the word “lesbians” slowly, deliberately, and unmistakably. I shrugged it off. Literally, I shrugged. “Yeah, okay. Yeah, I know;” I thought to myself. I turned and walked away.

This scenario repeated itself, becoming almost predictable. If I mentioned the Mercury, Coach Zote would make an L on his forehead. It was a common enough occurrence that he did not always mouth the word “lesbians,” because he knew that I knew what he meant. I did know. It was like an inside joke. A silent way he communicated to me—and only me. Only it was not funny. Or at least it was not to me.

This experience with Coach Zote may be the most powerful single experience I had as a Mercury fan—and it made me feel bad about being a fan. As such, his othering of me and my fandom represented a significant identity threat. Several dynamics influenced this encounter. First, there was a power differential between me and Coach Zote. He was an adult, a man, a person in an authority role as a coach, and a leader who was highly respected by my teammates with the most social capital. In addition, while his actions were inexcusably hostile, they also exemplified a threat I had already been navigating for years, albeit through less obvious or direct threats. His L, however, was unmistakable and unignorable.

2.5.9 2007 Championship

The Mercury won their first championship on a Sunday night in 2007 during the fall of my senior year of high school. The game started at 4 p.m. in Phoenix. I had a babysitting job that night for my junior year English teacher, Mr. Booke, who was a mentor to me and other friends. I had not known about the Mercury game when I agreed to babysit. I watched the second half
from the family room in my childhood home while anxiously calculating what time I needed to leave to make it to Mr. Booke’s house. I waited until the last possible moment to leave, right as the Mercury won. I was jubilant. I rushed to get in the car. I got to Mr. Booke’s house, explained why I was a few minutes late, and put the Mercury’s triumph behind me.

I had grown accustomed to this compartmentalization of my fandom—a fandom that took me to great highs, and sometimes lows, but that always stayed contained within me, because where else could it go in my in-person, everyday life? Not out on the streets with others. Not on the roads with celebrating honking cars. Not even to my mentor’s house in north Phoenix, where I was now in charge of two young kids who probably knew nothing of the Mercury or their championship victory.

I decided my fandom would go to school with me the next day (Monday). I would wear something to celebrate the Mercury’s championship. It was not a fully obvious decision. In fact, offering a disclaimer to my friends that there would be gay people at the game was seemingly more obvious to me than showing up at my high school dressed in Mercury gear. Though I was used to being the odd one out and had spent years rejecting the latest fashion trends, wearing Mercury gear to school gave me pause. Ultimately, I do not remember any big reactions—positive or negative—to my fan couture that day. Rather, what has stayed with me is the anxiety about the decision to wear it. To show my fandom so outwardly in a place as potentially inhospitable as my public high school. I had been a fan for a decade by now and in that time had mostly seen the Mercury ignored or mocked, so I worried about people’s reactions. I thought, “What will people say? Is it weird to wear this? Will other students make fun of me? Will
anyone even care—or know—that the Mercury won? Would they make comments like Coach Zote’s L for lesbians? Or make a ‘joke’ about how women ‘can’t’ dunk?”

The Mercury hosted a Championship Rally the following day (Tuesday) in downtown Phoenix. My parents called me out of my afternoon classes so I could go to the rally. The night before, I made a poster celebrating the team with a nod to Finals MVP Cappie Pondexter. In homage to Pondexter’s famous WNBA tattoo, I drew a picture of the championship trophy, wrote “CAPPIE’S NEW TATOO [sic]” above it and “THE PRESENT” below it. I wore a homemade championship tee shirt: a Hanes V-neck undershirt on which I used permanent markers to celebrate the Mercury’s victory. I was proud to stand on my chair at the rally and hold my poster high—high enough that the official photographer snapped my photo. When I found it in the online photo gallery from the event, I made it my Facebook profile picture.

*The Mercury winning the WNBA championship probably should have a purely empowering experience. Indeed, it is hard for me to imagine a sport fan not having an entirely positive experience of their team taking home the championship. The championship! But as a Mercury fan, few things were ever that simple, including the Mercury winning it all. Instead, my joy was tempered by institutionalized stigma—driving across town as if nothing had happened, because the Mercury were ‘nothing’ to most people in Phoenix—and anxiety of anticipated (felt) stigma about what would happen at school if I dared to take pride in my fandom.*

*What percentage of this felt stigma can I attribute to being a Mercury fan? Certainly, I had spent a decade receiving implicit and explicit messages that the Mercury were less-than and that being a Mercury fan (as opposed to a Suns or Cardinals fan) made my fandom—and maybe even me—less-than, too. But being a Mercury fan was not the only thing that made me different.*
I was a precocious Jewish girl, raised in a liberal-leaning family, in a conservative community heavily influenced by the values of Evangelical Christianity and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. How do I separate out the influence of feeling othered in so many parts of my life, from feeling othered because I was a Mercury fan? Can I even? Being a Mercury fan was part of the package that made me different—and made me feel different. At times, it is easy to see that my Mercury fandom was the trigger for unkind reactions, like with Coach Zote. And at other times, it was likely just one more thing that painted me as a kid who was easy to pick on.

2.5.10 Looking Back

As I reflect on these vignettes from the vantage point of the present day, I see the function the Mercury played in my life. As a Mercury fan, I carefully navigated the paradox of optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991), which was influenced by experiences with stigma (Herek, 2007).

At times, the Mercury facilitated experiences that made me feel unique in a good way. Through the Mercury, I had enhanced relationships with my dad and with Batya; I was adored by Batya’s seat buddies and the stadium’s ushers; I felt known and seen by the players who came to recognize me; I shined at school during the annual toiletry drive; and I took pride in my knowledge and cunning presence as a young superfan on the message boards.

However, being a Mercury fan also made me feel different in a way that was less-than. The hostility from Coach Zote externalized the more implicit devaluation I experienced for years prior. The limited representation of the Mercury (and WNBA) in my communities signified the team’s devaluation. Simply, the Mercury were not worthy of attention from my peers, sports-crazed teachers who had social clout, or summer camp. Not having peers to share in my fandom made it clear that I was not like other kids, and not seeing the Mercury celebrated in the broader
community suggested they were not like other sports teams. They were not like other sports teams, presumably, because the lesbian stigma of women’s sport coded the team as gay, and gay was bad (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). This stigma was so powerful that I intimately understood its implications even as an elementary-school-aged child, leading me to carefully uphold the unspoken agreement between me and my PE teacher Ms. Okus and warn my friends about the lesbians they would encounter before attending games.

Ultimately, the lesbian stigma of women’s sport and its extension to fans—a stigma by association (Melton, 2013)—was a barrier for me in my own coming out years later. As I wrote for my college’s LGBTQ+ blog in support of a queer Day of Silence, “I’m silent for those who are in the closet. That was me for far too long...The stereotypes about female athletes and women’s sport fans kept me from embracing who I might be.” I had internalized the stigma and worried about confirming the stereotypes, causing “harm” to something I cared about so deeply. Thus, despite the positive aspects to my fandom, on the whole, growing up as a women’s sport fan was stigmatizing.

2.6 Discussion

The purpose of this reflexive autobiography was to explore experiences of a women’s sport fan. Below I consider how these experiences align with and depart from past research.

2.6.1 Marginalization and Empowerment

Sveinson and Hoeber (2016) found that women fans of men’s sport experience marginalization and empowerment. My experiences as a fan of women’s sport are consistent with this dual framework, with some differences. Notably, in contrast to women whose fandom may be viewed as inauthentic, my fandom was not mocked or ignored. Paradoxically, it was the
authenticity of my fandom that led to stigma. Despite these experiences with stigma, with intentional probing of myself, I identified moments that made my women’s sport fandom an empowered existence, too. Below I elaborate on these this duality.

2.6.1.1 Stigma and Marginalization

Stigma is the overarching feeling that describes my experience of being a women’s sport fan during my childhood. My fandom marked me as different from “normals” (Goffman, 1963)—especially Suns or Diamondbacks fans. I experienced this through enacted and structural stigma (Herek, 2007), such as when my high school coach would invoke the shape of an L on his forehead and when my summer camp omitted posting WNBA scores alongside other scores. These moments created conditions in which felt stigma (Herek, 2007) was constantly present. The frequency of these experiences over a prolonged period (i.e., more than a decade) and their relationship to historically marginalized identities (i.e., girls/women, LGBTQ+ folks) manifested as an identity threat (Mansfield et al., 2020). As a result, I developed a salient stigma consciousness (Cunningham, 2019) and a series of stigma management strategies (Herek, 2007). For example, awareness of the anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment that plagued the WNBA’s reputation led me to offer a disclaimer to friends before they joined me at a game. Further, I knew that others perceived my fandom in a negative light, leading me to actively question how I showed my fandom even after acquiring some level of social status as a high school senior and the Mercury winning the league championship. Regrettably, I also internalized this stigma, as being a women’s sport fan posed a hurdle for me as I grappled with my own sexual orientation.

Institutionalized stigma (Herek et al, 2009) also played a strong role in my experiences of marginalization due to my fandom. This form of stigma operates through two levels: a)
invisibility, and b) problematization (Herek et al., 2009). First, invisibility is when a minority group “remain[s] invisible and unacknowledged by society’s institutions” (Herek et al., 2009, p. 33). My experiences in feeling alone in my fandom—especially without peers—was one way I experienced invisibility. Outside of my parents, Batya, and the anonymous message boards, I did not have other fans to share in the experiences with. Further, women’s sport were largely ignored in my community: for example, the teacher who was my school’s prototypical sports fan did not include the Mercury in his fandom. Second, problematization is when a minority group gains visibility only to then be explained as abnormal or requiring an explanation (Herek et al., 2009). My compulsion to offer a disclaimer to my friends before games about the gay and lesbian community that would be present is an example of problematization.

2.6.1.1.1 The Loneliness of Being a Women’s Sport Fan. Fandom is often conceived of as a shared experience (e.g., Katz & Heere, 2015). While I did have people to share my fandom with, typically those people were not my peers. Without others like me, I often felt alone in being a women’s sport fan. Even when I shared my fandom—with Batya or my dad, when bringing friends to games, or after finding others through the online message board—I still lacked true equals. In this way, even shared experiences heightened my feelings of separateness, difference.

2.6.1.1.2 The Power of One Hostile Experience. Feelings of fan marginalization are often conceived of as a buildup of many experiences (Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016; Sveinson et al., 2019)—akin to the accumulation of microaggressions. This reflexive autobiography affirms the past research—as surely the comprehensive experiences over the 10-plus years explored here contributed to the feelings of marginalization discussed.
I also offer a new understanding: Some singular events are so powerful that they alone can create a stigmatized experience for a fan. Coach Zote’s L exemplifies this. Across the many anecdotes and reflections shared in this reflexive autobiography, Coach Zote’s L was the first one that came to me and is easily the most emotionally evocative. This combination suggests its power in influencing my experience as a fan from that moment forward.

2.6.1.2.1 Homophobia as Fan Identity Threat. The role of homophobia in women’s sport is well-documented (e.g., Griffin, 1992; Mumcu & Lough, 2017; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). My experience as a Mercury fan in the late 1990s through late 2000s is consistent with this past research. I extend this research by understanding homophobia as an identity threat for fans of women’s sport, thereby also advancing literature about fan identity threat (e.g., Mansfield et al., 2020). While Dolance (2005) wrote about the in-stadium experience of fans who are lesbians, I demonstrated that experiences with homophobia outside the stadium also influence fan experiences and behavior. I also demonstrated these experiences affect fans regardless of sexual orientation (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). Even as a kid who thought she was straight (and thus “presented” as straight), homophobia was levied at me as a WNBA fan. Beyond such direct hostility, homophobia was simply in the air around me enough to warrant a warning to friends tagging along to games. These experiences, especially given that they occurred in childhood, likely had a profound influence on my understanding of sport spaces and fandom even years later (Cavalier, 2011).

2.6.1.2 Empowerment

Being a Mercury fan was not all terrible. After all, if it had been, I likely would have stopped being a fan (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). But I did not. Instead, something—or many
things—about the experience more than made up for the feelings of stigmatization. Being a Mercury fan gave me feelings of pride, independence, and uniqueness, similar sentiments to those participants shared with Sveinson and Hoeber (2016). Through the Mercury, I had strong relationships with Batya and my dad, was exposed to role models, had unique opportunities to lead a project at my school, and forged my own way as a kid among adults. These experiences offered positive inputs to important interpersonal relationships and my overall self-esteem.

Beyond these positive experiences, empowerment is a “silver lining” to my experiences of marginalization. Sveinson and Hoeber (2016) note that “empowerment is a positive outcome of resistance” (p. 10). Thus, empowerment may in part be a byproduct of going against the grain—the same experiences that led me to experience stigmatization. Being a women’s sport fan made me feel different—and at times, I was different in a good way. As a women’s sport fan, I had a sense of optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991). I also learned how to navigate a sense of difference that has helped me be a more authentic version of myself in all areas of my life.

2.6.2 Implications

The insights from this research have theoretical and practical implications. By exploring experiences of stigmatization and empowerment in women’s sport, this reflexive autobiography further demonstrates the variability that exists within and across sport fandom. Simply, sport fandom should not be considered a monolithic experience that is universally prototypical (Cohen et al., 2017; Tague et al., 2020). Further, our understanding of the role of gender in sport fandom (Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016; Sveinson et al., 2019) is incomplete if we only consider the fan’s gender, and not the experiences of fans based on the gender of the athletes competing (Fink et al., 2002). As this reflexive autobiography shows, our understanding
of sport fandom ought to include fans of women’s sport (Delia et al., 2022; Fink et al., 2002), because these fans may have unique experiences, including unique encounters with identity threats. Through a reflection on a decade of experiences as a Phoenix Mercury fan, I trace experiences of stigmatization (enacted, felt, internalized, and institutionalized) as a result of overall loneliness, one particularly hostile encounter, and pervasive homophobia.

Understanding the experiences of stigma and marginalization of women’s sport fans is particularly important for managers of women’s sport. While women’s sport teams do not have control over fans’ out-of-stadium experiences that may influence their fan behavior, teams ought to consider how in-game experiences can counter some of the negative messaging and experiences fans have in other areas of their life as a result of their fandom. Organized meet ups and watch parties could help fans build connections with likeminded others, creating social experiences for fans that are likely to be free of stigma. Additionally, teams could monitor social media conversations for fans’ organic sharing of experiences with stigma and surprise select fans with merchandise, tickets, or other special experiences that may help counter fans’ stigmatized experiences.

2.7 Conclusion

Using reflexive autobiography, this paper explored experiences of stigmatization and empowerment in women’s sport fandom. In doing so, I counter past literature that has suggested sports fans are prototypical (Cohen et al., 2017; Tague et al., 2020), demonstrating the ways in which sport fans themselves can experience stigmatization for their fandom. Further, I extend research that has used gender to understand the experiences of sport fans. By focusing on fans of
women’s sport, I show the importance of considering the sport’s gender—not just the fan’s (c.f., Fink et al., 2002).

As with all research, this study has limitations. Perhaps the greatest consideration is the length of time that has passed. It has been nearly 15 years since the most recent anecdote shared, and more than 25 years since the first game I attended in the WNBA’s inaugural season. However, while women’s sport and society have changed considerably in this time, women’s sport continues to be devalued (Cooky et al, 2021). Additionally, given the time lapsed, I have only included vignettes about which I have relative certainty. Further, even where details may be off from precise “fact,” the emotions experienced and ways these moments influenced my fandom are more important to understanding fan perceptions and behavior.

As one of the first studies to explore experiences of marginalization and empowerment in women’s sport, there is room for ample work to follow. A natural next step would be to explore these topics with a diverse group of women’s sport fans, including: fans who have many years under their belt, and those who are new; fans of a variety of genders, races, social classes, geographic locations, and other identities; and fans who follow different teams and leagues. Additionally, studying the influences of these experiences on fans’ behaviors long after the initial incidents may also prove fruitful (Cavalier, 2011).
CHAPTER 3
Other Duties Not Assigned: Navigating Stigma in Women’s Sport

3.1 Introduction

Work that is stigmatized is called *dirty work* (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Dirty work professions could be associated with literal dirt (e.g., janitor), perceived as amoral (e.g., casino manager) or affiliated with people who are culturally stigmatized (e.g., AIDS worker). What connects them is that a critical mass of society has devalued the occupation as well as its employees (known as “dirty workers”). Those working in “dirty work” professions may experience a feeling of separation from others as their work identity casts them as different (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Work-based stigma may also be related to emotional exhaustion for workers (Bentein et al., 2017). In the face of this stigma, research suggests perceiving one’s work as necessary and contributing to society might both lessen dirty work’s negative effects on a worker’s self-esteem and positively enhance employees’ work engagement (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Bentein et al., 2017).

There is some evidence to suggest some professions in sport are dirty work. For example, among journalists, sports journalism may be looked down upon and considered dirty work. Notably, covering women’s sport is seen as especially dirty (Lucie & Fabien, 2021). Specifically, the journalists in Lucie and Fabien’s study believed women’s sport to be less worthwhile than men’s sport, suggesting a hierarchy in which men’s sport reigns supreme and women’s sport is far below. Importantly, the devaluation of women’s sport is not limited to (sports) journalists. Rather, ample evidence suggests that women’s sport is stigmatized and exists
on the margins of society (Allison, 2018; Cooky et al., 2021; Fink, 2015; Isard et al., 2022; Micelotta et al., 2018; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009; Thomson et al., 2022).

To date, few scholars have considered if jobs in sport could be dirty work. In fact, the suggestion that sport is dirty work contradicts previous research that cast sport as a valued occupation (Swanson & Kent, 2017; Todd & Kent, 2009). Specifically, scholars have conceptualized jobs in sport offer workers a positive social identity and sense of pride—and that these are strategic assets for organizations, enhancing productivity (Swanson & Kent, 2017; Todd & Kent, 2009). Such arguments suppose that working in sport prompts feelings of importance, value, and admiration based on one’s job (Swanson & Kent, 2017). In part, scholars base these claims on cultural rhetoric, for example that baseball is America’s “national pastime.” Further, researchers have argued that sport is a high visible occupation with tangible accomplishments (Oja et al., 2018). However, these benefits may not be available to employees in women’s sport, which is more often the basis of cultural debate, altogether ignored, or positioned as a steppingstone, rather than received with pride (Cooky et al., 2021; Frohman, 2021; Walker & Melton, 2015a).

It is difficult to determine if there are actual differences between women’s sport and men’s sport employees because limited empirical evidence has even looked at women’s sport in general (Delia et al., 2022; Thomson et al., 2022), and even less work has examined people working in women’s sport. Though Swanson & Kent (2017) survey more than 1,000 sport employees from nearly 100 organizations, their sample included not a single women’s sport employee. Such oversight is regrettable, for it hinders our understanding of the sport employee experience, an understudied population that is critical to the industry (Melton & Cunningham,
While scholars may question the need to study women’s sport, assuming that principles operate universally regardless of the organization’s gender (Delia et al., 2021b), recent research has found distinctions between men’s and women’s sport (Delia, 2020), highlighting the importance of exploring women’s sport organizations.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of women’s sport employees. Using case study methodology and semi-structured interviews, I met virtually with 15 employees in women’s sport. I draw from stigma theory to understand how these workers experience work-based stigma at both the structural and individual level. I subsequently apply the dirty work literature to understand how these workers navigate and manage the stigma they experience on the basis of their occupation. Through this research, I ask two broad research questions:

1. How does stigma manifest for women’s sport employees?
2. How do women’s sport employees navigate this stigma?

3.2 Theoretical Framework

In this study I draw from stigma theory as well as literature on dirty work and stigma-related stress. Below I elaborate on each and its relevance to women’s sport.

3.2.1 Stigma Theory

Stigma theory is used to explain the experiences of people who are devalued (i.e., stigmatized) in a society (Goffman, 1963). People can be stigmatized for any characteristic that marks them as different and causes disgrace in the eyes of others. The stigma may be especially great for attributes that are incongruent with established norms about how a person “should” be. Notably, just as stigma signifies a person’s difference, a lack of stigma confirms the typicality of a person.
3.2.1.1 Structural-level Stigma

Stigma can be experienced at the structural and individual level. Structural stigma refers to the way societal institutions and cultural norms legitimate and perpetuate stigma, including the differences in status and power it creates (Herek, 2007). For example, the nationwide pay disparity between coaches of men’s and women’s teams (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) represents a structural stigma as it signals that coaches for men’s teams are more highly valued (and thus compensated) than coaches for women’s teams.

3.2.1.2 Individual-level Stigma

At the individual level, stigma exists in three forms: enacted, felt, and internalized (Herek, 2007). First, enacted stigma concerns behavior directed toward a stigmatized individual based on their devalued trait. For example, a study of track and field athletes at the 2020 Olympic games found 70 percent of the athletes who received online abuse were women (World Athletics, 2021). Further, 43 percent of all online abuse that targeted track and field athletes featured gender-based vitriol. This harassment represents enacted stigma. Second, felt stigma refers to a fear of being stigmatized and often leads individuals to engage in stigma management strategies (Herek, 2007; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). For example, in an effort to avoid the lesbian stigma, women in sport may emphasize a feminine appearance that is associated with heterosexuality (Krane, 2001; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). The anxiety about being typecast as a lesbian that leads an athlete to embrace a “heterosexy” (Griffin, 1992) appearance is an instance of felt stigma. Lastly, internalized stigma is when an individual incorporates the negative evaluation of their identity into their own self-concept (Herek, 2007). For example, U.S. Soccer Federation’s Chief Legal Officer Lydia Wahlke put forth that competing on the women’s
team did not require “equal skill, effort and responsibility” as compared to the players on the men’s team (Hays, 2020, para. 7). As a woman who argued that women athletes were less talented and worked less hard, and that their work was not as important, Wahlke’s legal strategy suggests she may have internalized stigma facing women athletes.

Past research has documented the stigma and related barriers facing women in sport (Burton, 2015; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009), including women athletes (Fink, 2015; Melton & Cunningham, 2012), coaches (Borland & Bruening, 2010; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013), and employees in college sport (Walker & Melton, 2015b). However, these studies have tended to center the gender of the individual, rather than the gender of the sport (c.f., Fink et al., 2002; Ridinger & Funk, 2006). While there likely are similarities between women in sport and women’s sport (i.e., sexism and heterosexism undoubtedly influence both; Fink, 2015; Hindman & Walker, 2020; Melton, 2013; Sartore & Cunningham, 2010), the two should not be assumed to be the same. Indeed, women’s sport is known to have unique characteristics (Lough & Geurin, 2019). As such, in this study I aim to understand the experiences of those working in women’s sport, regardless of their own gender.

3.2.2 Dirty Work

Stigma can affect entire vocations, making dirty work a chronic, group-level concern (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). What dirty work occupations have in common is a public perception that taints the job—and its workers (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). In this way, dirty work is a social construct, rather than something inherent in the job or those who perform it (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014a). As such, Ashforth & Kreiner (2014b) assert that “dirt exists when people think
it does” (p. 85), adding that there need not be a unanimous agreement that the work is stigmatized, only consensus among a “critical mass.”

As a social construct, dirty work is contextually specific and may be exacerbated under specific conditions. Individuals’ personal identities—like race and gender, and the intersection of these—influence perceptions of dirtiness (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014a; Simpson & Simpson, 2018). For example, dirty workers who break stereotypes (e.g., a male nurse) may be seen as even dirtier (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014a).

Scholars have sought to understand how employees (known as dirty workers) manage their relationship to dirty work, especially given that workers tend to be keenly aware of the stigma (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). For example, dirty workers often enter their profession knowing others have stigmatized it and continue to see others disparage it once they are in the role. The media and other popular culture are especially common sources of scorn (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Dirty workers may also be subjected to both direct and subtle messages that suggest they and their work are devalued, whether through put downs and demeaning questions (direct) or avoidance (subtle; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Notably, dirty workers must contend with these challenges both while on the job and after leaving work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014a). These messages of contempt can trigger acute identity threats for workers, jeopardizing their positive self-view (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014a; Branscombe et al., 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

3.2.2.1 *Maintaining a Positive Identity in the Face of Stigmatized Work*

Given the importance of maintaining a positive self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), dirty workers engage in three main types of practices to manage the chronic and acute threats
they face in their work: a necessity shield, meaningfulness and job crafting, and social weighting.

Below I briefly explore these three strategies.

3.2.2.1.1 Necessity Shield. Doing dirty work is sometimes considered a “necessary evil” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b). This is particularly true for physically and socially stigmatized work. In these cases, dirty workers may benefit from a “necessity shield,” which helps protect the worker’s self-concept on the basis that these jobs are necessary for a functioning society. For example, trash collectors (physically dirty) and AIDS workers (socially dirty) are both necessary for maintaining public sanitation and health.

3.2.2.1.2 Meaningfulness and Job Crafting. Understanding one’s work as meaningful may also help buffer workers’ experiences with stigma (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013; Berg et al., 2013). Meaningful work is that which is “personally significant and worthwhile” (Lysova et al., 2010, p. 374). Meaningfulness in a job is subjective (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013), though some jobs may be more or less prone to experiencing meaning (Lysova et al., 2010). For example, jobs deemed “pink collar” (i.e., related to women’s work, such as hospitality and care work) may be less meaningful than “white collar” work (e.g., managerial roles), while a sense of contributing to a greater good may be a central driver in finding meaning in work (Lysova et al., 2010; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2016).

Meaningful work may be a function of a fit between a person and their environment (Lysova et al., 2010). At the personal level, an individual’s motives or goals influence what they deem to be meaningful. At the organizational level, aligning purpose and profit in a triple bottom line increases employees’ experiences of meaningfulness. This may be particularly relevant to
women’s sport, where employees have a hybridized understanding of value that integrates business opportunity and social good (Isard et al., 2022).

Employees may also have agency in creating a sense of meaning in work. Indeed, one way employees find meaning is through job crafting, or “redefining and reimaging their job designs in personally meaningful ways” (Berg et al., 2013, p. 81). Job crafting includes a process known as cognitive crafting, wherein employees change the way they perceive job tasks in part by seeing the holistic purpose of their work in relationship to society. For example, a ticket salesperson may understand their role as providing access to entertainment—or an employee in women’s sport may understand their job as providing role models to girls (Allison, 2016).

Notably, the most common and effective kind of crafting may be done at the collective level, in what is known as collaborative job crafting (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013; Berg et al., 2013). Such collective cocreating of meaning may be particularly relevant for dirty workers as they work with other stigmatized colleagues who share a motivation to see their work as meaningful (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013). Indeed, a sense of shared meaning only reinforces and validates a worker’s individual perception (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013).

### 3.2.2.1.3 Social Weighting

Dirty workers also engage in social weighting as they manage their work stigma and external relationships (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Specifically, dirty workers are known to condemn the condemners, support the supporters, and engage in selective social comparisons (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). When workers condemn the condemners, they discredit the legitimacy of the outsiders who deem their work dirty. In contrast, when workers support the supporters, they elevate the outsiders who offer validation of their work. Lastly, when dirty workers use strategies of selective social comparisons, they favorably compare
themselves to another group that is similar enough to be a reasonable reference group but different in some way that allows the dirty works to maintain a superiority (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Given the prestige typically associated with working in sport (Todd & Kent, 2009), it is not surprising that sport management has yet to employ dirty work to understand phenomena in our field. Indeed, there is only one study I am aware of that uses dirty work to understand a sport-related context. Lucie and Fabien (2021) draw from dirty work to understand how sport journalism is devalued among other journalistic endeavors in Switzerland. Further, they find covering women’s sport to be an even dirtier job in journalism. Given the dearth of research on stigmatized work in sport, more research is needed to understand how dirty work manifests in this field. In this study, I focus on the experience of employees in women’s sport to explore the stigma they face and how they navigate it.

3.2.3 Minority Stress Model

People with stigmatized identities (e.g., dirty workers) may experience disparate health outcomes (Meyer, 2003). These outcomes are the result of a particular kind of social stress known as minority stress. Broadly, social stress refers to factors in a person’s surrounding environment that requires them to adapt. Relatedly, minority stress specifically refers to the excess social stress a stigmatized individual experiences based on their marginalized identity (Meyer, 2003). Minority stress may stem from chronic or acute events, the vigilance required to navigate such events, or internalized stigma (Meyer, 2003). Notably, women in sport may experience minority stress as they anticipate experiencing prejudice and discrimination (Melton & Cunningham, 2012; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). This minority stress functions in part
because of the lesbian stigma facing women in sport (and women’s sport), regardless of a woman’s sexual orientation (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). Researchers have noted that coping with minority stress in women’s sport may be possible with social support from outsiders as well as sharing a common identity (Melton & Cunningham, 2012).

3.2.4 Research Context: Women’s Sport

Women’s professional sport in the United States were born out of a necessity. The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League launched in 1943, marking the first professional league for women in the country (Micelotta et al., 2018). The league arose at a time when American men were fighting in World War II, threatening the viability of professional men’s baseball teams and the operation of their stadia (All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, n.d.). Thus, the first-ever women’s professional sports league was an attempt to keep ballparks afloat while providing entertainment on the home front.

Today, there are professional leagues for at least six different team sports. At 26 years old, the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) is the longest running women’s professional league in U.S. history and boasts 12 teams across the country. The National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL), the third and longest-lasting iteration of a professional soccer league since launching in 2012, also hosts 12 teams nationwide. The Premier Hockey Federation (PHF), formerly named the National Women’s Hockey League, launched in 2015 and is home to seven teams primarily in the northeast. As the newest edition, Athletes Unlimited launched in 2020 and runs leagues for volleyball, lacrosse, softball, and basketball.

Despite these national and regional footprints, women’s professional team sport is a devalued institutional field (Isard et al., 2022). Notably, women’s teams, leagues, and athletes
are commonly subjected to gender marking, wherein women’s sport is commonly prefaced with “women” or “female” while men’s sport is simply sport (Fink, 2015). Such marking communicates and reinforces women’s sport as outside the bounds of typical sport. Similarly, the lack of marker for men’s sport signifies and perpetuates the typicality of the men’s sport enterprises (Goffman, 1963).

3.3 Methodology

I use a case study approach and an a priori design to answer the above research questions. Specifically, I embrace a theoretical sensitivity based on stigma theory and dirty work literature to interpret participants’ perspectives. Such interpretation is also influenced by my own subjectivities. Thus, I acknowledge my positionality as a former employee in women’s sport. As a worker, I have a shared background with participants in this study, including similar experiences with stigma to those they shared that are represented below.

3.3.1 Study Design

I embraced a case study methodology for this study. Specifically, given the design of interviewing participants from across women’s sport, thereby offering a broader understanding of a specific issue (i.e., stigma), this study represents an instrumental case (Hodge & Sharp, 2017). Regardless of specific case type, case studies incorporate a variety of perspectives to explore a specific phenomenon (Hodge & Sharp, 2017). There is no singular process for conducting a case study. Rather, scholars must determine the steps that best suit their study (Hodge & Sharp, 2017). I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews (via Zoom) with women’s sport employees, because such allows for both directed conversations with participants and flexibility to explore emerging themes.
3.3.2 Participants and Procedure

This study is part of a larger study about the institutional field of women’s sport. Using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, I recruited current or recent employees of a women’s sport team or league. Recruitment strategies included contacting existing members of my network who fit the study criteria, posting on Twitter to invite women’s sport employees to contact me, and sending cold emails to those listed on women’s sport teams’ online staff directories. Throughout recruitment, I was mindful of creating a diverse participant pool, accounting for organizational roles (e.g., C-suite versus entry-level across various departments) as well as identities (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation). I offered participants the option to choose a girl-serving sport organization to receive a $25 donation as an incentive for their participation.

In total, I interviewed 15 women’s sport employees. Before the interview, participants completed a thinking activity via Qualtrics. The prompt asked participants, “What are all the metrics you can think of—whether currently used or not—that demonstrate the value of women’s sport?”

The Qualtrics form also asked participants to select a research name (Hoeber, 2022), report their demographic information, and describe their work role. Based on self-reported information, at time of interview participants ranged from 24 to 54 years old (median = 30.5 years). In their current or most recent role, thirteen worked at the team level and two held league-level roles. They represented five leagues (NWSL = 7; WNBA = 4, Premier Hockey Federation = 2, other leagues = 2) among them. One participant worked pre-professional level of sport; all others worked for professional teams or leagues. Table 1 has full participant details.
Table 1

*Study 2 Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Name (Pronouns)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Organization Level</th>
<th>Sports Career Tenure (in Years)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Adam (he/him)</td>
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<td>Straight</td>
<td>Senior</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Black</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Entry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brooke (she/her)</td>
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<td>Straight</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elyse (she/her)</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabrielle (she/her)</td>
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<td>NR</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haley (she/her)</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen (she/her)</td>
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<td>Senior</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>White</td>
<td>LGBQ+</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie (she/her)</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JB (she/her)</td>
<td>W &amp; NB</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>LGBQ+</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Straight</td>
<td>Entry</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Straight</td>
<td>Senior</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret (she/her)</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Sue (she/her)</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* M = Man. W = Woman. NB = Nonbinary. LGBQ+ = Lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or other sexual minority diversity. NR = Not reported. The above represent self-reported identities and research names except for one participant who declined the opportunity to do so.

As part of the larger study, I asked participants questions about the value of women’s sport. I interviewed until reaching saturation, with an intentional focus on hearing from a diversity of participants (i.e., identities, tenure, league). Interviews lasted 40-85 minutes, with a mean of 66 minutes. I recorded interviews via Zoom, transcribing them after for a total of 232
single-spaced pages (156,054 words). Throughout the conversations, participants organically reflected on their experiences as employees and fans in women’s sport, sharing observations about the barriers they and their organizations face. Those reflections are the basis of this particular study.

3.3.3 Analysis

I employed a deductive analytical approach to answer the research questions. I read all transcripts multiple times until I was intimately familiar with them and had developed an understanding of participants’ thoughts and experiences. I subsequently coded participants’ reflections using stigma theory and dirty work as guides. As an example of the application of stigma theory, when participants shared about disparaging comments directed at them, I coded this as enacted stigma (Herek, 2007). For instance, when reading Holly’s transcript I noted as enacted stigma her experience described below that when she tells people she works in women’s sport, they frequently respond by asking demeaning questions. Furthermore, as an application of dirty work, when participants used language that disparaged those making such remarks toward them, I coded this as condemning the condemners (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Specifically, I noted Jordan’s commentary about Twitter trolls who are “stuck in the 1930s” (described in greater detail below) as condemning the condemners.

3.3.4 Evaluative Criteria

I used Tracy’s (2010) criteria to establish and bolster this work’s quality, focusing on sincerity, rich rigor, credibility, worthy topic, and significant contribution. To establish sincerity, I engaged in multiple forms of self-reflexivity, including journaling immediately after each interview focusing on both what the participants shared as well as my own interpretations and
interviewing strategies. I used these notes as I debriefed regularly with an informed colleague. To achieve rich rigor, I listened back to the first five interviews, identified trends in the interviews, and debriefed with my colleague before conducting additional interviews. To bolster credibility, I engaged in in-depth member reflections with participants, emailing participants to share a full transcript and key takeaways. Participants who responded agreed that my takeaways and transcript reflected our conversation and their experiences. Lastly, women’s sport is a timely and worthy topic (Lough et al., 2022; Thomson et al., 2022) and as the findings identify unique barriers to women’s sport employees and organizations, they make a significant contribution.

3.4 Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of women’s sport employees, focusing on their experiences with stigma. Below I use stigma theory (Goffman, 1963; Herek, 2007) to identify the way stigma manifests for these employees. I subsequently draw from the dirty work literature (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b) to explore how employees manage the stigma they face based on their occupation. See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

*Relationship between stigma, collective anxiety, and stigma management strategies for participants in Study 2*
3.4.1 Employees’ Experiences with Stigma

In interviews, every participant alluded to observing structural stigma or experiencing individual stigma, with many sharing encounters with both types of stigma. Below I explore in more detail how stigma manifested for these employees. Before doing so, however, it is important to note that participants’ observations of structural stigma also imply that these employees have developed a stigma consciousness. That is, they are aware of the stigma facing women’s sport, which allows them to perceive disparities as systemic issues rather than isolated or merely personal issues (Wells et al., 2021).

3.4.1.1 Structural Stigma

Structural stigma refers to ways participants saw women’s sport being devalued through social norms and systems. At times, participants spoke about structural stigma in broad reflections. For example, Holly succinctly noted, “social bias plays into…everything” in women’s sport. Margaret further explained that she and her colleagues operate with an “understanding [of] the larger world and where it sees women's sports.” Jordan reflected on his
time on the job, saying “being deep working in women’s sports, you really see what other people on the outside think of it…the negative perceptions.” Luca offered additional insight, noting that it has “been ingrained in people's minds, like ‘oh men's sports is like the better thing.’” These statements reflect a broad awareness of structural stigma from employees in women’s sport. Participants also reflected on three specific ways that structural stigma operates in women’s sport: through media, organizational practices, and treatment of players.

3.4.1.1 Media. Participants were aware of the media disparities facing women’s sport. Notably, Nate referred to these disparities as the “gross negligence of mainstream media.” These media discrepancies manifested in three main ways: quantity, placement and promotion, and narratives. First, quantity refers to the limited coverage women’s sport receives. As Jamie reflected, “when we don't feel like we're begging for attention, I think it'll be considered successful. Like the NFL doesn't wake up on Monday morning and worry about whether or not they're getting coverage.” Second, placement and promotion refers to the marginalization of coverage based on where and how much marketing is put behind it. Margaret offered a broad example of her experiences with women’s sport television, saying “It was on ESPNU and only so many people get that channel…and they didn't put any commercials in, whereas this other game that was on ESPN that was the men's game…was promoted for a week and a half.” Third, narratives refers to the negative storylines told in the media. As Holly observed, “whenever the broad media talks about women's sports it's always ‘Well, they lose money every year; well, they're supported by the NBA or the MLS…the men. And I think, that's such a shitty way to look at it.” Others also commented on the way scandals are elevated and influence public perception in the absence of other available storylines. Sue noted, “it is the more inflammatory things that
breakthrough [in the media]…that's really frustrating when it’s like, oh shoot like that one thing that happened 10 years ago, that's what you remember?” Collectively, limited quantity, marginalized placement and promotion, and negative narratives are ways structural stigma manifested through the media.

**3.4.1.1.2 Organizational Practices.** Participants who worked for organizations that operated men’s and women’s teams reflected on the way the structure and culture of their organizations disadvantaged the women’s teams. In participants’ organizations that had this set up, few employees—if any at all—focused exclusively on the women’s team. In Gabrielle’s organization, accounting practices also benefitted the men’s team, as it applied a standard 90%/10% split to all corporate sponsorship, with the majority going to the men’s side. As a result, the women’s team did not receive dedicated attention or adequate resources. As Gabrielle explained:

> There were very few people that were dedicated to the [women’s team] …you're always kind of the redheaded stepchild when you have that kind of dynamic going, when it’s 90% of your revenue and probably 90% of your salary, ego, and everything else is tied up over here, it's hard to pay attention to this little 10%.

Holly similarly reflected on the organizational norms that prioritize the men’s team and devalue the women’s, including employee incentives.

> The promotions, the bonuses are based off of work you do on the men's team and not so much on the women's team, so it's just everything, the whole system is set up to focus more on the guys and the women get what's left over.

Overall, organizational practices like staffing and accounting practices codified and perpetuated structural stigma.

**3.4.1.1.4 Players’ Salary and Treatment.** Participants emphasized the disparities in how players are treated. As Nate explained, “It's [advocating for themselves] something they've
always had to do because nobody wants to treat them like pro athletes.” Participants pointed to discrepancies in salary, other perks, and cultural recognition for women athletes. Reflecting on the players on his team, Adam noted, “the vast majority of them have to have additional jobs to support themselves…they're not getting an income that they deserve, or an income that allows them to live on [their sport] alone, and I do consider that a travesty.” In addition to salary, participants noted women athletes do not receive the same ancillary benefits as men. For example, participants noted the athletes have had to play in hand-me-down jerseys, have fewer amenities in their locker rooms, do not receive 24/7 catered meals, and have worse travel arrangements. Gabrielle emphasized the latter, saying “we can't take chartered planes. Even though they have to get up and play early the next morning, they have to take a commercial flight…it's not equal, it's not equal at all.” Lastly, participants reflected on the disparity in cultural cache. Luca dreamt of a future where being a professional athlete in women’s sport is “as big a deal as it is to be an NBA player or to be an NHL player or to play in the MLB.” That is not the current reality. Jamie reflected on a recent NHL event she attended wherein between periods they introduced the US Women’s National Hockey Team for the upcoming Olympics. The inadequacy of the experience stood out to her.

They did the most horrible job…there weren't graphics ready on TV, the announcers didn't have their names and so these poor women are standing on the field being shown on camera and we're getting no information…that would just never happen if you were introducing the men's hockey team.

The mistreatment of athletes in women’s sport, including salary, other perks, and cultural recognition represented structural stigma.

3.4.1.2 Individual-Level Stigma
In addition to observing structural stigma, participants shared experiences with individual stigma at all three levels: enacted, felt, and internalized. Below I explore each.

3.4.1.2.1 Enacted Stigma. In this case, enacted stigma refers to the negative behavior women’s sport employees receive due to their role in women’s sport—an occurrence that was common for participants in this study. As Brooke noted, “it makes me kind of mad when people are like, ‘Oh, it's just a women's game’ or like, ‘Oh, yeah, why would you watch? Women's sports are boring’ or ‘Oh, yeah who cares about that, it's just a girl.’” Helen has faced these comments countless times, as she remarks, “Whenever somebody says, ‘Oh well, people don't watch women’s sports.’ You know, like, we've heard that forever. I mean it's probably tattooed somewhere on me I've heard it so many times.” Notably, these kinds of comments come from strangers and friends, alike. As Jordan reflected, “I still have people in my life who are like… ‘Why should I care?’” At other times, the tone may be more hostile, as Jordan described people “slandering” women’s sport. In addition to passing judgement on women’s sport broadly, sometimes these comments directly invoke an employees’ career. As Holly has experienced, “If you tell people that you work in women's sports, it's always like, ‘Oh, that's great, are they profitable? Are they sustainable? Are you going to have a job in 10 years? Five years? Two years?’”

Employees in women’s sport who are former professional players may have a unique experience with enacted stigma. As one participant, a former professional basketball player, reflected:

People really discredit us because it's women's sports… when you see the responses we get on our personal social media, or different things, where people are going out of their way to make it seem like we don't know what we're talking about and we don’t know what we're doing, to me I think that's the most frustrating thing is just the lack of support just because we're women.
The comments this participant received as a player are inseparable from her experiences as an employee. Collectively, employees in women’s sport regularly contend with questions and comments that directly suggest women’s sport are less-than, a form of enacted stigma.

Other times, enacted stigma for employees in women’s sport may manifest more like a microaggression. One participant reflected, “when I started at the [WNBA team], if I said I worked for the [WNBA team] people would go, ‘Oh is that women's soccer? Where do you play at?’” Jordan has had similar experiences when talking about the team he works for as well as specific athletes in women’s sport who do not play for the team for which he works. “I can say Megan Rapinoe and someone will look at me like ‘Who?’ or they’ll be like ‘Oh is, that the gay one?’ They don't automatically think, ‘Oh, Megan Rapinoe, really good player’ or anything like that.” While not blatantly hostile comments, these questions are demeaning. The ignorance reflected in them conveys an unawareness, unimportance, and devaluation of women’s sport.

3.4.1.2.2 Felt Stigma. Felt stigma refers to fear and anticipation of being stigmatized. Based on their observations of structural stigma and personal experiences with enacted stigma, some women’s sport employees experienced felt stigma. Notably, this felt stigma influenced their behavior, perhaps most often around when and how to quantify women’s sport. As Holly explained, the documentation of successes in women’s sport is a “defense mechanism.” She elaborated, “We're still measuring a lot of the times to show that women's sports belong…when the critics come to call and say no one cares about women's sports or no one watches women's sports.” Other times, teams may choose not to share numbers, if they worry they do not tell a good enough story and will be used against women’s sport. As Margaret shared:

There’s the fear of the online or even offline haters who will use it as fuel to say ‘well, this is why it's not good’ and ‘this is why it's not worthwhile.’ And it gives them easy fuel
to write off all of women's sports.

In this way, a “fear of [women’s sport] being perceived horribly” (Margaret) influenced employees’ behaviors. Given the broader context—namely, employees’ observations of structural stigma and experiences with enacted stigma—this fear represents the manifestation of felt stigma in women’s sport.

3.4.1.2.3 Internalized Stigma. Internalized stigma refers to when individuals who are stigmatized incorporate that negative evaluation into their self-concept. In this case, internalized stigma is when employees in women’s sport express sentiments or act in ways that diminish women’s sport. For participants in this study, this mainly manifested in two ways: internal stakeholders devaluing women’s sport and participants themselves accepting the status quo.

3.4.1.2.3.1 Internally Devaluing Women’s Sport. Participants reflected on strategic decisions internal stakeholders have made that devalue women’s sport. For example, Helen explained that at times, women’s sport executives have positioned women’s sport as needing donations. Speaking about a now-defunct league, she commented, “You were selling yourself as sort of this charitable contribution…It was almost like you were asking for charity, like, ‘Oh, support women's sports,’ like ‘we need the support.’” While she suggested the days of asking for charity have ended, women’s sport decision-makers may still undercut their value and positioning in the market. One participant reflected on this.

My point of view is that we should double the price of [the league’s streaming platform]. It's embarrassing that it's only $17. I think it cheapens us. And I hate it. And then we're trying to increase our media rights value overall in the public, why don't we start with our own thing? ...The traditional thinking would be, you get more fans by taking away all the barriers to entry including pay for a subscription and I think that is really dangerous in devaluing us as a property…fans are willing to pay a lot to support us and we need to be bold enough to capture that.
This comment suggests that decision-makers may be influenced by an internalized stigma that says women’s sport are not very valuable. It is a sentiment Nate has had to contend with in a different sport. “You have to look at ticket sales, you have to look at broadcasting numbers, you have to look at how much sponsorships are valued because people [in women’s sport] undervalue all of that stuff constantly.” In Nate’s experience, others in women’s sport frequently undervalue the product, leading to underpriced tickets, broadcasting rights, and sponsorship packages. As this undervaluing happens by those working in women’s sport and mirrors a broader societal devaluing of women’s sport, it may be a result of internalize stigma. Collectively, these reflections suggest that strategic decisions across women’s sport may be in part a function of internalized stigma in which employees have accepted the devaluation of women’s sport.

3.4.1.2.3.2 Accepting the Status Quo. Participants may also be operating under the influence of internalized stigma unknowingly. For example, Brooke worked for an organization that operated both a men’s and women’s team. The women’s team played in the most prestigious league for their sport, while the men played in a lower division league for their sport. Brooke explained, “technically the women's team is a little bit higher than the men's team but we're very, very, very adamant about making it equal for both of them.” Here she acknowledges that the women’s team competes at a higher level and that they receive equal treatment with the men’s team, which competes in a lower-level division. But why should players in the highest division get the same treatment—not better treatment—than players in a lower division? Would we expect women in a lower-division league to get equal treatment to men in the highest-division league? These are not questions she asks, despite recognizing the differences in league level.
Brooke’s acceptance of equal treatment, despite women athletes’ higher-level play, may suggest an internalized stigma at play, such that the very best women are perceived to be akin to second-best men.

The women’s sport employees who were part of this study all navigated stigma on a regular basis. They were keenly aware of the structural stigma facing women’s sport through media, organizational practices, and players’ salary and treatment. They also contended with individual-level stigma as they regularly received comments and questions that devalue women’s sport (enacted stigma) and factored a fear of experiencing nasty comments into their strategic calculus (felt stigma). They also observed other women’s sport employees devalue women’s sport and at times unintentionally did so themselves (internalized stigma).

3.4.2 Collective Anxiety

Employees observations of and experiences with stigma created a distinct stress. Specifically, some participants voiced a sense of collective anxiety. Collective anxiety refers to a pervasive sense of worry that women’s sport could fold—and given how women’s sport symbolizes and advances gender equity, folding would represent a failure for women’s sport and for women in society broadly (Isard et al., in review).

Awareness of women’s sport second-class status in society provoked a worry in some participants. Sue explained, “We’re underdogs. We are trying to scratch and claw for every bit of ground that we get. And there is this anxiety that if that doesn’t happen, we might go away entirely.” This understanding of being an underdog speaks to women’s sport employees’ observations of structural stigma that conveyed women’s sport place is on the margins.
Second, the enacted stigma women’s sport employees faced also played a role in producing collective anxiety. Those who do not support women’s sport often challenge employees, questioning the value and viability of women’s teams and leagues, a manifestation of enacted stigma. These demeaning questions simultaneously communicate disregard for women’s sport and may trigger employees’ own understandings of the history of women’s sport, which looms large for some employees. As Nate explained, “There’s obviously some trauma from… having things fail as part of this league… that’s where the nervous energy comes from.” Though Nate had been working in women’s sport for only two years, unprompted she recited the history of her sport dating back to the 1980s, well before she was born. In this way, the “trauma” she is reflecting on largely has been passed down to her, likely through conversations with colleagues and fans. Holly specifically noted the role of women’s sport’s history in conversations, saying “women’s sport fans [including employees] are used to teams crumbling or moving or leagues folding… it’s a pretty common conversation that we have.” Notably, these historic events are frequently levied against women’s sport and its employees.

Collective anxiety was based on a shared identity with others in women’s sport that had a pronounced effect on women’s sport organizations. Participants indicated that collective anxiety stemmed from turmoil they experienced (enacted stigma) or observed (structural stigma) as well as that which others passed down to them (e.g., trauma from past iterations of teams and leagues). Notably, many who voiced collective anxiety had only worked in women’s sport for a short while. Regardless, the outcomes of collective anxiety were palpable and varied as the emotional experience prompted both adaptive behaviors and maladaptive mindsets (Isard et al., 2022).
3.4.3 Dirty Work and Stigma Management Strategies

Given the above illustration of participants’ experiences with stigma based on their occupation (i.e., working in women’s sport), I contend that women’s sport is a form of dirty work. Specifically, women’s sport may be most aligned with socially dirty work. This is because women’s sport is devalued based on social norms that dictate sport as a men’s activity, thereby stigmatizing women athletes and those associated with them. As employees for socially stigmatized organizations, women’s sport employees are dirty workers.

Women’s sport employees found many ways to cope with the taint of their jobs. Below I use concepts from dirty work to help explore how women’s sport workers managed the stigma they experienced based on their employment in women’s sport. Specifically, I identify that women’s sport employees invoke a necessity shield, as well was engage in and with meaningfulness, job crafting, and social weighting.

3.4.3.1 Necessity Shield

One way that dirty workers justify their stigmatized profession is by perceiving their work as necessary for society. Dirty work scholars call this belief a necessity shield (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b). Women’s sport is often justified based on its contributions to society. Notably, every participant articulated a belief that women’s sport provides an important social good. As Luca noted, working in women’s sport is about something “much, much bigger” than the job. Specifically, participants noted that women’s sport was important because it provides role models for kids. For example, Haley explained “it’s [women’s sport] valuable because it shows people that whether you’re a man or a woman, it doesn't matter, you can still go out, you can still do something that you love to do, you can still be active.” Elyse echoed this, emphasizing the
importance of such role models for girls, saying “women's sports made our country better because we can go parade Megan Rapinoe in front of 200 12-year-olds [girls] and they freak out and suddenly they go home and like their aspirations are just so much higher.” The role modeling matters for boys, too, who can now see women in these positions. As Gabrielle noted, “the biggest thing that we bring to society is a chance for girls to see that they can go on and for boys to see that girls can succeed at just about anything as well as boys.” The implication is that what happens in women’s sport matters beyond sport itself. In this way, women’s sport employees in this study universally understand their work as being necessary for society.

However, while a necessity shield is typically a coping mechanism, among some women’s sport employees, the belief that women’s sport is necessary for society may have an unintended consequence. The very notion that women’s sport has a social importance is part of what makes collective anxiety such an intense experience. The elephant in the interviews: What happens to society—and especially to women and girls—if women’s sport goes away?

3.4.3.2 Meaningfulness and Job Crafting

Given employees’ shared understanding that women’s sport is necessary for society, working in the industry brings meaning to them. For example, Nate reflected on her career trajectory saying, “whatever that [my path] was going to be, it was going to be women-oriented; that's just everything I did in college and what I was interested in talking about in college and writing about.” After an internship with a women’s soccer team, she “appl[ied] to every job I can possibly think of because I knew I wanted to work in women’s sports.” Helen echoed the connection between gender-focused work and her goals in women’s sport, saying “for me it was always gender equity and sport simply the vehicle to do so…it's simply a great platform for us to
try to drive gender equity.” For Holly, the meaningfulness she experiences helps her keep going. Though she believes she would be making more money and have a higher title if she worked in men’s sport, she says the good she feels she is doing “gives me a purpose or reason why I moved across the country for a new job. Yeah, it just makes it more meaningful when you can see more and more girls and women getting opportunities.” Sue similarly finds a lot of meaning in her work. As she reflected:

I came to the [her organization] because I love women's sports and especially women's [specific sport]…When I think about a career, there are some jobs that aren't as stressful because you don't care as much and there are some jobs that are stressful because you care so much and this is definitely the latter, where sometimes it keeps me up at night. But that just tells me that I care. I wouldn't want it any other way. It's a lot of people in [her organization] who feel similarly, you know there's a lot of passion behind it.

Sue and her colleagues share an understanding that the work they are doing is meaningful.

Similarly, Luca and her colleagues share a mindset about the meaning in their work—one they hope prospective colleagues will also embrace.

In terms of our recruiting efforts, it's looking for people who are value driven and not just looking for a job… They're doing this because it really hits their heart, and they want to be a part of change [for women’s sport] that will continue to go on even after…That's the kind of sentiment that I think most of us share at this club…and we're focused on creating a culture that is about bringing in more and more people who believe in that kind of value system.

Collectively, employees in women’s sport derive a lot of meaning from their work—something they share with each other across organizations and with colleagues they work alongside daily.

3.4.3.2.1 Condemning the Condemners. Condemning the condemners refers to when stigmatized workers aim to discredit the legitimacy of an outsider who devalues them. Several participants showed a propensity to do this. As Jordan explained

What we [employees in women’s sport] want to show people is that there are people that care [about women’s sport]…contrary to what everybody wants to believe. And by
everybody, I mean it's the Twitter trolls and the ones who walk around as if they're still stuck in the 1930s. (Emphasis added)

Jordan dismisses the validity of those who devalue women’s sport, calling them “Twitter trolls” and describing them unfavorably as having a mentality that is “stuck in the 1930s.” He was far from the only participant to rhetorically attack the credibility of those who oppose women’s sport. Margaret reflected on how condemners interpret various financial metrics of women’s sport

From an outside world, money is given the most value…especially within women's sports it's always like, ‘Well, is it making money? Or is it not making money?’…for anybody who's not a fan of women's sports or who doesn't see the value in it, it's their easiest argument to write it off immediately. But, it's not a very valid argument because most professional sports teams didn't make money for a very long time…so it's an argument that they think they're being clever in, but, and it's really like social media voices or, you know, people hiding behind their computer. (Emphasis added)

Margaret critiques those who are critics of women’s sport, targeting their intelligence and bravery as she says they are not actually very smart—and they cower behind their keyboards.

Participants who engaged in condemning the condemners also adopted a shorthand to invoke similar sentiments. For example, later in the interview, Margaret broadly referred to these individuals as “haters;” Elyse described those who devalue women’s sport as “shitty men on Twitter” and “naysayers;” and Gabrielle referred to similar people as “uneducated men” and “trolls.” The implications are that those who devalue women’s sport are not as advanced, smart, or innovative as those who support women’s sport. By condemning the condemners, women’s sport employees were able to write-off the criticisms of those who discredited women’s sport.

3.4.3.2.2 Supporting the Supporters. Supporting the supporters refers to when stigmatized workers uplift those who affirm them and see the value of their stigmatized affiliation. Typically, supporting the supporters refers to elevating external voices, but it can also be applied to internal
stakeholders. For the participants in this study, supporting the supporters seems to be evenly split between external and internal stakeholders.

3.4.3.2.3.1 External Stakeholders. Many participants reflected on the role of supportive external stakeholders, including sponsors, individuals affiliated with men’s sports, and women’s leadership initiatives. First, Brooke noted that corporate sponsors who had deals with the men’s team have been enthusiastic in their partnership with the women’s team. “When I talk to partners on the phone about [women’s team]…they share my excitement, which I think is awesome. So that's always a really big blessing when people match your excitement, especially for [the women’s team].” Here, Brooke’s opinion of the sponsor is elevated because of their support for the women’s team. Sue felt similarly toward sponsors of women’s sport—and that translated into her buying their products. The calculus was easy for her, as she reflected “I'm more likely to buy a Bud Light Seltzer than any other seltzer because I know how much Budweiser is supporting women's sports.” Second, participants felt favorably toward those affiliated with men’s sport who they saw as supportive. As Holly noted, “We've seen a lot of success when like the [men’s team] can come to [women’s team] games, the [women’s] players can go to [men’s] games…they benefit from having each other.” In particular, the celebration of when men’s team athletes attend the women’s games exemplifies supporting the supporters. Similarly, Helen found it validating when a men’s team reached out after she led a successful, innovative campaign to find out how she did it. “We got calls… from teams around the country that said, ‘Wow, we want to try this.’ And it was really cool to get calls from men's minor league baseball teams from the East Coast…I was like, ‘This is awesome.’” Finally, one participant noted the importance of women’s leadership organizations that are not sport-specific. Aziza noted, there are “research
institutions that have been working on [supporting women’s sport] and it has been a really great, affirming process…that these things that we've been thinking are actually now being supported by data.”

3.4.3.2.3.2 Internal Stakeholders. While external stakeholders offered important support, some women’s sport employees may have found the level of support to be insufficient, leading them to turn inwards to each other. Indeed, several participants reflected on the important role of finding likeminded others, including athletes, colleagues, and fans. First, participants regarded athletes in women’s sport to be passionate—an attribute they hoped to match. Elyse explained, “in many ways it [working in women’s sport] replicates what the athletes themselves are doing. It's just like fight, fight, fight and try to make progress and try to figure it out.” Luca similarly admired the resilience of the women, saying “when it comes to female athletes, they are doing it because they love this sport despite the obstacles around them and despite the disrespect that they face. I can't even put into words how incredible these athletes are.” In this way, those who work in women’s sport draw inspiration from the athletes as they all face stigma.

Second, participants championed their front office colleagues. For example, Gabrielle noted the important contributions of a former leader at her team, saying “We are all very proud of [leader], who was the one who pushed for women's teams.” Lastly, participants in this study were also fans of women’s sport and as such found solace among other fans. For example, Margaret turns to her friends who do not work in women’s sport but are fans nonetheless. “I have friends who I like watching women's sports with…[they] work totally unrelated to the sports industry but they'll see, ‘Oh, this was the most tuned into game on ABC for women's sports ever’ and they're…excited about it.” Having like-minded friends helped Margaret feel less alone and
stigmatized. As dirty workers, women’s sport employees in part managed their stigma by engaging in supporting the supporters, who were both external and internal stakeholders.

3.4.3.2.4 Selective Social Comparisons. Selective social comparisons refers to when stigmatized workers compare their occupations to others in an effort to bolster self-esteem. More than any other reference group, the women’s sport employees in this study compared their organizations to men’s sport organizations.

The comparisons participants made tended to highlight three axes: growth potential, impact, and winning. First, participants were consistently quick to note that men’s sport has been around longer than women’s sport. The relative youth of women’s sport provided an important opportunity: there is still so much growth ahead. As Elyse explained with optimism, “The most stable women's sports league is the WNBA and that's in its 25th season…mapping men's sports on top of that, well the growth trajectory, we're still in the infancy of so many of these leagues.” Second, in addition to growth potential, participants noted that women’s teams made a greater impact in communities. This is evident in Aziza’s reflection that “Our players are really accessible in a way that the [men’s] players are a little harder to reach. Our players don't live too far from the arena at all and are involved in the community.” Haley similarly noted that women’s sport is a leader for sport broadly when it comes to inclusion. As she expressed, “people identify in a lot of different ways and everybody's accepted. I think that's something women's sports is better at doing that than men’s sports and on an authentic level…leading the way for sports.”

Finally, many participants were proud of beating men’s sport in areas that may matter most in sports: winning and fans. For example, both Gabrielle’s and Adam’s teams achieved feats their local men’s teams had not. As Adam shared, “The [NHL team] have never won the
Stanley Cup, the [NFL team] never won the Super Bowl, the [women’s team] have won the [championship] before…and I think that's something.” Nate’s team similarly beat the local men’s team on an important achievement. “We are the only people who have sold out [arena name]. The [women’s team] has sold out [arena] and [men’s team] still has not sold out [arena]…So, we are definitely competitors to them and they know it.”

3.5 Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to explore the experiences of women’s sport employees. Specifically, I sought to understand how stigma manifested for women’s sport employees (RQ1) as well as how these employees navigate this stigma (RQ2). To address RQ1, I drew from stigma theory (Goffman, 1963; Herek, 2007) and found that employees observe structural stigma and personally experience enacted, felt, and internalized stigma. To address RQ2, I drew from dirty work literature and found employees navigated these stigmas with a necessity shield, finding meaningfulness in work through job crafting, and engaging in social weighting.

3.5.1 Stigma

The findings in this research align with and depart from past research on experiences with stigma and stigma in sport (e.g., Goffman, 1963; Herek, 2007; MacCharles & Melton, 2021; Melton & Cunningham, 2012; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). Notably, this study aligns with past research that has explored the role of stigma in women’s sport, including how key stakeholders respond to and cope with experiences of stigma (Melton & Cunningham, 2012). Specifically, this study affirms the importance of studying experiences of employees of professional sport (Oja et al., 2018) and doing so with a lens that recognizes the stigma facing employees (Cavalier, 2011; MacCharles & Melton, 2021; Melton & Cunningham, 2014; Sartore
Importantly, employees may face stigma from a variety of sources at both the structural and individual levels.

This study underscores the importance of understanding structural stigma facing sport employees. Indeed, scholars have long studied the role of media coverage in women’s sport (e.g., Cooky et al., 2021; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Fink, 2015; Isard & Melton, 2021), recognizing the media as one of the “most powerful economic, social and political institutions on the planet” (Kane, 2011, para. 4). These studies have consistently noted disparities facing women athletes, arguing that such is a disservice to those athletes and broader society. This is a reasonable conclusion, and one I have made (Isard & Melton, 2021). However, perhaps until now, studies have rarely considered the toll of these disparities on those working in women’s sport. Thus, the present study extends understanding about the impact of disparate media coverage facing women athletes, as these disparities represent a structural stigma about which employees are keenly aware. As employees in women’s sport have likely been surrounded by this media messaging for years—perhaps decades—before entering the profession, they bring this understanding with them to the job (Cavalier, 2011) as well as see it continue once in their profession (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Participants also discussed the role of organizational practices, another representation of structural stigma, affirming and extending prior literature. Specifically, participants in this study noted organizational practices (i.e., staffing head counts, accounting practices, employee incentives) that codified and perpetuated structural stigma. The notion that internal practices have the potential to marginalize individuals aligns with prior research that argues sport organizations’ policies signal what is valued and what is tainted (i.e., stigmatized; MacCharles &
Melton, 2021; Melton et al., 2022). I show that the impact of policies extends to employees’ work-based identities, communicating that some work—and workers—are more valued more than others.

At the individual level, this work advances understandings of enacted, felt, and internalized stigma (Herek, 2007) for employees based on their occupation identity. First, this research affirms that the questions dirty workers field—while on or off the job—may represent enacted stigma (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Second, this research extends understandings of felt stigma and stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Notably, in response to felt stigma, women’s sport employees expressed that they make strategic work decisions in part based on a fear of confirming negative stereotypes about women’s sport. Finally, as past research has documented and been critical of women’s sport’s positioning as a cause (Allison, 2016), this paper advances understanding about this phenomenon by interpreting it as a form of internalized stigma.

3.5.2 Dirty Work

The findings in this research both are consistent with previous dirty work research (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013; Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014a; Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b) and present novel insights. While working in sport has largely been conceptualized as a high-status occupation (Kent & Todd, 2009; Oja et al., 2015; Swanson & Kent, 2017), this study aligns with Lucie and Fabien’s (2021) contention that at times working in sport is dirty. I extend this understanding by identifying the ways stigma manifests for those working in women’s sport as well as the related consequences of this stigma, including the stigma management strategies women’s sport employees may use.
Through exploring dirty work in a relatively unexplored setting (i.e., women’s sport), this study also extends understandings of what makes occupations dirty. Though prior research has established that work that is counter-stereotypical may be especially prone to dirty work, this has been conceptualized as, for example, a man working as a nurse, which is a role typically associated with femininity (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014a; Simpson & Simpson, 2018). As this study explored experiences of women’s sport employees, and the majority of participants were themselves women, I show that counter-stereotypical work may not only be defined by the gender of the worker—but could also be defined as an occupation that is gendered in a counter-stereotypical manner. That is, sport remains a male domain (Burton, 2015) and thus women’s sport is an occupation that—regardless of the worker’s gender—contrasts with gendered social norms.

This study also affirms and extends scholarly knowledge about how workers navigate the taint of a devalued occupation. For example, I find women’s sport employees at times use a necessity shield (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b) to help protect themselves from the stigma they experience as a result of their job. Specifically, women’s sport employees asserted the necessity of women’s sport for important social goods benefitting youth and advancing gender equity, namely, role models, leadership skills, and health outcomes. However, this study also shows that under certain conditions, a necessity shield may have a dark side. That is, the relationship between the stigma facing women’s sport employees and their belief in the necessity of women’s sport for advancing gender equity produced an intense, shared experience of collective anxiety.

Collective anxiety may represent a unique form of minority stress, as it results from experiences with a stigmatized identity—being a dirty worker as an employee in women’s sport
(Isard et al., 2022; Meyer, 2003). Notably, dirty work scholars have argued that experiences with occupational stigma produce group-level threats that result in strong workgroup culture and cohesion (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b). While such group-level cohesion may at times be a resource for dirty workers (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), it may also produce shared emotional experiences that inhibit workers and their organizations from maximizing productivity (Isard et al., 2022).

This study also illustrates the role of meaningfulness in stigmatized work. Specifically, meaningfulness manifested as employees worked in support of women’s sport given its perceived social importance. As is common, employees co-created this meaningfulness with their direct colleagues (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013; Berg et al., 2013). However, this paper extends prior understandings of co-creation as women’s sport employees also constructed meaning with individuals external to their organizations. Thus, this study provides evidence of collaborative job crafting in women’s sport, as employees engaged in cognitive crafting to derive meaning and place their work in relationship to a broader social good (Berg et al., 2013). Given the importance of meaningfulness to the employees in this study, this work also contrasts past research that suggested “pink collar” (i.e., women’s sport; Lucie & Fabien, 2021) work may be less meaningful (Lysova et al., 2010). Instead, what is meaningful may be more individually dependent.

Lastly, the findings affirm and extend understanding of social weighting among dirty workers (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Participants in this study engaged in all three forms of social weighting: condemning condemners, supporting supporters, and selective social comparison. First, women’s sport employees, like other dirty workers, regularly sought to
discredit those who criticized women’s sport. Interestingly, though at times participants explained the shortcomings of their condemners, it was more common for them to engage in a shared shorthand to refer to these individuals. While specific terms they used varied slightly, they were overwhelmingly consistent in targeting condemners’ intelligence and mindsets, as well as their gender (i.e., men). Future work could examine the emergence of shared shorthand and the axes on which condemners are condemned. Second, participants engaged in supporting supporters. As many of them spoke to the importance of supporting sponsors of women’s sport, this study aligns with industry-based research that women’s sport fans are also particularly apt to support companies that invest in women’s sport (Jones, 2021). Thus, future research should consider exploring how consumers engage with dirty occupations. Finally, participants in this study used selective social comparison to assert women’s sport’s value, helping to boost their self-esteem in the face of a dirty occupation. Interestingly, though scholars have predicted that dirty workers will tend to make “downward” comparisons (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), women’s sport employees defaulted to comparing themselves upward—to men’s sport. While this may be in part the result of not having other reference groups against which to compare, it nevertheless stands out. Thus, future work could consider further exploring upward comparisons from dirty workers to valorized occupations.

3.5.3 Theoretical Contributions

This paper makes several theoretical contributions. Perhaps most significantly, this study helps advance an understanding of the unique theoretical context of women’s sport and builds out an understanding of the role of dirty work in sport. First, this work demonstrates that many sport employees—a component that is only growing—may not experience their work in a
unilaterally positive manner. This is in contrast to existing work that has suggested sport employees are distinct from other occupations precisely because of the admiration they receive (Oja et al., 2018; Swanson & Kent, 2017; Todd & Kent, 2009). Second, this is one of the few studies that considers the role of dirty work in sport. Thus, this study helps open the door on a wide line of inquiry about stigma in the sport industry. While past research has focused on the stigma employees experience based on demographic identities, dirty work considers the stigma employees face because of their job.

3.5.4 Managerial Implications

This work has important managerial implications for the growing segment of the sport industry focused on women’s sport. First, this study points to the role of organizational practices play in communicating what work—and which workers—are valued members of an organization. In this case, women’s teams were devalued at the expense of men’s teams. Thus, it would behoove organizations to consider their internal policies and norms to discern where they unintentionally may be stigmatizing part of their organizational portfolio of products as well as portions of their workforce. Adjusting practices to be more equitable is likely to improve organizational outcomes (Swanson & Kent, 2017; Todd & Kent, 2009), so is in the best interest of sport organizations.

Second, based on their observations of structural stigma and experiences with enacted stigma, women’s sport employees may feel like the underdog. Indeed, some women’s sport organizations have been known to emphasize this mindset (c.f., Watkins, 2022). However, such a mentality may only hinder employee wellbeing and organizational outcomes (Isard et al., 2022).
Instead, managers in women’s sport organizations should help build employees’ confidence in the organizations and broader women’s sport field.

Lastly, some workers in women’s sport may be more prone to experiencing enacted stigma than others. For example, those who regularly engage with non-fans in the public including and perhaps especially those who run organizations’ social media accounts, may be more likely to encounter frequent disparagement. Given the negative impact of experiencing enacted stigma on employee wellbeing (Meyer, 2003) and organizational outcomes (Isard et al., 2022), women’s sport managers should invest additional time and resources in supporting these employees.

3.5.5 Future Directions and Conclusion

This work focused on women’s sport, the stigma these employees face, and how they navigate it. However, employees may not be the only stakeholders in women’s sport who experience stigma and have it influence their behaviors (c.f., Isard, Study 1). Limited research has suggested fans of women’s sport are aware of the structural stigma facing women’s sport and to take action to remedy it, at times coming with an emotional cost (Sveinson & Allison, 2021; Sveinson et al., 2022). Further research should seek to expand on this emergent work to develop a model of fans’ experiences with stigma and its resultant outcomes (c.f., Bentein et al., 2017), such as collective anxiety and its possible consequences.

In conclusion, this study used stigma theory and dirty work to explore the experiences of women’s sport employees. In doing so, I find that women’s sport employees observe structural stigma and personally experience enacted, felt, and internalized stigma. Because the stigma they face is based on their occupation (i.e., working in women’s sport), I contend that these
employees are dirty workers—and that given the current conditions and cultural context, working in women’s sport is a form of dirty work. As such, I explore how women’s sport employees manage the stigma, identifying the valuable roles of a necessity shield, meaningfulness and job crafting, and social weighting. Thus, this research has advanced scholarly understanding of stigma in sport, experiences of sport employees, and the unique theoretical context of women’s sport.
CHAPTER 4

FAN LABOR IN WOMEN’S SPORT

4.1 Introduction

Women’s sport fans may be as loyal as they come (Fink et al., 2002). They track down streaming links to watch games, navigate ecommerce sites to meet their merchandise needs, and lean on social media and digital communities to find one another (Sports Innovation Lab, 2021). Compared to men's sport fans, they are more likely to have plans to attend future games and purchase more merchandise (Fink et al., 2002). In addition, women’s sport fans are significantly more likely to buy sponsors’ products (Jones, 2021).

Indeed, being a women’s sport fan may be a labor—an act of effort (Sveinson et al., 2022). This labor is in part a function of women’s sport operating outside the norm and outside the cultural consciousness. As famed journalist Kate Fagan (2022) explained, “just existing in our culture, you will know a dozen men’s storylines...osmosis will have you knowing men’s sports storylines” (8:06-8:39). But that is not the reality for women’s sport, which receives less than six percent of televised sports coverage (Cooky et al., 2021) and a fraction of the newspaper coverage (Gibbs, 2021). These disparities make it harder for women’s sport fans to do precisely what any fan wants to do: follow their sports.

The disparities simultaneously symbolize and perpetuate women’s sport’s second-class status—a distinction of which fans are keenly aware (Delia, 2020; Delia et al., 2021a; Sveinson et al., 2022). That is, while fans believe women’s sport is valuable, they find themselves surrounded by messages to the contrary. Consider the treatment of athletes in women’s sport, who in many instances remain underpaid (Hruby, 2022). In addition, they are rarely known only
for being athletes, instead being known as “female athletes” or “women athletes,” a practice that marks women in sport as not typical (Fink, 2015). As a cultural activity that is devalued through societal norms and practices, it can be said that women’s sport is stigmatized (Goffman, 1963; Herek, 2007).

This stigma may have considerable consequences for those beyond the athletes. For example, employees in women’s sport are subjected to harassment and have to contend with frequent criticisms challenging the existence and sustainability of women’s sport (Isard et al., 2022; Isard, Study 2). In part stemming from these experiences and an awareness of the broader cultural devaluation, employees in women’s sport may feel pressure to defend women’s sport and do all they can to support its continued growth (Isard, Study 2). Collectively, these experiences are exhausting for employees (Isard et al., 2022).

Women’s sport fans may face a similar set of circumstances and challenges. Notably, women’s sport fans are sensitive to the ways women’s sport is devalued in society (Sveinson & Allison, 2021). In addition to an awareness of the societal devaluation, fans may have their fandom personally ridiculed (Isard, Study 1). These observations of the world around them and experiences with ridicule may be stressful for fans and prompt them to consider present and historic mistreatment facing women’s sport. As a result, fans may go above and beyond to do what they can to help women's sport be successful (Delia, 2020; Delia et al., 2021a; Sveinson et al., 2022).

Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the labor of being a women’s sport fan. Drawing from stigma theory as well as Study 1 and Study 2, I conducted a field study with sport fans. Specifically, I surveyed fans, asking questions about their interests as a fan, observations of
and experiences with stigma, and behaviors. I used PROCESS for SPSS 3.5.2 (Hayes, 2013) to analyze the data and develop a model for fan labor in women’s sport. Below I elaborate on my hypotheses and methods.

### 4.2 Conceptual Framework

I build on Study 1 and Study 2 to examine the labor of being a women’s sport fan. Below I provide an overview of the theoretical tenets that support my hypothesized model (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Hypothesized mediational model for relationships among structural stigma, stigma-related stress, and loyal boosterism for fans of women’s sport*

![Hypothesized mediational model](image)

#### 4.2.1 Structural Stigma

Structural stigma refers to when cultural norms devalue something in society (Herek, 2007). This is the case for women’s sport, which scholars have frequently documented as being overlooked, treated differently, and generally disrespected (Cooky et al., 2021; Fink, 2015). In the more than 30 years that scholars have tracked television coverage of women’s sport’s, the most airtime women’s sport has received amounted to just 8.7% of televised sport coverage (in 1999; Cooky et al., 2021). The most recent data suggests women’s sport coverage has only fallen since then, down to less than six percent in 2019 (Cooky et al., 2021). Further, women’s sport is often written out of the storyline altogether, as happened in 2018 when the University of Maryland-Baltimore County men’s basketball team received acclaim for being the “first” 16-
seed in the NCAA Tournament to upset a 1-seed. Despite the headlines, they were not the first team to achieve this feat—a designation that belongs to Harvard University’s women’s basketball team (Martinelli, 2018). Beyond media disparities, women’s sport athletes and employees also receive less pay and fewer perks (Hruby, 2022; Megdal, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.), signifying its second-class status.

Fans of women’s sport are keenly aware of these discrepancies and related challenges (Delia, 2020). Notably, Doyle and colleagues (2021) found women’s sport fans associate women’s sport with funding limitations and lack of coverage—associations that do not exist for men’s sport. At times, fans speak up about these concerns, signifying that such treatment does not align with their values (Sveinson & Allison, 2021). When the U. S. Soccer Federation posted on Facebook to promote feminized fan merchandise for girls, 99% of the comments left on the post decried the stereotypical approach to selling clothing (Sveinson & Allison, 2021). In sum, women’s sport is devalued, its fans are aware of this, and take issue with it. As such, I predict that:

_Hypothesis 1: Being a fan of women’s sport will positively relate to perceptions of structural stigma_

### 4.2.2 Stigma-related Stress

Stigma can cause a person to experience a unique form of stress (Meyer, 2003). While all people experience stress in life, those who are in the minority or otherwise hold a devalued identity, may be exposed to additional stressors because of their membership in a low-status group. As women’s sport occupies a low-status position, those associated with women’s sport may experience heightened concerns (Delia, 2020; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). Specifically,
those affiliated with women’s sport may observe mistreatment of women’s sport (Sveinson & Allison, 2021) as well as often face questions or fend off criticism about the vitality of women’s teams and leagues (Isard et al., 2022; Isard, Study 2). As these experiences serve as frequent reminders of the lack of support facing women’s sport, those affiliated may be prompted to recall historic wrongdoings and experience a sense of worry (Isard, Study 2). As such, I predict that:

Hypothesis 2: Perceptions of structural stigma facing women’s sport will positively relate to stigma-related stress among women’s sport fans

In response to concern for a group’s status, individuals may engage in actions that strengthen the ingroup and preemptively defend against future risk (Wohl et al., 2010). This may be especially true for groups that have experienced historic wrongdoings and for those whom such history feels particularly salient (Wohl et al., 2010). Thus, fans of women’s sport who reflect on the historic barriers and mistreatment facing women’s sport may engage in boosterism in an effort to create a better future. Indeed, sport management scholars have theorized the relationship between fans of women’s sport’s connection to supporting gender equality and loyalty to women’s sport, including intentions to attend games and purchase merchandise (Fink et al., 2002; Ridinger & Funk, 2006). While these studies stop short of directly connecting support for women’s sport with past injustices facing women athletes, more recent evidence supports this notion. For example, Minnesota Lynx (Women’s National Basketball Association) season ticket holders intentionally engaged in behaviors to support their team and women’s sport more broadly (Delia, 2020). Specifically, fans brought friends and family members with them to games and team events, wore team gear to unrelated activities, and talked about the Lynx to anyone who would listen. These fans explained their behaviors as in part a response to the
mistreatment the Lynx has faced by virtue of being a team in women’s sport. As such, I predict that:

**Hypothesis 3:** Stigma-related stress will positively relate to loyal boosterism among women’s sport fans

Fans of women’s sport are known to have unique behaviors as fans (Fink et al., 2002). As articulated above, fans of women’s sport are also keenly aware of the disparities facing women’s sport (Delia, 2020; Doyle et al., 2021), which can lead to stigma-related stress (Isard et al., 2022; Study 2; Meyer, 2003). Finally, fans of women’s sport who experience this stress may attempt to make up for these injustices and proactively defend against future harm by engaging in behavior that can support women’s sport (Delia, 2020; Wohl et al., 2020). As such, I predict that:

**Hypothesis 4:** Perceptions of structural stigma and experiences with stigma-related stress will mediate the relationship between being a fan of women’s sport and engaging in loyal boosterism

### 4.3 Methods

#### 4.3.1 Study Design

This research employed a multi-wave field study to test the above hypotheses. Specifically, I administered a questionnaire to sport fans asking about their perceptions of structural stigma, experiences with stigma-related stress, and behaviors as fans (see below for measures). To test my hypotheses, I used PROCESS for SPSS 3.5.2 (Hayes, 2017).

#### 4.3.2 Participants

Participants in this study were sport fans who were 18 years of age or older. They represented a diverse set of identities (see Tables 2-3). In total, 325 fans participated in this
study. I recruited participants through Twitter and Prolific. Participants recruited through Prolific received $3.25 for completing the Time 1 survey and $4 for completing Time 2. Participants recruited through Twitter received $3 for the Time 1 survey and $5 for completing Time 2. See Appendix A for documentation from the Institutional Review Board and Appendix B for a non-exhaustive recruitment plan.
Table 2

*Study 3 Participants (Overall)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fan Interest</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fan of women’s sport</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fan of men’s sport</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fan Demographics</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Gender</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonbinary</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Describe Gender</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sexual Orientation</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asexual</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Describe Sexual Orientation</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Race and Ethnicity</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaskan Native</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Describe Race and Ethnicity</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Religion</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Describe Religion</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* N=535. All identities above represent self-reported identities for participants who opted in to report. Except for fan interest, participants could select all that apply; hence these categories are not mutually exclusive.
Table 3

*Study 3 Participants (Disaggregated)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Women's Sport Fans</th>
<th>Men's Sport Fans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man (Cis)</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman (Cis)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Minority a</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation b</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and Ethnicity c</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Minority d</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Minority</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic/Atheist</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* All identities represent self-reported identities for participants who opted in to report.

a Any fan who selected multiple genders, and/or selected nonbinary, transgender, or to self-describe their gender

b Any fan who selected multiple sexual orientations, and/or selected gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, asexual, or to self-describe their sexual orientation

C Any fan who selected multiple race or ethnicities, and/or selected Black or African American, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native, Hispanic, or to self-describe their race/ethnicity

d Any fan who selected multiple religions and/or selected Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and/or selected to self-describe their religious tradition

e/f N=177; N=148

4.3.3 Procedures

Participants completed two surveys as part of this study. All surveys were administered via Qualtrics. At Time 1, participants enrolled in the study and answered initial questions about their fandom. As part of enrollment, participants completed a digital informed consent form, answered questions about their demographics, and provided a method for follow up to receive the Time 2 survey. Participants also answered questions that correspond to the study’s independent variable (primary interest as a fan) and first mediator (perceptions of structural stigma). One week later (Time 2), participants answered questions that corresponded to the study’s second mediator (stigma-related stress) and dependent variable (loyal boosterism).
Collecting the data at two time points helps ensure rigor in the process. Specifically, using multiple points of collection reduces the chance of participants inadvertently being primed or guessing the goals of the research, both of which could affect their responses.

4.3.4 Materials and Measures

Participants completed two surveys in which they shared their experiences as fans. I describe the measures below in detail. Before answering any specific questions, fans first indicated whether they were a fan of men’s sport or women’s sport by answering the following question: “Thinking about the sport(s) you care most about, how would you finish this sentence? ‘I am primarily a fan of…’” Participants could select one of five options: Men’s sport; women’s sport; I am a fan both, but I like men’s sport a little more; I am a fan of both, but I like women’s sport a little more; I am not a fan of any sports. Participants who indicated they were a fan of/preferred women’s sport were directed to questions about women’s sport. Participants who indicated they were a fan of/preferred men’s sport were directed to the same questions, substituting “men’s sport” in the question. Participants who indicated they were not a fan of any sports did not qualify to continue. See Appendix B-C for the full questionnaire.

To measure perceptions of structural stigma, I asked 10 questions adapted from Harvey’s (2001) scale on social stigma, measured on a 7-point Likert scale anchored between strongly disagree and strongly agree. Example measures are “[Women’s/Men’s] sport is viewed negatively by mainstream society,” “society treats [women’s/men’s] sport according to a stereotype,” and “I feel that [women’s/men’s] sport is deprived of opportunities that are generally available to mainstream sports.” The items showed excellent reliability (α = .94). As such, I created a mean score for a participant’s answer across all 10 questions.
To measure stigma-related stress, I asked four questions adapted from Hirschberger et al.’s (2016) scale on existential threat. Existential threat represents a risk to a group’s survival (Hirschberger et al., 2016). Specifically, I adapted questions that address a group’s past victimization as a source of existential threat. An example measure is “The negative treatment of [women’s/men’s] sport in the past bothers me.” Questions were asked on a 7-point Likert scale anchored between strongly disagree and strongly agree. The four items had high reliability ($\alpha = .84)$ and were operationalized as a mean score calculated from a participant’s answers to all four questions.

To measure loyal boosterism, I asked five questions adapted from Moorman and Blakely (1995). Participants were asked how often they engage in a series of behaviors, measured on a 7-point scale anchored between never and always. Example measures include “defend [women’s/men’s] sport when non-fans criticize it” and “encourage friends and family to consume [women’s/men’s] sport.” The five items achieved excellent reliability ($\alpha = .92$) and were operationalized as a mean score calculated from a participant’s answers to all five questions.

4.4 Results

The purpose of this research was to examine the labor of being a women’s sport fan. Specifically, I sought to understand how a fan’s primary interest (men’s sport or women’s sport) affects their experiences and behaviors as a fan. Table 4 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations for the study variables. To test the hypotheses, I employed mediation bootstrapping procedures using Model 6 of the PROCESS for SPSS (Version 3.5.2, Hayes, 2017). An overview of all results is in Figure 3 and Table 5.
Table 4

Descriptive statistics and correlations among Study 3 variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Women’s Sport Fans</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Men’s Sport Fans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Perceptions of structural stigma</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.63***</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Stigma-related stress</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5.24***</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Loyal boosterism</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>5.32***</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* All items measured on a 7-pt Likert scale; higher numbers reflect higher measurements.

***Mean difference between women’s and men’s sport fans p < .01
Figure 3

Path model output with unstandardized coefficients, standard error, and significance for Study 3

hypothesized model

![Diagram of path model]

Note. This model predicts loyal boosterism for fans of women’s sport from perceptions of structural stigma, through the mediated process of perceptions of structural stigma and stigma-related stress. *p < .05  **p < .010  ***p < .001

Table 5

Relationships Among Study 3 Variables Tested in Figure 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Endogenous Variable</th>
<th>Predictor Variable</th>
<th>Women’s Sport Fan</th>
<th>Perception of Structural Stigma</th>
<th>Stigma-Related Stress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>95% CI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of Structural Stigma</td>
<td>3.14***</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>[2.98, 3.29]</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stigma-Related Stress</td>
<td>1.10***</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>[.62, 1.57]</td>
<td>.46***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyal Boosterism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Effect</td>
<td>1.77***</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>[1.52, 2.01]</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Effect</td>
<td>.74*</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>[.16, 1.32]</td>
<td>.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect Effect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Sport Fan →</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Structural Stigma</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>[.30, .85]</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stigma-Related Stress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyal Boosterism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect Effect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Sport Fan →</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stigma-Related Stress</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>[.19, .72]</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000. CI = confidence interval. *p < .05  **p < .010  ***p < .001
Hypothesis 1 predicted that being a fan of women’s sport would positively relate to perceptions of structural stigma. The results show this association between being a fan of women’s sport and perceived structural stigma ($b = 3.14, SE = .08, p < .001$). Being a fan of women’s sport predicted an increase in perception of structural stigma by 3.14. Thus, hypothesis 1 is supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that perceptions of structural stigma will positively relate to stigma-related stress. The results show this association between perception of structural stigma and stigma-related stress ($b = .46, SE = .07, p < .001$). For every one unit increase in perception of structural stigma there is an associated .46 increase in stigma-related stress. Thus, hypothesis 2 is supported. Though not hypothesized, there was also a significant direct effect between being a fan of women’s sport and stigma-related stress when controlling for perceptions of structural stigma ($b = 1.10, SE = .07, p < .001$).

Hypothesis 3 predicted stigma-related stress would be associated with loyal boosterism. Results show this association between stigma-related stress and loyal boosterism ($b = .38, SE = .07, p < .001$). For every one unit increase in stigma-related stress there is an associated .38 increase loyal boosterism. Thus, hypothesis 3 is supported. Though not hypothesized, there was also a significant direct effect between being a fan of women’s sport and engaging in loyal boosterism, when controlling for perceptions of structural stigma and stigma-related stress ($b = .74, SE = .29, p = .013$)

Hypothesis 4 predicted that perceptions of structural stigma and experiences with stigma-related stress would mediate the relationship between being a fan of women’s sport and engaging in loyal boosterism. Results show that the total effects model, in which being a fan of women’s
sport predicts loyal boosterism, is significant ($b = 1.77, SE = .12, p < .001$). The relationship between being a fan of women’s sport and loyal boosterism is reduced when accounting for the mediational processes through perceptions of structural stigma and stigma-related stress. Thus, results show that perceptions of structural stigma and experiences with stigma-related stress do partially mediate the relationship between being a fan of women’s sport and engaging in loyal boosterism ($b = .55, SE = .14, [.30, .85]$). Because the confidence interval excludes zero, I can conclude that mediation is present. Specifically, the relationship from being a women’s sport fan to loyal boosterism through perceptions of structural stigma and experiences with stigma-related stress accounts for 31.25% of the effect of being a women’s sport fan on loyal boosterism. Though not hypothesized, a second indirect effect from being a fan of women’s sport to loyal boosterism through stigma-related stress (excluding perceptions of structural stigma) is also significant ($b = .42, SE = .13, [.19, .72]$). This second indirect effect explains an additional 23.50% of the relationship between being a fan of women’s sport and loyal boosterism.

Additional analyses suggest that the model holds when controlling for participants’ demographics (gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, religion, age, and political beliefs). See Appendix E for a corresponding figure and table.

4.5 Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine the labor of being a women’s sport fan. I did this by conducting a multi-wave field study with sport fans to understand their perceptions of the world around them, emotional experiences, and behaviors. The findings show that for women’s sport fans, perceptions of structural stigma lead to loyal boosterism. This process is mediated by experiences with stigma-related stress.
This study helps to further illuminate the experience of being a fan of women’s sport. Scholars have long noted that the experience of being a fan of women’s sport is unique (Fink, 2002; Ridinger & Funk, 2006) and that understanding such experiences is important (James & Ridinger, 2002). More recent research has noted that women’s sport fans in part associate women’s sport with mistreatment in the forms of limited media coverage and funding (Doyle et al., 2021)—forms of structural stigma. The present study affirms and extends this research by presenting a model for how such an awareness of structural stigma impacts fans’ emotional experiences and behaviors.

To test Hypothesis 1, that being a fan of women’s sport will positively relate to perceptions of structural stigma, I regressed perceptions of structural stigma on primary fan interest (women’s sport or men’s sport). As noted in the results above, Hypothesis 1 was supported. The role of structural stigma in this model is particularly important. By definition, structural stigma refers to how macro-level societal issues signify who and what is valuable and who and what is less-than (Herek, 2007). For women’s sport fans, structural stigma conveys that women’s sport is inferior to men’s sport. Examples of structural stigma facing women’s sport include disparate media coverage, worse access to facilities, widespread pay inequity, and mistreatment of athletes (Berri, 2019; Cunningham, 2019; Cooky et al., 2021; Fink, 2015; Sveinson et al., 2022). Notably, observing structural stigma is something people encounter simply by engaging with society—and for fans of women’s sport, it is something they encounter simply by engaging in their fandom. That is, experiences with structural stigma are not directly dependent upon whom one surrounds themselves with. Thus, women’s fans’ experiences with structural stigma may reflect the ways sexism is institutionalized in sport (Cunningham, 2008).
To test Hypothesis 2, that perceptions of structural stigma will positively relate to stigma-related stress, I regressed stigma-related stress on perceptions of structural stigma. As noted in the results above, Hypothesis 2 was supported. Notably, an awareness of structural stigma puts fans of women’s sport at risk for experiencing a unique form of stigma-related stress (c.f., Meyer, 2003) and engaging in emotional work (Sveinson et al., 2022). Specifically, I find that observing structural stigma is associated with a rumination on past mistreatment with which women’s sport has had to contend. While this rumination is backward-looking to the past in women’s sport, it is intimately connected to a fear about women’s sport future (Hirschberger et al., 2016). Indeed, frequent consideration of the past may suggest these fans believe women’s sport faces an existential threat (Hirschberger et al., 2016).

To test Hypothesis 3, that stigma-related stress will positively relate to loyal boosterism, I regressed loyal boosterism on stigma-related stress. As noted in the results above, Hypothesis 3 was supported. Women’s sport fans seem to respond to structural stigma and its related stress by engaging in loyal boosterism to strengthen women’s sport and help ensure its continuation. Such a response is common among low-status groups who have experienced historic wrongs that continue to feel relevant (Wohl et al., 2010). Indeed, the persistence of structural stigma facing women’s sport suggests that characteristics of the past, such as deprioritizing women athletes, continue into the present (c.f., Trnka, 2023). Relatedly, past research has demonstrated that fans of women’s sport are keenly aware of such past and present wrongs and intentionally seek out opportunities to defend and promote women’s sport (Delia, 2020; Fink, 2002; Ridinger & Funk, 2006). As such, the findings in this study are consistent with past research that fans of women’s sport engage in promotive behavior (c.f., Delia, 2020; Fink et al., 2002; Jones, 2021) and that
such may have an emotional component (Sveinson et al., 2022). We extend these understanding to show how this behavior (specifically, loyal boosterism) may stem from an awareness of structural stigma, or the ways society treats women’s sport differently and sees it as inferior. Notably, while this behavior may be understood as a positive outcome that supports organizations (Moorman & Blakely, 1995), and thus framed as a positive, the present research shows that among women’s sport fans, these behaviors are related to observations of stigma and experiences with stigma-related stress. That is, fans’ promotion of and pride in women’s sport (i.e., loyal boosterism) is a response to conditions (i.e., structural stigma) that are associated with stress for fans. Thus, fans’ propensity for loyal boosterism may be a silver-lining to an otherwise unenviable set of circumstances facing women’s sport and its fans.

Lastly, to test Hypothesis 4, that perceptions of structural stigma and experiences with stigma-related stress will mediate the relationship between being a fan of women’s sport and engaging in loyal boosterism, I conducted a serial mediation analysis. As noted in the results above, Hypothesis 4 was supported. Taken together, this study empirically demonstrates the labor of being a women’s sport fan (c.f. Sveinson et al., 2022). As Sveinson and colleagues define such labor to be “any effort” (p. 243), this research makes clear that fans of women’s sport do quite a bit of effort in the course of their fandom. Indeed, fans of women’s sport contend with structural stigma, experience stigma-related stress, and engage in activities to help create a better future for women’s sport.

4.6 Conclusion

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, this study adds to the renaissance in literature about the unique experiences of women’s sport fans (c.f., Delia, 2020;
Fink, 2002; Guest & Luijten, 2018; Ridinger & Funk, 2006). Specifically, this research builds on an understanding of gendered labor (Sveinson et al., 2022) to understand the labor of being a fan of women’s sport. In doing so, I explore the role of structural stigma in fan experiences and suggest that fans in women’s sport may experience stigma-related stress based on their fandom. This study also has important implications for managers, especially those in women’s sport. The main finding in this research is that fans of women’s sport engage in loyal boosterism in part as a response to structural stigma and its related stress. While loyal boosterism is likely beneficial for organizations in women’s sport, it may be useful to consider how teams can incentivize this behavior so it emanates from a more positive association with women’s sport.

Future research should continue to consider the unique experiences of women’s sport fans. As the model presented here represents a partial mediation, it seems there may be other factors influencing women’s sport fans’ loyal boosterism. Better understanding those—with a focus on identifying processes that do not rely on the stigmatized status of women’s sport. For, ideally fans of women’s sport will no longer have to contend with structural stigma or its related stress, but will continue to promote their favorite athletes, teams, and leagues just the same. Additionally, scholars could advance this line of research by seeking to understand the outcomes of loyal boosterism. That is, what are fans’ experiences when they engage in such activities?

In conclusion, this study developed a model to understand the relationship between fans’ observations of the world around them, emotional experiences, and behaviors. In doing so, I find that fans of women’s sport are keenly aware of structural stigma facing women’s sport, and that this awareness is associated with a unique form of stigma-related stress, which is in turn
associated with behavior to boost women’s sport. Thus, this research has helped advance understanding of the unique experiences of women’s sport fans.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Overview

Women’s sport is having a moment. The past few years have seen the debut of new
leagues, new teams, new fans, and new investors and ownership structures. These trends are
widespread across women’s sport, including in basketball, soccer, hockey, volleyball, lacrosse,

Despite these advances, women’s sport often still finds itself on the outside looking in
(Rosen, 2022). Women’s sport’s position on the fringe characterizes specific arrangements—
such as media coverage and athlete pay—as well as reflects a more general societal hierarchy in
which women’s sport is excluded from the mainstream (Rosen, 2022). This devaluation suggests
that women’s sport is stigmatized (Goffman, 1963; Isard et al., 2022; Sartore & Cunningham,
2009), creating unique conditions for stakeholders to navigate (Micelotta et al., 2018).

Scholarship has documented the impact of gender-based stigma in sport, although only
limited research has addressed this through the lens of fans or employees in women’s sport.
Instead, such work has tended to examine experiences of women fans and employees in men’s
sport or explore the experiences of athletes in or structures around women’s sport. From this
scholarship, we understand that gender impacts employees’ and fans experiences, often in
negative ways (e.g., Burton, 2015; Hindman & Walker, 2020; Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Sveinson
& Hoeber, 2016). Such work is vitally important, but overlooks examining how the gender of the
sport (i.e., women’s sport or men’s sport) can influence employees’ experiences. Separately, the
limited scholarship on women’s sport (Thomson et al., 2022) has tended to focus on the athletes,
demonstrating that they experience mistreatment and navigate unique pressures (e.g., Fink, 2015; Isard & Melton, 2021; Krane, 2001; Melton, 2013). This work is valuable; however, it has tended to overlook other key stakeholders in women’s sport, including fans and employees. Such oversight is regrettable as research has noted both the unique conditions influencing women’s sport (Micelotta et al., 2018) and the importance of considering perspectives from the field’s employees and fans (Allison, 2016; Delia et al., 2021b; James & Ridinger, 2002).

Thus, the purpose of this dissertation was to explore the impact of stigma on fans of women’s sport and employees working in women’s sport. I do this through three studies in which I use varied methodologies to explore different populations of women’s sport fans and employees. In Study 1 I employed reflexive autobiography to explore the experience of being a women’s sport fan. Reflexive autobiography relies on a researcher’s first-person experience to derive theory and may be especially appropriate to investigate a phenomenon about which little is known (Delia, 2017; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Shaw & Hoeber, 2016). In this study, I documented vignettes from a decade of my own fandom. Drawing on stigma theory (Goffman, 1963; Herek, 2007) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), I subsequently engaged in reflexivity to make sense of these experiences. In doing so, I identified how I observed structural stigma and experienced enacted, felt, and internalized stigma as a fan. I also found that being a fan of women’s sport facilitated a sense of optimal distinctiveness that at times helped buffer the experiences with stigma.

Study 2 built on this understanding of stigma in women’s sport to explore employees’ experiences working in an occupation that may be tainted. Using a case study methodology, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 employees in women’s sport. I analyzed the
interviews through a deductive approach that drew from stigma theory (Goffman, 1963; Herek, 2007) and dirty work literature (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). I found that women’s sport employees observed structural stigma and personally experienced enacted, felt, and internalized stigma based on their occupation (i.e., working in women’s sport). As such, I concluded that women’s sport is a form of socially dirty work and thus employees in women’s sport are dirty workers. I subsequently identified strategies these employees used to navigate their work-based stigma, noting they relied on a necessity shield, as well as engaged in and with meaningfulness, job crafting, and social weighting.

In Study 3, I built on the first two studies to examine the labor of being a fan of women’s sport. Through a multi-wave field study, I surveyed 535 fans of both men’s and women’s sport. I find that fans of women’s sport engage in loyal boosterism more than men’s fans through a mediated process with structural stigma and stigma-related stress. Specifically, I find that fans of women’s sport are aware of the structural stigma facing women’s sport. These observations cause stress for fans, who subsequently engage in behaviors to help boost women’s sport. This understanding connects fans’ observations of the world around them with emotional reactions and behaviors.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

This dissertation makes several contributions. Overall, these studies help advance scholarly understanding of the unique context of women’s sport (Lough & Geurin, 2019). Previous research has identified unique barriers facing women’s sport given it is a field organized around women, who hold a lower-status position in society and sport (Micelotta et al., 2018). Indeed, as sport remains a male-dominated institution (Burton, 2015), women’s sport
endures a unique stigma. The three studies in this dissertation extend this line of research—and that which has explored the unique realities of being an athlete in women’s sport (e.g., Fink, 2015; Isard & Melton, 2021; Krane, 2001; Melton, 2013)—to understand how the stigma facing women’s sport affects fans and employees.

First, Studies 1 and 3 explore the role of stigma in fan experiences, affirming and extending past research. Nearly two decades ago, scholars noted that fans of women’s sport are distinct from men’s sport (Fink et al., 2002; Ridinger & Funk, 2006). Indeed, fans of women’s sport are more loyal (Fink et al., 2002), engage in promotive behavior (Delia, 2020), connect their fandom to gender equality (Delia, 2020; Guest & Luijten, 2018; Ridinger & Funk, 2006), and associate their sports with inequality (Doyle et al., 2021). Study 3 empirically tests a model that builds from and connects these concepts, demonstrating the relationship between how fans experience the world around them and engage in their fandom. Given the mediating relationship of stigma-related stress, Study 3 also incorporates and advances the emerging line of inquiry around fans’ emotional work (Sveinson et al., 2022). Importantly, both Study 1 and Study 3 explore the role of fans’ out-of-stadium experiences as influential to their experiences and behaviors as fans.

Additionally, in Study 2 I explore the influence of stigma on those working in sport, focusing on employees in women’s sport. As such, this dissertation counters a prevailing narrative that working in sport is a high-status occupation (Kent & Todd, 2009; Oja et al., 2015; Swanson & Kent, 2017), finding that some employees within sport may instead have a stigmatized experience. Thus, Study 2 adds to an emerging understanding of dirty work in sport (Lucie & Fabien, 2021). In doing so, Study 2 suggests that employees’ experiences working in
sport can be influenced by the gender of the sport. This extends sport management’s understanding of the role of gender in employee experiences, as prior research has tended to study the influence of the employee’s gender (e.g., Burton, 2015; Hindman & Walker, 2020).

5.3 Managerial Implications

This research also has meaningful implications for managers, especially those in women’s sport. Notably, the three studies collectively demonstrate that the stigma with which women’s sport must contend influenced both fans and employees—two key stakeholders in the industry.

Studies 1 and 3 show that fans are aware of the structural stigma facing women’s sport. Fans may observe structural stigma outside of their direct engagement with the team, for example, through disparate media coverage and as a member of their non-fan communities (Study 1). Insofar as observations of structural stigma hinder fans’ experiences—contributing to internalized stigma (Study 1) and producing a stigma-related stress (Study 3)—teams and leagues ought to consider how they can help combat these messages. Women’s sport organizations could start with ensuring fans are not exposed to structural stigma in the course of their direct engagement with leagues and teams. For example, having games relocated due to a scheduling conflict, ostensibly because the women’s sporting event was not as high of a priority, is an experience all too common for fans of women’s sport (Cash, 2021; Delia, 2020). Additionally, pay inequality represents another manifestation of structural stigma that is within the purview of women’s sport organizations (Hruby, 2022). Lastly, systemic abuse facing athletes in women’s sport represents a form of structural stigma (Cunningham, 2019) that women’s sport fans have had to endure. In addition to the way such widespread mistreatment
affects athletes in women’s sport (important in its own right), women’s sport organizations should consider the messages these common experiences send to one of their key revenue sources: fans.

Experiences with stigma also deeply affect employees in women’s sport (Study 2), another key stakeholder for organizations. First, like fans, employees are aware of the mistreatment toward women’s sport from society and from their organizations. The good news is that addressing structural stigma that manifests within the organization through practices and policies (suggested above) may have positive impact for both fans and employees. However, employees may also experience enacted stigma from others while performing their job duties. Consider social media managers, whose jobs entail reading comments, tweets in which the organization is tagged, and direct messages to the organization’s accounts. As women’s sport athletes are uniquely targeted with online abuse (World Athletics, 2021), it stands to reason that their teams and leagues also disproportionately receive vitriol. Internal sales staff who make cold calls to potential ticket buyers, corporate sponsorship staff doing initial outreach, and communications staff pitching stories to media members also may all encounter snide comments, demeaning questions, and other expressions of enacted stigma. Thus, leaders ought to take steps to understand the stigmatized experiences of their employees and create a culture that can help employees manage these experiences (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Doing so may be important for the organization—and the field of women’s sport as a whole—to retain staff and help them perform at high levels.

5.4 Future Research
Understanding the role of stigma in women’s sport is an important task to continue in future research. Scholars should continue to explore how structural, enacted, felt, and internalized stigma affects fans and employees, two key stakeholder groups in professional sport. Doing so can help to create a more nuanced understanding of the experiences and behaviors for those in women’s sport, a growing segment of the sport industry that faces unique challenges and opportunities. Given a goal of creating positive experiences for fans and employees, scholars should focus inquiry on ways these individuals cope with and manage their affiliation with a stigmatized setting. An understanding of these strategies can help create knowledge that then supports fans and employees as they navigate these experiences.

5.5 Conclusion

In summary, this dissertation explored the impact of stigma on fans of and employees working in women’s sport. In Study 1, I used reflexive autobiography to explore how stigma manifested in my own fandom. As such, I relied on my first-person experiences to derive theory about the role of structural, enacted, felt, and internalized stigma for fans. I also found that being a fan of women’s sport facilitated a sense of optimal distinctiveness that at times helped buffer experiences with stigma. Study 2 used a case study methodology and semi-structured interviews with 15 employees in women’s sport to understand how stigma influenced their experiences. I found that women’s sport employees observed structural stigma and personally experienced enacted, felt, and internalized stigma based on their occupation. From this, I concluded that women’s sport is a form of dirty work. Further, I identified strategies these employees used to navigate their work-based stigma, noting they employ a necessity shield, as well as engage in and with meaningfulness, job crafting, and social weighting. Finally, in Study 3 I examine the
labor of being a fan of women’s sport, given fans’ experiences with stigma. I found that fans of women’s sport are aware of the structural stigma facing women’s sport. These observations cause stress for fans, who subsequently engage in behaviors to help boost women’s sport. Collectively, these studies help advance an understanding of the unique theoretical context of women’s sport, as key stakeholders for the field (i.e., fans and employees) navigate experiences with stigma.
APPENDICES

Refer to the following list.

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STUDY 3 INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

UMassAmherst
Human Research Protection Office

Mass Venture Center
100 Venture Way, Suite 116
Hadley, MA 01035
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LETTER OF EXEMPT DETERMINATION

Date: March 1, 2023
To: Professor Elizabeth Melton and Risa Isard, Sport Management
From: Professor Lynette Leidy Sievert, Chair, University of Massachusetts Amherst IRB

Protocol Title: Labor of Sport Fandom
Protocol ID: 4194
Review Type: Exempt – Amendment
Review Date: 03/01/2023
No Continuing Review Required

The Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) has reviewed the above named submission and has determined it to be EXEMPT from the federal regulations that govern human subject research (45 CFR 46.104)

Note: This determination applies only to the activities described in this submission. All changes to the submission (e.g. protocol, recruitment materials, consent form, additional personnel), must be reviewed by HRPO prior to implementation.

A project determined as EXEMPT, must still be conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Researchers must also comply with all applicable federal, state and local regulations as well as UMass Amherst Policies and procedures which may include obtaining approval of your activities from other institutions or entities. All personnel must complete CITI training.

Consent forms and study materials (e.g., questionnaires, letters, advertisements, flyers, scripts, etc.) - Only use the consent form and study materials that were reviewed by the HRPO.

Final Reports - Notify the IRB when your study is complete by submitting a Close Request form in the electronic protocol system.

Serious Adverse Events and Unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others - All such events must be reported in the electronic system as soon as possible, but no later than five (5) working days.

Annual Check In - HRPO will conduct an annual check in to determine the study status.

Please contact the Human Research Protection Office if you have any further questions. Best wishes for a successful project.
APPENDIX B

STUDY 3 RECRUITMENT TEMPLATES

Sample Recruitment Message – Facebook Group (Women’s Sport)
Hi all – Want to participate in a study about women’s sport fans?

I’m a PhD Candidate at UMass Amherst and I’m in the final stages of my dissertation.

I’d love to hear from you as part of my study about how women’s sport fans engage in the world around them and how women’s sport shows up in your relationships with other people.

Participants will be compensated for each survey taken: $3 for the first and $5 for the second. Those who complete all three surveys will earn $8 total in an Amazon e-gift card.

Participating is fully voluntary. If you’re interested, you can sign up here:

Sample Recruitment Message – Risa Twitter
❗ Be part of a study about women’s sport fans❗

I’d love to hear about how you engage in the world around you + how women’s sport shows up in your relationships

Complete two surveys & receive an $8 e-gift card💪

Get started here + RT to share

Sample Recruitment Note – Influencers
Hi _____ -

Hope all is well for you! As part of my dissertation about women’s sport, I’m studying fans. Am trying to recruit as many folks as possible to take a few short surveys. Any chance you’d help by retweeting my tweet and encouraging the fans who follow you to participate? Thanks so much!

[Insert link to Risa’s Tweet for them to RT]
APPENDIX C

STUDY 3 TIME 1 SURVEY ITEMS

Thinking about the sport(s) you care most about, how would you finish this sentence? "I am primarily a fan of..."
*Answers in set order; select one; force response*

- Men's sport → men’s sport version
- Women's sport → women’s sport version
- I am a fan of both, but I like MEN'S sport a little more → men’s sport version
- I am a fan of both, but I like WOMEN'S sport a little more → women’s sport version
- I am not a fan of any sports → end survey

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability.
*Questions ordered randomly; measured on 7-pt Likert scale, strongly disagree – strongly agree; optional response; adapted from Harvey (2001)*

1. [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport is viewed negatively by mainstream society
2. I feel that society views [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport as being inferior
3. I feel that [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport is treated differently by mainstream society
4. I feel as though society sees [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport as less than
5. I feel that [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport has to work harder than mainstream sport in order to overcome society’s prejudice
6. I feel as though mainstream society views [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport as having a shortcoming
7. [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport is "at home" in society (R)
8. [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport is victimized by society
9. Society treats [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport according to a stereotype
10. I feel that [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport is deprived of opportunities that are generally available to mainstream sports

Which of the below best describes your gender? Select all that apply.
*Answers in set order; select all that apply; optional response*

- Man
- Woman
- Nonbinary
- Transgender
- I prefer to self describe (write in optional)

Which of the below best describes your sexual orientation? Select all that apply.
*Answers in set order; select all that apply; optional response*
• Straight
• Gay
• Lesbian
• Bisexual
• Queer
• Asexual
• I prefer to self describe (write in optional)

Which of the below best describes your race and/or ethnicity? Select all that apply.
Answers in set order; select all that apply; optional response
• White
• Black or African American
• American Indian or Alaska Native
• Asian
• Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
• Hispanic
• I prefer to self describe (write in optional)

Which of the below best describes your religious tradition? Select all that apply.
Answers in set order; select all that apply; optional response
• Christianity
• Judaism
• Islam
• Sikhism
• Buddhism
• Hinduism
• Agnostic
• Atheist
• I prefer to self describe (write in optional)
APPENDIX D

STUDY 3 TIME 2 SURVEY ITEMS

Read each statement below and select how often you engage in the behaviors described.
Questions ordered randomly; measured on 7-pt Likert scale, never – always; optional response; adapted from Moorman and Blakely (1995)

1. Defend [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport when other FANS criticize it
2. Encourage friends and family to consume [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport (e.g., attend, watch, follow)
3. Defend [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport when NON-fans criticize it
4. Show pride in [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport in public
5. Actively promote [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport to potential fans

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability.
Questions ordered randomly; measured on 7-pt Likert scale, strongly disagree – strongly agree; optional response; adapted from Hirschberger et al. (2016)

1. I often think about the grievances facing [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport in the past
2. The negative treatment of [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport in the past bothers me
3. I tend to reflect on the difficult history of [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport
4. I usually do not think about the history of [WOMEN’S/MEN’S] sport (R)
APPENDIX E

STUDY 3 ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS USING CONTROLS

Figure 4

Path model output with unstandardized coefficients, standard error, and significance for Study 3 hypothesized model when controlling for participant demographics.a

Note. This model predicts loyal boosterism for fans of women’s sport from perceptions of structural stigma, through the mediated process of perceptions of structural stigma and stigma-related stress. *p < .05 **p < .010 ***p < .001. aDemographics controlled for include gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, religion, age, and political beliefs of participants.
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