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## AN EXAMINATION OF ROLE IDENTITY IN WOMEN'S SPORT FANDOM

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AN EXAMINATION OF ROLE IDENTITY IN WOMEN'S SPORT FANDOM

A Dissertation

by

DANIELLE HECETA MCARDLE

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

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Isenberg School of Management

Department of Sport Management

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A Dissertation Presented  
by  
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## DEDICATION

I first want to give honor and glory to my Heavenly Father, through whom I can do all things. Maraming Salamat to my Grandma who is and always will be my role model. Your sage advice encouraged me to go after my dreams and your glass breaking example will always be one that I endeavor to follow. Thank you to my Tita Tasha who modeled what it was like to go after a PhD, let's finally go get that drink we have always talk about, you know the one. Thank you to Doctor Harrison who planted the seed back in 2016 and has been my mentor ever since. Your invitation and God-fearing example opened the door to a field where my talents can shine. Thank you to Dr. Marvette Lacy who coached me through this process. I am so glad that you decided to use your tests as testimonies for others because I have benefitted from your mentorship in so many ways that thank you just doesn't seem to cut it. Thank you to Dr. Dan-o, who has shepherded me from my master's through to today. Your listening ear and servant leadership style are things that I am grateful for and I will answer your call to pay it forward. Thank you to Prof. Emily Must for being a literal shoulder for me to cry on and for the reminders about sh\*t sandwiches. I would not have made it to this point without you and I am deeply grateful for our friendship. Thank you to my other mentors who helped me on my journey. Lastly, thank you to those who have decided to read my work. I hope you are inspired by it, and that you will join me in the act of breaking glass ceilings. This was written for all those pioneers who strive to break glass ceilings of any kind.

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## ABSTRACT

AN EXAMINATION OF ROLE IDENTITY IN WOMEN'S SPORT FANDOM

MAY 2025

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Extensive research into sport consumer behavior has shown that sport fandom was a social experience that fostered belonging. Belonging referred to a feeling of connection with others who shared an interest in a sport team or league (Cornwell & Jahn, 2023; Sloan, 1989). These connections often led to a strengthened fan identity, which yielded social and psychological benefits (Inoue et al., 2020; Wann, 2006) and drove consumption behaviors such as purchasing merchandise or attending games (Biscaia et al., 2023; Mazodier et al., 2018).

However, most of this body of research has centered men's sport contexts (Delia et al., 2021; Lebel et al., 2021). Only seven percent of sport consumer behavior research has examined women's sport contexts (Delia et al., 2022), limiting insight into how fans of women's sport make meaning of their fan identities. Prior researchers have suggested that fans of women's sport were motivated by values such as a desire to support gender

equality (Clarke et al., 2022; Delia, 2020), which signaled a need for deeper inquiry into the unique meanings associated with fandom in women's sport.

Fans of women's sport often navigated structural challenges (e.g., limited media visibility and inconsistent merchandise availability; Clarke, 2019; The Collective, 2023; Hytner, 2020) and negotiated their fandom alongside other role identities, such as parenting or advocacy. Identity theory posited that individuals carry overlapping role identities, and that the salience and social validation of these roles influenced behavior and self-understanding (Stryker & Serpe, 1994; McCall & Simmons, 1978). As such, this theoretical lens offered a useful framework for exploring the experiences of fans of women's sport through the lens of their interlocking role identities and understanding the meanings attached to being fans.

Guided by identity theory and a social constructionist epistemology, I conducted a generic descriptive–interpretive qualitative study (Elliott & Timulak, 2021) with fans of teams within the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL), and the Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL). These findings contributed to identity theory and offered new insights for organizations seeking to better understand and engage fans of women's sport.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The women's sports industry was predicted to earn global revenues over 2 billion dollars in 2025 (Deloitte, 2025). This signaled that interest in the women's sport industry was on the rise (Intel, 2024). According to Nielsen (2024), general interest grew 29% for the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) and 17% for the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) between 2023 and 2024. Similarly, television viewership increased as the 2024 women's National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) basketball title game, averaging 18.9 million viewers, outdrew the men's championship, averaging 14.82 million viewers (Reedy, 2024) and the 2024 WNBA Draft audience increased 511% over the league's 2023 Draft audience (Nielsen, 2024). Likewise, fan attendance at women's sporting events rose, as 92,003 attendees witnessed the world record-setting Nebraska volleyball match (NCAA, 2023) and 28,900 attendees, on average, attended matches at the Women's World Cup in Australia (AP News, 2023). Together these achievements demonstrated that people are becoming increasingly interested in consuming women's sport.

Most often, sports were consumed by fans. Fans were defined as individuals that experienced a feeling of belonging to a group of people with a shared interest in something (Cornwell & Jahn, 2023). When this feeling of belonging was felt with a group of people who share an interest in a sport-related entity, it was called *sport fandom* (Sloan, 1989). When sport fans derived self-esteem benefits from being a sport fan, they engaged in *fan identification* (Mazodier et al., 2018). It was theorized that the more strongly someone was identified with a sport team, the more likely they were to engage in

consumption behaviors like buying tickets and merchandise (Biscaia et al., 2021; Shapiro et al., 2013). Thus, fan identification and sport consumer behavior were found to be inextricably linked.

### **A. Problem Background**

While sport consumer behavior has been frequently studied in the sport management literature (e.g., Lock & Heere, 2017; Robinson & Trail, 2005; Trail et al., 2003), the proportion of the literature centered on women's sport contexts remains limited. Specifically, Delia and her colleagues (2022) found that only seven percent of sport consumer behavior research articles published in the four top sport management journals (*European Sport Management Quarterly* (ESMQ), *Journal of Sport Management* (JSM), *Sport Management Review* (SMR), and *Sport Marketing Quarterly* (SMQ)) used women's sport as a research setting. This suggested that what was understood about the sport consumption experience was almost solely derived from studies of men's sport contexts. Continuing along this trajectory risks perpetuating "the assumption that women's and men's sport contexts are the same" (Lebel et al., 2021, p.4).

However, these contexts were not always the same. Researchers have demonstrated that the underlying motives for consuming women's versus men's sport can differ (Delia, 2020; Fink et al., 2002; Funk et al., 2003; James & Ridinger, 2002). For instance, Delia (2020) found that a desire to support gender equality was a more prevalent motive among fans of women's sport. This suggested that there is a need for deeper inquiry into the theoretical nuances of fandom in women's sport. Specifically, Delia et al. (2021) observed that "it will be essential to consider the complexity of multiple identities involved in connecting with women's sport teams, just as we have

consistently done when studying men's sport (p.67)." Thus, I aimed in this dissertation to answer this call by investigating how multiple, interlocking role identities shape the experiences of women's sport fans, and to explore the meanings that fans of women's sport ascribed to their role as fans of women's sport.

### **B. Study Significance**

One's *role identity* was defined as the part of a person's sense of self that was tied to the various roles they occupied in society (e.g., sport fan, mother, employee; Stryker, 1968). Scholars have demonstrated that role identities influence how individuals experience and engage in sport consumption (Esmonde et al., 2015; Pope, 2011; Trail et al., 2003). Examples of role identities that have been found to impact sport consumption experiences include gender (e.g., Crawford & Gosling, 2004; Dietz-Uhler et al., 2020; Sveinson & Hoerber, 2016), ethnicity (e.g., Armstrong, 2002; Ha et al., 2018; Heere & James, 2007), and parenthood (e.g., Hyatt et al., 2018; Mansfield, 2020b; Tinson et al., 2017). This suggested that fans may have other role identities that also influence their sport consumption experience. Therefore, more work exploring the influence of other role identities on sport consumption was needed (Lock & Heere, 2017).

Given that people held multiple role identities within their self-concept (Stryker & Serpe, 1994), it became necessary to examine how fans prioritize and integrate these identities. The relative importance that individuals placed on each of the role identities within their self-concept was called *psychological centrality* (Rosenberg, 1979). The more central (i.e., important) a role identity was to a person, the more it was understood to influence that person's behavior (Callero, 1985). The extent to which individuals act in

ways that affirm their commitment to a role identity is known as *role commitment* (Heiss, 1981).

Thus, the more committed a person was to their role identity, the more their self-esteem (i.e., the way they felt about themselves) became tied to acting in ways that affirmed their role identity (Stryker, 1980). In sport contexts, sport fans demonstrated their commitment to being a sport fan by purchasing team merchandise (Kwon & Kwak, 2014; Lee et al., 2023; Ströbel et al., 2019), goods and services provided by team sponsors (Gwinner et al., 2009; Herrmann et al., 2016; Ngan et al., 2011), and game tickets (Inoue et al., 2020; Pease & Zhang, 1996; Yoshida et al., 2023).

For fans of women's sport, demonstrating fan commitment often required them to navigate additional barriers. Fans had to rely on streaming services, social media accounts, or nontraditional platforms to follow their favorite teams (Sports Innovation Lab, 2021). Moreover, the different forms of labor required to consume women's sport, as compared to men's sport (McClearen, 2024), underscored the need to understand not only how fandom was enacted but how fans construct the meanings associated with being a fan of women's sport.

Given these theoretical gaps and the broader call for "theorizing about the differences between consumers" (Delia et al., 2022, p. 588), the purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of fans of women's sport through the lens of their multiple, interlocking role identities and to understand the meanings fans attach to their role identity as women's sport fans.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What role identities do fans of women's sport have?
2. How do fans prioritize their multiple and interlocking role identities?
3. To what extent, does their prioritization impact their understanding of what it means to be a fan of women's sport?

To explore these questions, I focused on fans of the most high-profile women's professional sport leagues in the United States (Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL), WNBA, and NWSL). Using identity theory as the theoretical lens, I conducted a qualitative study guided by a generic descriptive–interpretive research approach (Elliott & Timulak, 2021) within a social constructionist epistemological framework. Through interviews with fans, I sought to understand how fans articulate, prioritize, and sustain their fan identities, and how the meanings they attach to being fans of women's sport are shaped by their broader role identity structures.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

To ground this study, I reviewed relevant theoretical perspectives on role identity, salience hierarchies, meaning-making, and fan identification, with particular attention to how these concepts inform the understanding of fandom within women's sport contexts. I began this chapter by introducing identity theory (Stryker, 1968, 1980, 1987). This theory helped to explain how the various roles which individuals occupy in society (e.g., professor, churchgoer, sport fan) contributed to their understandings of self (i.e., self-concept) and their behaviors. Thereafter, I reviewed the fan identification literature to demonstrate the application of the role identity approach in sport contexts (Lock & Heere, 2017; Mansfield., 2020a; Trail et al., 2003). Lastly, I concluded this chapter by discussing literature relevant to the field's understandings of people who are fans of women's sport (e.g., Clarke et al., 2022; Coche, 2014; Fink et al., 2002; Funk et al., 2003).

#### **A. Identity Theory and Role Identity**

Identity theory posited that individuals played multiple roles within a society (Stryker, 1968). These roles aligned with the different components that individuals considered integral to their self-concept (Stryker & Burke, 2000). These roles also contributed to the formation of *multiple selves* within an individual such that a person had a different self for every social context within which they participated (Stryker & Serpe, 1982). For example, a person could simultaneously have had a self that was tied to being a mother, a corporate executive, and a sport fan.

Each of these roles was tied to a corresponding *role identity* (Stryker, 1980). Role identities were defined as meanings that individuals applied to themselves and meanings others applied to them within a social role or situation (McCall & Simmons, 1978). These meanings were co-constructed (i.e., mutually shaped through interaction) and served as reference points for behavior (Burke & Stets, 2023; Stets et al., 2020). People learned the meanings of their role identities through other's responses, which helped them understand who they were in specific settings (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Hornsey, 2008). As an example, one could consider how a child learned the role of being a sport fan. A parent provided cues about appropriate behavior in a sport setting, and over time, the children accordingly adjusted their actions to align with their parents' guidance. In this way, social interactions played a key role in shaping how individuals learned what their role identities were.

In addition, people learned the meanings of their role identities in relation to the complementary identities held by others in a shared social context, referred to as *counter-roles* (Lindesmith & Strauss, 1956). These counter-roles helped define and reinforce the expectations associated with any given role. For example, the identity of a coach was not formed in isolation, but through its relationship to the role of an athlete; similarly, the role of a husband gained significance through its connection to the role of a wife. In each case, meaning was derived from the reciprocal expectations and behaviors of those occupying corresponding positions (McCall & Simmons, 1978). That is, individuals learned what they were expected to do in relation to what others did in particular social contexts (Burke & Stets, 2023). Thus, one's understanding of their role identity was

fundamentally linked to the roles that others occupied within the social environment as well.

### **1. Salience Hierarchy and Role Identity Alignment**

Importantly, individuals did not hold singular role identities within their self concept. Instead, they maintained multiple role identities within their self-concept (McCall & Simmons, 1978). Therefore, knowing which particular role identity was being acted upon at any given time was highly contextual (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). The notion that one role identity was more important than another at a given time was grounded in the concept of the *salience hierarchy* (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Specifically, Hogg et al. (1995) put forth that “role identities were organized hierarchically in the self-concept with regard to the probability that they will form the basis for action” (p. 257). Those role identities that were most important to a person were near the top of their salience hierarchy and were therefore more likely to be invoked in a particular situation over other identities nearer to the bottom of the person’s salience hierarchy (McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker, 1968; Wiley, 1991). To illustrate this, one could have considered a person who was a women’s sport fan and a Christian. While the person may have found being a women’s sport fan to be important, it could have also been the case that this identity was ultimately less important to them than being a Christian. So, if the demands for the two roles competed (i.e., when women’s sporting events were held at the same time as church services), then the person would have been more likely to go to the church service and less likely to attend the women’s sporting event. As such, the salience hierarchy has been useful in understanding which identities were most important to individuals.

**a. Social Commitment and Role Identity Salience**

The position of a particular role identity within a person's salience hierarchy was influenced by an individual's emotional investments in social structures (Burke & Stets, 2023; Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). These structures - families, religious groups, working environments, etc.- created relational ties for individuals (Stryker, 1968); the more committed a person was to others within a social structure, the more committed they were to fulfilling the roles associated with people within that social structure (Burke & Stets, 2023; Stryker & Serpe, 1982).

In terms of sport consumers, those who had a higher number of sport fans, who were important to them, in their social circles were more likely to attend sporting events (Katz et al., 2016, 2018, 2020, 2021). However, some fans of women's sport did not have a single person in their social circles who supported women's sport (Katz et al., 2024). In the absence of said social connections, it is not yet fully understood what connected fans of women's sport to women's sport. Thus, understanding the role identities that fans of women's sport hold helped elucidate the important relationships (i.e., social commitments) which sustained fandom in women's sports.

**b. Duration and Role Identity Salience**

Time also shaped role identity salience (Stryker & Serpe, 1982). In particular, role identity salience was enhanced by how early in life a person had been able to integrate a role identity into their self-concept (Epstein, 1973; Mead, 1934). For many sport fans, this occurred between the ages of 6 and 15 years old (Funk & James, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000). Thus, the longer someone had been a fan, the more central the sport fan role was to their identity (Kolbe & James, 2000), and the identities that were most central

to a person were those that guided their behavior (Stryker & Serpe, 1982; Super, 1957). Therefore, examining the most enduring role identities held by fans of women's sport was important, as these role identities were the most likely to shape the understandings of fandom in women's sport.

## **2. Role Identity, Negotiation, and the Salience Hierarchy**

Moreover, engaging in behaviors that aligned with one's prioritized role identities fostered psychological coherence (Guidano & Liotti, 1983). Psychological coherence was often experienced when individuals were able to integrate or act upon multiple role identities simultaneously (Erikson, 1950). This experience, referred to as *identity integration* (Erikson, 1968), was found to be especially salient for sport fans who found opportunities to enact other important role identities within the context of their fandom. For instance, a fan who attended a women's sporting event with their child may have experienced identity integration, as doing so allowed them to simultaneously express both their parental and fan role identities.

However, this kind of integration was not always possible. As illustrated in the earlier example involving the Christian fan who was faced with choosing between attending a church service or a women's sporting event, individuals were sometimes required to prioritize one role identity over another. In such cases, they experienced *identity conflict*, as psychological tensions arose when they were unable to simultaneously fulfill multiple important identities (Ebrahimi et al., 2020; Syed & McLean, 2016). The fact that individuals have experienced identity conflict underscores the inherently dynamic and situational nature of role identity salience.

Prior scholars have suggested that the salience of the sport fan role has been continually shaped by changes in life circumstances and social environments (Lock et al., 2011; Mullin et al., 2007). For instance, moving to a new city with a professional team (Lock et al., 2012) or beginning college (Heere et al., 2011; Katz & Heere, 2016) created new opportunities for individuals to integrate fandom alongside the other aspects of their lives, thereby strengthening fan identification. Conversely, major life transitions such as becoming a new parent may have limited one's ability to engage as a fan, producing tension between competing identities and resulting in identity conflict (Mansfield, 2020b).

Thus, it was in these moments of identity conflict or integration that the salience of particular role identities became most apparent. Instances of integration revealed which identities coexisted with fandom and how fans actively maintained multiple selves across social settings. In contrast, moments of conflict—when fans were forced to choose between competing roles—shed light on which identities were ultimately prioritized. Therefore, exploring these patterns in women's sport fandom was important, as they helped illuminate how fans prioritized and defined what it meant to be a fan of women's sport within the context of their broader lives.

### **B. Fan Identification and the Social Construction of Fan Meanings**

Prior to diving into fandom within women's sport contexts, it was important to detail what was currently known about sport fandom in general. Sport fandom has played a role in fulfilling the psychological needs of sport fans (Inoue et al., 2017; Wann et al., 2017), including socialization (Allison & Pope, 2022; Funk & James, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000), belongingness (Lock & Funk, 2016; Magrath, 2021; Towery, 2024), and

meaning in life (Delia et al., 2022; Doyle et al., 2016; Keaton & Gearhart, 2014). Sport fandom also served as a basis for both self-conceptualization and behavior (Mahony, 1995; Mahony & Howard, 1998). For some fans, the meanings they attached to sport fandom were deeply integrated into their self-concept, to the point that they experienced their team's victories and losses as personal successes and failures (Cialdini et al., 1976; Delia, 2015; Wann & Grieve, 2005). These fans tended to describe their fan identity as central to who they were (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). In contrast, other fans saw sport fandom as a less central part of their self-definition (James et al., 2019). Thus, the meanings and importance associated with the fan identity varied significantly among individuals, shaping the ways fans understood, prioritized, and expressed their connection to sport. Building on this understanding, I next turned to fan identification as a critical concept for exploring how fans defined the meanings they associated with their sport fan identity and how those meanings became embedded within their broader self-concept.

### **1. Socialization Agents and the Embedding of Fan Identity**

Socialization has long been understood as a key process through which individuals learned what it means to be a sport fan (Kolbe & James, 2000; James, 2001). Parents, especially fathers, have traditionally served as socialization agents who introduced their children to sport fandom (James, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000; Mastromartino et al., 2020; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010). Farrell et al.'s study also found support for brothers, husbands, sons, and uncles being the teachers of sport fandom for women. This suggested that men often served as the gatekeepers and standard bearers of the meanings which are attached to sport fandom (Dixon, 2015; Farrell et al., 2011; Scraton et al., 1999).

However, for U.S. and U.K.-based women's soccer fans, additional sources of socialization were identified. These added socialization agents included women who were interested in women's sport and individuals who participated in web forums centered on women's sport (Allison & Pope, 2022). The emergence of these different pathways highlighted that the meanings associated with fandom, particularly women's soccer fandom, are not static, but can be shaped by diverse and evolving social influences. Although, socialization itself was not the focus of this study, it was important to consider because it provided critical context for understanding how the meanings of certain role identities, particularly the fan of women's sport identity, became embedded in the self-concept.

## **2. Self-Verification and the Co-Construction of Fan Identity**

In addition to socialization, I drew upon the concept of self-verification to understand how feedback from others helped to sustain role identity salience. *Self-verification* referred to the process through which individuals sought and interpreted feedback that confirmed that others saw them as they saw themselves within a given role (Riley & Burke, 1995). This process was determined to be essential for identity stability, as it reinforced the internal *identity standard*, defined as the set of meanings an individual held about who they were in a given role (Burke & Stets, 2023). Notably, when individuals received affirming signals from others that their behaviors aligned with their internal understanding of a role, they experienced a sense of coherence and legitimacy (Burke & Reitzes, 1991). In turn, this sense of coherence deepened their emotional investment and strengthened the role's salience.

In fan contexts, self-verification occurred when a fan's values or practices were mirrored and affirmed by others in the fan space, reinforcing the feeling that one truly belonged in and to the role (Mansfield et al., 2021). This could have taken the form of shared routines, common priorities, or reciprocal recognition of identity-relevant traits. For instance, some fans who were parents found that they were able to engage more fully in sport fandom after connecting with other parents who also valued attending games or watching matches with their children (Mansfield, 2020b). In turn, these experiences did more than enable participation; they allowed fans to see their understanding of the role reflected back to them by others. Moreover, these experiences validated their sense of who they were as fans and helped solidify their internalized meaning of the role. Therefore, in this dissertation, I drew upon the concept of self-verification to better understand how fans of women's sport confirmed the meanings they associated with their fan identity.

### **3. Perceived Role Support and the Co-Construction of Fan Identity**

Whereas self-verification highlighted the process by which individuals sought confirmation that others saw them in the same way they saw themselves in a given role, perceived role support highlighted the ways that individuals received external validation from others about their role enactment. Specifically, *perceived role support* referred to the sense that others recognized and affirmed one's performance of a role. This form of support played a critical role in shaping the meanings individuals associated with their role identities, as positive feedback and recognition helped reinforce an individual's emotional connection to a role (Burke & Reitzes, 1981) and fostered a sense of coherence between self-perception and social affirmation (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Therefore, the

repeated enactment of role-consistent behaviors was not simply an individual choice, but a reflection of shared social understandings that reinforced the perceived importance of the role within one's broader identity structure (McCall & Simmons, 1978).

In fan contexts, perceived role support could take many forms, including direct encouragement, recognition from peers, or shared experiences that affirmed one's belonging to a broader fan community (Katz & Heere, 2013; Mansfield, 2020b). For example, fans who received consistent affirmation from family members or peer groups about their fan identity often described their sport fandom as a way to develop stronger emotional ties with others (Mansfield et al., 2021; Mansfield et al., 2022). These findings suggested that fan identification is not solely a function of personal commitment or behavioral frequency, but also a reflection of the shared social meanings reinforced through interpersonal validation. Therefore, in this dissertation, I drew upon the concept of perceived role support to explore how fans of women's sport understood and co-constructed the meanings associated with their fan of women's sport role identities.

### **C. Multiple Role Identities, Meaning-Making, and Women's Sport Fandom**

Taken together, it is the work of identity scholars to "probe novel aspects of consumer behavior, such as the role of social commitment, identity salience (as a ranked order of roles), and the influence of other consumers on behavior" (Lock & Heere, 2017, p. 427). To date, scholars have explored how the relative salience of singular role identities intersected with the sport fan identity (e.g., Mansfield et al., 2022; Toffoletti, 2017). Specifically, the intersections between sport fandom and gender identity (e.g., Hoerber & Kerwin, 2013; Jones, 2008), geographic identity (e.g., Andrijiw & Hyatt, 2009; Krazewski, 2008; Porat, 2010), and family role identity (e.g., Hyatt et al., 2018;

Mansfield, 2020b; Sveinson & Toffoletti, 2023) have been studied. However, relatively little scholarly attention has been directed at exploring how sport fans made sense of multiple identities at the same time (cf. Lock & Funk, 2016). Fandom in women's sport often required fans to navigate less traditional socialization pathways (Allison & Pope, 2022), fewer established community supports (Katz et al., 2024) and competing commitments to gender advocacy and sport consumption (Clarke et al., 2022; Delia, 2020). Thus, it represented a particularly rich context for studying role identity salience, negotiation, and perceived support.

In order to fully understand how role identities are constructed, negotiated, and maintained among fans of women's sport, it was critical to situate fandom within the broader social and structural conditions that shape these experiences. Inconsistencies in media coverage, disparities in merchandise availability, and the need for alternative socialization pathways all informed the meanings fans constructed around their role identities. Therefore, an examination of these conditions provided essential context for understanding the meaning-making processes that characterize fandom in women's sport.

Research centered on women's sport gained momentum in recent years (e.g., Clarke et al., 2022; Coche, 2014; Guest & Luijten, 2018; Mumcu et al., 2016). Nevertheless, most theorization about sport fans has explored the experiences of men's sport fans (Delia et al., 2022). As Delia et al. (2021) noted, only five studies had discussed women's sport contexts: Fink et al. (2002), Heere and Newland (2013), Lee et al. (2017), Madrigal (1995), and Schramm and Knoll (2017). This limited body of work stood in contrast to Delia et al.'s (2021) suggestion that the women's sport context should have been explored to the same extent as the men's sport context.

Yet, the growing demand for women's sport told a different story. Game attendance had increased in both the WNBA and the NWSL (Across the Timeline, n.d.; Berri, 2022; NWSL,2024), despite longstanding media practices that have historically limited access to women's sport content (Billings & Young, 2015; Cooky et al., 2021; Kian et al., 2008). Most recently, *The Collective* (2023) reported that only 15% of all sport media coverage focused on women's sports. While Lough and Guerin (2019) highlighted the promise of online-only platforms to create new spaces for fans of women's sport to connect and share experiences.

However, inconsistencies in coverage have remained a defining challenge for fans of women's sport. These inconsistencies have illuminated significant differences in the sport media content available for women's and men's sport (Tuggle, 1997; Wolter, 2015). For example, the Premier Hockey Federation, a forerunner to the PWHL, broadcasted some of their games on YouTube and others on Twitter (Phillips & Antunovic, 2019). This made it difficult for women's hockey fans to know where to stream the games (Phillips & Antunovic, 2019). By contrast, the National Hockey League (NHL), the men's hockey equivalent to the PWHL, secured a centralized media rights deal with ESPN (ESPN, 2021). This allowed fans of men's hockey to know that they could go to ESPN+ to watch all of their favorite teams play (ESPN, 2021).

Taken together, this demonstrated that "women's sport consumption requires an awareness of change and multiplatform management" that men's sport consumption simply does not (Phillips & Antunovic, 2022, p. 323). By comparison, as Kate Fagan (2024) in her TED Talk once opined, "In America, osmosis will have you knowing men's sports storylines." Thus, there appears to be a significant difference in the amount of

effort a fan of women's sport must exert to engage with their fandom compared to the effort required of a fan of men's sport.

Likewise, merchandise availability has posed another barrier to the full expression of fandom for women's sport consumers. Sport apparel has been championed as a way for fans to demonstrate attachment and identification with teams (Lee et al., 2023; Madrigal, 1995; Stroebel et al., 2019; Sveinson & Macaulay, 2024). However, women's sport organizations have historically failed to provide fans with sufficient or appropriate merchandise options. For instance, women's soccer fans expressed frustration at the offering of soccer shorts at the 2010 Women's Professional Soccer Puma-sponsored event (Allison, 2018) and at gendered children's apparel supporting the U.S. women's soccer team (Sveinson & Allison, 2022). In addition, there was insufficient merchandise available for purchase at the 2019 Women's World Cup (Clarke, 2019), and replica jerseys for the Australian women's team were placed on extended backorder until 2022 (Hytner, 2020). A report by Klarna and the Sports Innovation Lab (2024) further found that women's sport fans were 58% more likely than men's sport fans to experience inventory shortages. Taken together, these examples suggested that women's sport fans were eager to purchase merchandise, but structural limitations inaccurately suppressed recorded sales figures (Darvin, 2024).

In sum, a variety of structural and social factors shaped how fans engaged with women's sport fandom. These included challenges related to media access, merchandise availability, and the diverse pathways through which fans were socialized into fandom. However, beyond these constraints, social validation, particularly in the form of perceived role support, may also have played a critical role in shaping how fans both

construct and made meaning of their role identity. Prior research has indicated that the meanings of role identities were affirmed, challenged, or negotiated within social environments (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). Therefore, when examining how role identities were constructed among fans of women's sport, it was essential to account for both the broader conditions surrounding fandom and the social processes that contribute to meaning-making.

Building on this foundation, it became clear that understanding fandom in women's sport required more than identifying external barriers, motivations, and surface level behaviors. Instead, understanding fandom in women's sport required researchers to also pay attention to how fans actively interpreted, affirmed, and negotiated their role identities in relation to the social cues and structures that fans encounter in everyday life. Accordingly, in this study, I moved beyond measuring behaviors like attendance or viewership and instead focused on how fans of women's sport—across three professional leagues (NWSL, PWHL, and WNBA)—experienced fandom as part of a broader identity system, and how those experiences shaped the meanings that they attached to the fan of women's sport role identity.

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter detailed the research design, beginning with the research questions and the rationale for the study. I then outlined the paradigmatic approach that I took in this study, described the participants and the setting, and explained the data collection methods I employed. Lastly, I ended this chapter with a discussion of the analysis process and the rigor markers I used to ground this study.

#### **A. Research Questions**

The purpose of this research was to explore how different fans of women's sport experience fandom, using a role identity lens. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What role identities do fans of women's sport have?
2. How do fans prioritize their multiple and interlocking role identities?
3. To what extent, does their prioritization impact their understanding of what it means to be a fan of women's sport?

#### **B. Methodology**

For this study, I used a generic descriptive interpretive qualitative research (GDI-QR) design. GDI-QR research design was appropriate when seeking to answer open and exploratory research questions, particularly when a researcher was "seeking answers about features, types, or patterns within a phenomenon" (Elliot & Timulak, 2021, p. 17). GDI-QR was especially useful when researchers collected open-ended, non-numerical reported experiences as data (Elliot & Timulak, 2021). Therefore, I conducted interviews with fans of women's sport, across three professional women's sport leagues (NWSL,

PWHL, and WNBA), to understand how they experienced fandom in light of their multiple interlocking role identities.

Furthermore, Elliot and Timulak (2021) noted that GDI-QR was rooted in methodological pluralism. That is, this approach could be used with many paradigms, but the onus was placed on the researcher to explain how their preunderstandings informed the study—from the questions asked to the interpretation of the findings (Elliot & Timulak, 2021). In this study, I took a social constructionist approach to inquiry.

### **1. Social Constructionism**

Social constructionists asserted that “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices being constructed in and out of interactions between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 2020, p. 2). This meant that knowledge originated from human relationships within social contexts and that “truth” was a result of social processes that took place in historical or cultural contexts (Durkheim & Mauss, 2009). As such, social constructionists held that there were no absolute truths.

Because knowledge is socially produced, social constructionists argued that it carries social, cultural, and political consequences (Crotty, 2020). Knowledge had social consequences when people in communities collectively decided what truths, realities, and values they accepted and sustained (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). There were also cultural consequences when community members—both foreign and native—accepted the same truths, realities, and values as the source of their collective understanding, interpretations, and behaviors (Crotty, 1998). Likewise, when knowledge was codified into policy, it had

political consequences when relations between communities with differing understandings of social reality became antagonistic (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Language played a central role in this process (Searle, 2008). Specifically, language was important to social constructionists because it was “the tool, one might say, with which people construct [social reality]” (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 77). Communities shaped the rules of language as they used words to assign meaning to different objects with which they interacted (Pinker, 1994). Over time, the meanings that were applied to objects became fixed and seemingly unchangeable. As a result, language constrained how people understood cultural phenomena (Foucault, 1980).

Given that meaning was found to be socially negotiated and stabilized through language, it followed that studying meaning-making required attention to the contexts in which language was used. This interpretive emphasis was foundational to qualitative research, which sought to understand how individuals made sense of their lived experiences within natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Social constructionism, therefore, was aligned with qualitative inquiry, as both were grounded in the view that realities were co-constructed through interaction, discourse, and shared social experiences (Crotty, 1998). Thus, a qualitative approach appropriately aligned with my purpose: to explore how fans of women’s sport construct and make sense of their fan experiences through multiple role identities.

## **2. Researcher Positionality**

Given that social constructionists posited that knowledge stems from human relationships within social contexts (Durkheim & Mauss, 2009), it was important for me to be reflexive about the preunderstandings that I had of women’s sport and how these

may have influenced the research project. To begin, my interest in women's sport started at the age of 5. It was then that I began following the WNBA and have been a highly identified women's sport fan ever since. My first ties were to the Houston Comets, and I still have my child-sized medium personalized Comets Jersey. I also had secondary ties to the Minnesota Lynx as my aunt enrolled me in a basketball camp that the Lynx held when I was eight. However, when the Comets folded in 2008, I became a highly identified Seattle Storm fan as well. I started following the NWSL after the 2015 Women's World Cup and first became a fan of the Orlando Pride in 2016. I also developed a secondary fandom of Gotham FC when I started going to their games while I was in graduate school. Within the PWHL, my fan identification lies with NY Sirens. I follow this team because many of its players formerly played for the Metropolitan Riveters. The Riveters were a team in the Premier Hockey Federation (PHF; original name: National Women's Hockey League) and I worked for this league from September of 2018 to April of 2019. I say all of this to say that I love women's sport, and I love it so much that I not only follow it as a fan, but feel it is my calling to keep advocating for its existence in my professional life. I say advocating for its existence because in my experiences as both a fan of women's sport and as a professional working in women's sport, I have often felt that fans of women's sport (me included) were misunderstood, discounted, and sometimes even just plain ignored.

During my childhood, I would turn on SportsCenter to try to find out about the WNBA games that were on tv past my bedtime, but it was rare that I ever heard the commentators talk about these games. So, I had to settle for the rolling ticker tape at the bottom of the screen. It really infuriated me because it felt like I was always the

respectful one waiting my turn to hear about the sports I cared about, but the people that really cared about the NFL games did not ever have to wait their turn. Then, I would hear people like Steven A Smith say if people were interested in hearing about women's sport then the networks would talk about it. Meanwhile, I was screaming into the void I am right here, and I know I am not alone. Have you even asked us?

During my time as an undergraduate (2013-2016), I pursued a minor in sport business management. For one of the classes I took, we were assigned to read a textbook on sport marketing, written by Dr. Bill Sutton. In his conclusion, he wrote that he was not yet convinced that women's sport could be profitable within the next ten years. I read that and got angry once again. I was angry because now one of the most respected academic researchers that studied sport marketing was saying that what I loved was not going to be profitable within the next ten years. So, when he visited our class later in the semester, I told him I want to prove that what you wrote at the end of your new book was wrong. I want to prove through my research that women's sports can be profitable if marketed correctly.

Today, nearly nine years since I had that conversation with Dr. Sutton, I am writing my dissertation on fans of women's sport. My hope is that this is the first part of a lifelong career helping marketers to understand who fans of women's sport are. I want to answer questions like who is considered a fan of women's sport? What identities do women's sport fans hold? What behaviors are accepted in women's sport fan settings?

In my experiences witnessing behaviors of fans who consume women's sport online and in person, I have noticed that they tend to be outspoken about social issues. For example, I have seen fans display signs at games that say Black Lives Matter and

Trans Lives Matter and wear clothing that expresses their support for the Crown Act and women's rights. I have also read posts made in Seattle Storm Facebook groups that are encouraging fans to vote. Furthermore, in attending women's professional sporting events, there seems to be a strategy from sport organizations to communicate their support for social issues too. For instance, at a Kansas City Current game, the stadium had a sustainability program in place which encouraged fans to give their cups back so that they could be washed and reused. On the other hand, there are new fans that do not seem to share the same positions on social issues. For instance, WNBA players during the playoffs voiced frustration with new fans that yelled racial slurs at them (Pickman, 2024). Furthermore, Elle Duncan (2024), a ESPN commentator called out new WNBA fans for creating culture wars and demonstrating othering. Given these differences between new and old fans, does this mean that the identities for new and old fans of women's sport are different? Does this mean that norms that are associated with being a women's sport fan are different depending on when you became a fan?

As a nearly lifelong fan of sport contested by women, I have come to find comfort in the displays of support for historically marginalized groups at women's sporting events and to view those who do not support these groups as people with whom I do not identify. I think part of this stems from me being a white-passing Filipina who has experienced identity erasure my whole life. Specifically, this has manifested itself in people only viewing me in terms of my whiteness and questioning my Filipino roots. For instance, classmates of mine would ask what do you know about being Asian, you are White, and teachers would ask if my mother was my mother or my nanny as she and I did not share the same skin tone. In turn, this form of identity erasure prompted me to want to advocate

for those who may have experienced similar things and distance myself from people who did not support historically marginalized communities.

I also have not known many people to be fans of women's sport, so if I meet someone that does support a women's sport team, I evaluate them as people with whom I identify, irrespective of the women's sport team they support. When others question the value or skill of women's sport teams, I defend them even if the team is not my team. I think I do this because in childhood my peers did not consider me to be a real sport fan as I was more interested in women's sport than men's sport. This also made me acutely aware of the biases that were held against women's sport. So, today, I feel compelled to support others who are fans of women's sport because I have known what it is like to not feel supported.

In terms of my own fan behaviors, I have a subscription to WNBA League Pass, Paramount Plus, Prime Video, DirectTV, and ESPN+ so that I can keep up with the WNBA, NWSL, and PWWL. I also subscribe to two email-based sport newsletters that cover women's sport (The GIST and Just Women's Sports) and two podcasts (Goals and The GIST) that center on women's sport content. I also own and wear official merchandise that shows simultaneous support for women's sport teams and social issues. So, I am a very highly identified women's sport fan and the fact that I did share some lived experiences with the fans allowed me to quickly develop rapport with the participants and empathize with their experiences (Taylor, 1998).

This status as a partial insider and highly identified women's sport fan is important to acknowledge as I had to keep my position in mind as it related to the positions that other fans of women's sport had. That is, knowing that I have my own ideas

about my own women's sport fandom, my goal as a researcher was to explore how other fans define what it means to be a fan of women's sport. I did this by looking for the patterns across statements that the other fans made about how they experienced fandom rather than for sentiments that are right or wrong in relation to how I have experienced fandom.

### **C. Procedure**

As previously mentioned, I utilized GDI-QR to gather the perspectives of fans of women's sport. GDI-QR embraced a pragmatic approach to research, meaning that it did not have a standardized approach to collecting data (Elliot & Timulak, 2021). That said, the approach specified that researchers should have been clear about what informed their data collection strategy (Elliot & Timulak, 2021). As such, I began this section by detailing some background information about the women's sport context. Next, I provided information on my participants and the strategy I used to recruit them. Lastly, I detailed my data collection strategy.

#### **1. Sample: Background and History of WNBA, NWSL, and PWHL**

Fans of women's sport, specifically fans of the WNBA, PWHL, and NWSL were the target population for this study. I interviewed fans of these three leagues as these three leagues are among the most high-profile women's professional sport leagues in the United States. A background of all three leagues was provided to share the necessary context for the research and data.

In the case of the WNBA, the league completed its' 29<sup>th</sup> season and during the 2023-2024 season the league "reached over 36 million total unique viewers across all national networks, the highest since 2008 and it was up 27 percent from 2022" (WNBA,

2023). It has become the longest enduring women's professional sport league in the United States. When the league started in 1997, the league had eight teams (the Charlotte Sting, Cleveland Rockers, Houston Comets, Los Angeles Sparks, New York Liberty, Phoenix Mercury, Sacramento Monarchs and Utah Starzz) and three TV deals: NBC, ESPN and Lifetime (Sport Business Journal, 2021). Today, the league has 12 teams and is expanding to San Francisco in 2025 and Toronto by 2026 (Sutelan, 2024).

In the case of the NWSL, the league started its 10th season in 2024 and saw its attendance figures at NWSL games exceed 1.2 million in 2023, a 26% year over year increase (Adgate, 2023). Notably, this league has become the longest enduring women's professional soccer league in the United States as there were two prior leagues. The first professional soccer league for women, the Women's United Soccer Association, was founded right after the 1999 World Cup but folded in 2003 (Southall et al., 2005). The second league, Women's Professional Soccer, ran from 2008 to 2012 before folding (LeFeuvre et al., 2013).

The PWHL first opened its doors in 2023 and reported sellout crowds at four of its six teams' venues (Burton & O'Reilly, 2024). This league followed the Premier Hockey Federation (original name: National Women's Hockey League), which folded in 2022 (Gisiger, 2024) and the Canadian Women's Hockey League, which folded in 2019 (Berkman, 2019).

## **2. The Sample: Recruitment of Fans of Women's Sport**

While the three leagues have fans throughout the United States and abroad, I focused only on connecting with U.S. based fans of the WNBA, PWHL, and NWSL. Currently, the PWHL is the only league with teams in both the United States and Canada,

but the WNBA will be expanding into Canada by 2026 (Sutelan, 2024). So, to allow for the consistency of comparison across the three leagues, I focused on the fans of U.S. based teams within the PWHL.

My first approach to reaching these fans involved placing a recruitment post on my personal social media pages. This was my attempt to reach people whom I knew to be fans of teams within the WNBA, the NWSL, and the PWHL. This approach always had the potential to generate a biased sample, but I took this step to circumvent issues accessing fans of women's sport who had historically been hard to reach (Delia et al., 2021). I was able to recruit six participants this way. The second recruitment method required me to partner with my professional acquaintances who were currently working within the WNBA, NWSL, and PWHL. They sent a recruitment email to fans subscribed to their internal customer listservs and I was able to recruit 3 participants this way.

The third recruitment method involved my partnership with supporter groups of teams within the WNBA, the NWSL, and the PWHL. Though I reached out to Facebook group account administrators for all the teams within the WNBA, NWSL, and PWHL, I was only successful in partnering with the account administrators of the Minnesota Frost Fan Club (PWHL) and the Seattle Storm Crazyies (WNBA) on Facebook. I was able to recruit five participants in this manner. The administrators posted a recruitment post for my study on their accounts. The recruitment post that was sent by me, my professional acquaintances, and the supporter group account administrators can be found in Appendix C.

By partnering with my professional acquaintances and these administrators, I attempted to increase the diversity within the sample and was able to garner a stronger

response rate, given that the participants received the request from someone with whom they had “trust, empathy, and a shared past” (Shankar et al., 2009, p. 80). The recruitment post provided by me, my acquaintances, and the account administrators also incentivized participation by offering to donate five dollars on each participant’s behalf to the Women’s Sports Foundation and directed interested participants to a pre-screening questionnaire.

The last recruitment method I employed was an intercept survey. I approached participants at five WNBA games, five NWSL games, and five PWHL games and asked if they wanted to take part in my research. I went to five games of each league for consistency in recruitment. I attempted to reduce bias in my intercept approach by adhering to the following procedure. I arrived at the games 20 minutes before doors opened, so that I could stand in line with others waiting to go in the arena. I would chat with the people who were in line and I would ask them if they would be willing to participate in my study. I also would go to the merchandise shops and concession stands prior to the game and chat with people who were shopping and in line to make their purchases. I approached people until I had 20 who verbally agreed to participate. This number was chosen because I found that there was a 10% completion rate after each game. My goal was to recruit 10 fans from teams in each of the three leagues. So, by approaching 20 people at each game, I was able to recruit at least two participants per game. After verbally agreeing to participate, participants were shown a laminated copy of the recruitment post, which prominently featured a QR code. The QR code linked to the same pre-screening questionnaire that the other participants completed. Using this recruitment method, I was able to recruit seventeen participants.

The questionnaire asked participants to indicate whether they identified with a team within the NWSL, WNBA, or PWHL, as well as with women's sports in general, and to answer demographic-related questions. The demographic-related questions pertained to their age, ethnicity, highest level of education, annual household income, gender identity, and sexual orientation. This was done in an attempt to answer the call from Delia and her colleagues (2022) to recruit more diverse samples in sport consumer behavior research. The survey ended by asking participants to provide their names and email addresses so that I could reach out to qualified participants. Thereafter, I deleted the data for any participants who did not qualify for the study and included only those who were 18 years of age or older and who self-identified with a team in the WNBA, NWSL, or PWHL.

In effect, this survey became a screening tool because it required participants to state that they self-identified with a women's professional team within the WNBA, NWSL, or PWHL before committing to a Zoom interview. Moreover, if they reported that they did not identify with a team that played in the WNBA, NWSL, or PWHL, then they disqualified themselves from the study without a significant time burden, and I was able to determine this before engaging in an hour-long Zoom interview.

To gain an understanding of fans across the various leagues, I interviewed 31 participants. Elliot and Timulak (2021) provided a list of exemplar studies (e.g., Doherty et al., 2016; L'Estrange et al., 2016; Levitt et al., 2018) that used GDI-QR methodology, and the number of participants in these studies ranged from 8 to 18. Thus, conducting 31 interviews was appropriate. More information on the demographics represented within my sample can be found in Appendix D.

### **3. Data Collection**

Data were collected via interviews as interviews are an effective way to have participants share their detailed and unique perspectives (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). More specifically, the interviews allowed me to dialogue with participants about the aspects that made them different from other participants (Tracy, 2020). The interviews were semi-structured, using both questions informed by the literature and unstructured discussion. In this study, having structured questions allowed me to make comparisons cleanly across contexts given that the participants answered the same questions. However, allowing for unstructured conversation helped me to understand anything participants shared that was not originally captured within the structured questions.

#### **a. Interview Procedure**

The duration of each interview ranged between 23 minutes and 107 minutes and took place on Zoom. Zoom interviews allowed me to speak to participants who were at a significant geographic distance from me (Salmons, 2014). It also potentially increased my rapport with participants given that they could share their perspectives in a more familiar setting (Salmons, 2014).

A formal interview guide was provided in Appendix A. However, at a high level, questions centered on how fans described the role identities that are most important to them, explained how these identities were structured within their saliency hierarchy, and detailed how these ultimately influenced how fans understood what it means to be a fan of women's sport.

Interviews were appropriate for studies in which the researcher were interested in having questions answered by "different individuals involved in the same line of activity

who have multiple perspectives on some phenomenon” (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012, p.101). In terms of this study, I was interested in having questions answered by different individuals that are fans of teams within the WNBA, NWSL, and PWHL. As such, the use of interviews in this study was appropriate.

### **E. Analysis**

I employed a reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke’s (2022) guidelines. This process involved six phases and each stage of the coding and theme development process used in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was described below. Phase one required me as the researcher to familiarize myself with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To familiarize myself with the content of my dataset, I began by uploading the audio files of my Zoom interviews into Otter Ai. Then, I listened to the interviews, compared the transcript and audio to ensure accuracy, and reconciled any discrepancies. While listening to these audio files, I also made brief notes about any insights that I had related to individual audios and the aggregation of all the audio files. Following the transcription verification, I uploaded the transcripts into MAXQDA and used the software as a data organization tool so that I could read and code the transcripts.

The second phase was coding which required me to read each data item closely and then to tag the segments of text that were relevant to my research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I started this process by looking at the data inductively by coding phrases or words that detail the “who, what, where, and when” (Tracy & Hinrich, 2017, p.5). On the whole, these codes applied at the semantic level, meaning that they captured the participant’s explicitly expressed thoughts on the role identities they hold and their experiences as fans of women’s sport. For example, codes such as lawyer, teacher, and

welder were coded as professions (i.e., roles) that participants had. Thereafter, I transitioned to coding the data deductively. The deductive phase allowed me to build from established theories (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Specifically, I examined what I coded inductively at the semantic level and then organized them so that I could make sense of what I already saw in the data set. Thereafter, I identified any connections to existing theory and any patterns or cause and effect relationships within the data (Tracy & Hinrich, 2017). In doing so, I engaged in latent coding, which required me to pull out the implicit meanings from the participants responses (Braun & Clarke, 2022). For example, existing theory on role identity posited that a person's self-esteem is tied to behaving in accordance with the understood meanings that are ascribed to a role (Burke, 1991; Burke & Cast, 1997; Riley & Burke, 1995). So, when one of my participants shared that in order to be a fan of women's sport that you have to be accepting of the LGBTQ+ community, I coded LGBTQ+ acceptance as part of what it meant to be a fan of women's sport.

The goal was to have the inductive phase and the deductive phase inform one another through an iterative "circular reflexive process" (Tracy & Hinrich, 2017). This occurred as I moved from the data to individual codes and from codes to theory and back to data (Tracy & Hinrich, 2017). Upon completion of this, I reviewed all of my codes, collated the code labels, and then compiled all the relevant segments of data for each code (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Next, I moved into the third phase called initial theme generation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In this stage, I identified shared patterns in meaning across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This involved the compilation of code clusters such that those that shared similar core ideas were grouped together as potential meaningful answers to

my research questions. I repeated this process until I felt that I collated all of the clusters into relevant possible answers to my research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The possible answers were then considered *candidate themes* (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Thereafter, I proceeded to the fourth phase where I developed and reviewed my themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Specifically, I reviewed each of my candidate themes for their ability to represent the data on the whole and I reviewed the codes for their ability to represent the candidate theme (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To illustrate how I reviewed my candidate themes and codes, I provided an example from my analysis. I had several participants in my study share that they were parents, aunts, or uncles who bought tickets to women's sporting events for themselves and the children in their lives. So, I coded each of the participants as parents, aunts, or uncles first as these are examples of role identities that fans of women's sport could have. Then, several of these participants shared that the main reason they brought the children to games was to show the children that they could do anything that they set their minds to doing. So, I coded all of the instances in which participants shared similar sentiments and I clustered all of these under the candidate theme *role model for children*.

Once I was satisfied that my candidate themes represented the data, I moved into the fifth phase: refining, defining, and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Key steps in this phase included writing a brief synopsis of each theme and providing each theme with an informative name (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Lastly, in phase six, I wrote up my analysis so that I had a coherent persuasive story about my findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). My write up is comprised of the themes, their representative quotes, and my

analysis of how the themes answer the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The complete write up can be found in Chapter 4.

### **F. Rigor**

Tracy (2010) asserted that qualitative research of high quality is rigorous. That said, what constitutes rigorous qualitative research varies (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Some are in favor of using a criteriological approach which deem projects that meet predetermined and permanent criteria, regardless of research purpose, to be rigorous (Sparkes & Smith, 2016). Examples of such criteria based approaches are Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness standard or Tracy's (2010) eight quality markers. Others prefer a non-foundationalist or relativist approach which suggests that the criteria for evaluating quality should be flexible rather than fixed and be applied on a case-by-case (i.e., contextually situated) basis (Burke, 2016; Sparkes & Smith, 2016). I chose to apply a relativist perspective to rigor in my dissertation because it aligned with my social constructionist epistemological stance (Burke, 2016; Sparkes & Smith, 2016). Specifically, taking the relativist approach aligned because this perspective acknowledged that what constitutes a good study is socially constructed (Burke, 2016; Sparkes & Smith, 2016). Thus, the evaluative criteria tied to this study were dependent upon the context and the research aims (Burke, 2016; Sparkes & Smith, 2016).

For the purposes of this study, I chose the following criteria as quality markers for my work: worthy topic, credibility, and meaningful coherence from Tracy's (2010) list, and research memoing (Tracy & Hinrich, 2020). The connection between these markers and my work was explained below.

First, a worthy topic, as described by Tracy (2010), is “relevant, timely, significant, interesting, or evocative” (p.840). In this study, I explored how different fans of women’s sport experience fandom through the role identity lens. This topic was timely because the number of people who are fans of women’s sport is growing (Mintel, 2024) and media members have discussed potential differences between fans who have been long-term fans versus those who have just recently started following women’s sport (Neumann, 2024; Tennery, 2024). Additionally, Tracy (2010) noted that “studies of little-known phenomena are intrinsically interesting” (p.840). Therefore, role identity, particularly amongst the fans of women’s sport, was intrinsically interesting because both the topic (role identity in sport; Lock & Heere, 2017) and the context (i.e., women’s sport) have been studied to a lesser extent (Delia et al., 2022).

In addition, my final analysis exhibited credibility which refers to the sense that the research findings are trustworthy or plausible (Tracy, 2010). The standard of credibility was met when practices such as thick description, triangulation or crystallization, and multivocality were employed (Tracy, 2010). Thick descriptions were defined as in-depth illustrations that explained culturally situated meanings (Geertz, 1973) and provided abundant concrete detail (Bochner, 2000). Successful illustrations of culturally situated meanings provided readers with “the details needed to come to their own conclusions about the scene” (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). They also detailed tacit (i.e., taken for granted) knowledge that was often “manifested in nods, silences, humor, and naughty nuances” (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 492). Therefore, in this study, I provided readers with thick descriptions so that they could understand the tacit knowledges of

women's sport fans, the environments in which women's sport fans existed, and the meanings that women's sport fans ascribed to their women's sport fandom.

Crystallization referred to the practice of including multiple data sources not for the purpose of providing researchers with a singular valid truth, but rather for presenting a complex, in-depth, yet partial understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Tracy, 2010). Multivocality, in line with crystallization, referred to the inclusion of "multiple and varied voices in the qualitative report and analysis" (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). I achieved crystallization and multivocality in my dissertation by including a diverse sample of fans of women's sport and by providing thick descriptions of the meanings that these fans assigned to their fandom. This was particularly important in this study because role identity was something that was highly contextual (Stryker & Burke, 2000), and presenting the many nuances that existed within the different subgroups of fans who consumed women's sport was crucial. I accomplished this by including the voices of 31 fans who varied by fandom length, age, ethnicity, educational attainment, annual household income, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

Meaningful coherence, which referred to the alignment of the research design, data collection, and analysis with the theoretical framework and research aims, was also adopted in this study (Tracy, 2010). To begin, there was meaningful coherence between the research topic—role identity among fans of women's sport—and the paradigmatic lens used: social constructionism. The two were linked because the paradigm acknowledged that knowledge was contextual (Crotty, 2020) and identity was best understood when context was emphasized (Ashforth et al., 2008). In addition, meaningful coherence was achieved as GDI-QR was appropriately applied when seeking to answer

open-ended exploratory questions, and this project sought to answer the open-ended question: *How do different fans of women's sport experience fandom?*

Lastly, I engaged in reflexivity. Reflexivity required researchers to acknowledge that their assumptions, expectations, actions, and choices throughout the research process influenced the outcomes of the study (Finlay & Gough, 2003). I engaged in reflexivity because it aligned with social constructionism and was required to engage in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I practiced reflexivity by keeping a reflexive journal. A reflexive journal was a “repository for documenting and storing thoughts for subsequent reflection, interrogation, and meaning making” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 19). Within my reflexive journal, I collected my thoughts on the research process, noted why I responded in particular ways, and accounted for how my responses influenced the research project (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Below, I provide an excerpt from my reflexive journal. *“This participant just said that there is not any other place in sport where you can be pro LGBTQ+ other than women's sport and just the other day two other participants talked about women's sporting events being really queer spaces. The first one was a member of the LGBTQIA+ community and the other was an ally. However, both emphasized that they liked that the space was inclusive for the LGBTQ+ community. It's almost like they are protective of that in the sense that they want others looking in to know that queerness is accepted and if you don't like it get out kind of thing. This is something I need to keep an eye on”*. These reflections allowed me to elucidate how I made sense of the data at different points of time and served as an accountability trail.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This chapter presented the findings of the study organized under two broad headings: a) Identity negotiation: Integration and conflict and b) Meanings Associated with Fandom in Women's Sport. Under the first heading, identity negotiation, two types of fan experiences were discussed - identity integration (Erikson, 1950) and identity conflict (Syed & McLean, 2016). The fans who experienced identity integration frequently consumed women's sporting events because fandom allowed them to simultaneously enact one or more of their prioritized role identities (e.g., being a partner, a role model for children, an ally, and a former athlete) and these fans' experiences were discussed under their respective headings. By contrast, fans who experienced *identity conflict* shared that they infrequently consumed women's sporting events because doing so took them away from enacting their prioritized role identities and their experiences were discussed in the fifth theme entitled I am a fan when I can.

Under the second heading meanings associated with fandom in women's sport, fans articulated how they understood the role identity as fans of women's sport. In particular, they described fandom as encompassing values of inclusivity toward the LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Plus) community, advocacy for gender equity in sport, broad support across women's sports, and the creation of emotionally and physically safe fan spaces. In the subsequent sections, I elaborated on these themes with illustrative participant quotes and interpretive commentary.

## **A. Identity Negotiation: Integration and Conflict**

Identity theory posited that individuals simultaneously hold multiple role identities within their self-concept (Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). The salience and prioritization of these identities was found to influence behavior, particularly when identities were either integrated or in conflict. In this study, fans described how their fandom of women's sport intersected with other important role identities, illustrating patterns of identity integration and conflict.

### **1. Identity Integration: Partner Role**

Fans whose role identities as partners aligned with their fan identities often experienced identity integration. One fan that experienced identity integration between their role as a partner and as a fan of women's sport discussed how women's sporting events were the impetus for their relationship. Janet shared, "I think to the people that I engage in watching women's sport with, definitely, both of my partners ... that it feels like a cornerstone... of our collective, like relationship experience, like all of us together... as partners." In this case, Janet highlighted how pivotal women's sport had been in shaping their relationship with their partners. They continued, "like, I'm not a sporty spice, but it was the 2019 World Cup that got me...both of my partners were into it and so they were like, just watch with us...And I just, like, fell in love." As such, watching women's soccer games made them feel connected to their partners and Janet experienced identity integration because they and their partners felt closer together when they collectively consumed women's sports.

Similarly, Madeline discussed how women's sports allowed her and her husband to feel connected to one another. When discussing the things that were the most important

to her Madeline remarked, "I've been in Las Vegas for most of my life. I'm an attorney. I have two living children, and I have been married for 31 years." In sharing how long she had been married, Madeline conveyed the importance of her marriage to her. This led to a conversation about how she prioritized being a spouse while being a fan of the Las Vegas Aces at the time. Madeline shared, "One of the things that Stephen and I have is season tickets [for the Las Vegas Aces] together. So, it's, you know, it's a date night." Madeline reflected on these date nights and detailed that they would often go out to dinner after the games, which made game nights "a nice time to spend together". The time the couple spent together meant a lot to her because both her extended and immediate family lived at quite a distance from them. As such, the Aces games were not just a welcomed diversion, but also a way for them to feel connected to each other when they felt disconnected from their family members that lived at a distance. Thus, Madeline experienced identity integration as she felt like her role as an Aces fan allowed her to fulfill her role as a partner too.

Likewise, Nike's story underscored how identity integration (i.e., being able to enact two or more role identities at the same time) impacted a person's support for women's sport. Nike detailed, "My husband and I go to most of the games together and I mean we have so much fun, like they're just really, really good games." She elaborated that what made it fun for her was that her husband was "really, really supportive" of the Minnesota Lynx too which made her not "feel like I'm doing this all by myself." Notably, she brought up "doing this all by myself" because her ex-husband was not interested in women's sport. At one time, Nike had even contemplated getting season tickets for the Minnesota Lynx by herself, but her ex-husband's diminished interest in women's sport

ultimately kept her away from the team. In the face of this identity conflict between her role as a partner and her role as a fan of women's sport, she chose to spend time with her ex-husband. However, this was short lived as Nike got remarried and in 2015 the newlyweds became season ticket holders of the Minnesota Lynx. Thus, as Nike's story exemplified, when people were able to integrate their role identities as fans and as partners, they were more likely to consume women's sport and vice versa.

## **2. Identity Integration: Ally Role**

In addition, some fans felt that being an ally intersected with their role as a fan of women's sport. This theme represented those fans who described themselves as being an advocate, for numerous causes both related and unrelated to being a fan of women's sport, and a fan of women's sport at the same time. For example, when asked why she considered herself to be a fan of women's sport, Nike declared, "I am supporting women's sports and putting my money where my values are. And, you know, I wouldn't be being true to my what I say I believe, if I wasn't willing to make the investment in them [women's sport organizations]." In sharing that she wanted to put her "money where [her] values are", she communicated that she wanted her consumption habits to align with her values. The values she mentioned wanting to support with her money were Black Lives Matter, openness toward the LGBTQ+ community, and gender equity. This led to a conversation about what women's sport organizations do to support the aforementioned causes. Nike shared:

I think with the way the league, the coaches, and I will speak to the Lynx coaching staff, fans, and players...wearing Black Live Matter T-shirts... celebrating Native American heritage and others too, and really celebrating

women as well, like Cheryl Reeve, every game has a t shirt...that says something or has a message...And yeah, so I think most people feel pretty welcome there, I hope.

In essence, Nike saw that the Minnesota Lynx and the WNBA advocated for some of the same causes that she did firsthand, and this prompted her to want to continue supporting the work done by the WNBA and the Minnesota Lynx. Thus, Nike experienced identity integration as consuming women's sport allowed her to show her allyship for the causes she supported as well.

Similar to Nike, Charlie wanted to financially support organizations that were engaged in advocacy work on behalf of Black women. Specifically, Charlie shared:

Like the league [WNBA], in a way, is kind of a walking protest, and like investing in black women and black queer women is something I strongly believe in, and so it's, it's cool ... to have gotten to interact with those players when I was there, and just the fans who generally feel the same.

In detailing how the WNBA is “kind of a walking protest”, Charlie communicated that he viewed the WNBA to be an organization that engaged in advocacy work. Furthermore, by explaining that his interactions with fans were similar to those interactions that he has had with the players, he demonstrated that this advocacy work is a throughline from the organization to its fans. Moreover, in asserting that “investing in black women and black queer women” is something that he strongly believes in, he shared that he wanted to support black women. According to Statista, more than 60% of WNBA players identify as Black or African-American. Therefore, Charlie experienced identity integration as consuming women's sport allowed him to show his allyship for Black women.

Aside from supporting the advocacy work of women's sport organizations, some fans mentioned that they consumed women's sport as a way to support the individual advocacy efforts of female athletes. For instance, when asked why she considered herself to be a fan of women's sport, Jessica shared that she was, "doing whatever I can, to give them [WNBA players] a platform to use their platform." The notion of giving the players a platform communicated that Jessica was aware that female athletes were not always broadcasted to the same extent that male athletes were. It also communicated that she watched women's sport to make sure that broadcasters knew that the WNBA deserved to be broadcasted. Furthermore, in wanting to give the players a platform to use, she demonstrated that she supported the social justice work that the players were doing and that she wanted them to continue doing it. As such, Jessica experienced identity integration as consuming women's sport allowed her to show her support for the social justice initiatives the players were supporting. Taken together, the remarks of Charlie, Jessica, and Nike illustrated the experiences of fans that experienced identity integration as attending games and supporting women's sport organizations allowed them to live out their values around racial justice, gender equity, and LGBTQ+ inclusion.

### **3. Identity Integration: Role Model for Children**

Fans who viewed themselves as role models for younger generations also reported identity integration. Specifically, this theme encapsulated the experiences of those fans who described themselves as both a fan of women's sport and an influential figure in a child's life (e.g., uncle, aunt, father, etc.). For instance, when asked why he considered himself to be a fan of women's sport, Brad discussed how being a fan allowed him to instill gender equity beliefs in his daughters:

Especially as a dad of three girls, I feel that I have a responsibility...to show the girls ... that these opportunities are out there, and that the playing field... is being leveled... I want them to have every opportunity in the world. So of course, supporting that [gender equity] on the other side of it goes hand in hand.

Showing his daughters real life examples of women breaking barriers was important to him because he watched his mother struggle with self-esteem issues. He got choked up as he relayed:

I watched my mom...read those effing magazines that she was supposed to fucking keep up with Cosmo, all that bullshit. And I used to look at that tortured woman, and my heart used to break as an only child... I witnessed a lot of my mom's personal struggles with body image...she got all kinds of extra attention and cat calling and bullshit from men ...so, you know, I got three girls. I'm not raising them to be subservient...I want to let them know that... at the end of the day, it just doesn't matter. You get to do whatever you want.

Because he saw his mother experience misogyny firsthand, he recognized that he would need to counter the inherent misogynistic examples in the media and society at large if he wanted his daughters to have a positive self-esteem. Thus, Brad brought his daughters to games to give them examples of women succeeding. In doing so, he was able to experience identity integration because being a Boston Fleet fan allowed him to demonstrate to his daughters that he believed in his daughters, gender equity, and the Boston Fleet at the same time.

Likewise, when asked about the meaning of being a fan of women's sport, Napoleon hoped that he could through his support of women's sport positively impact his

niece. Specifically, he wished that his niece would view him as “someone who is like a male figure” and “pick up on that and hopefully choose better partners.” In acknowledging that he wanted his niece to “choose better partners”, he was aware that she could be subjected to being in a relationship with someone who did not support women (i.e., a worse partner). Furthermore, in hoping his niece would view him as a positive male figure because he was a fan of women’s sport, Napoleon was communicating that he believed positive male role models and partners support women. Therefore, Napoleon’s support of women’s sport was a way to model his belief for his niece. In doing so, he was able to experience identity integration because being a Minnesota Lynx fan allowed him to demonstrate that he supported women, his niece, and the Minnesota Lynx at the same time.

In addition, other fans detailed how they hoped their support of women’s sport would instill the importance of practicing inclusion, like Melissa, who spoke about the value of bringing her son to WNBA games:

So I just wanted him to see that diversity and to have it not be a thing that was like, Oh, this is the first time I've seen a person of color. This is the first time I've seen a gay person or someone who you know is dressing different than maybe what you assume their gender identity is going to be.

In this case, Melissa wanted to expose her son to a diverse group of people at the Liberty games and to teach him the importance of valuing diversity. These things were important to her because she grew up in a small town where she, as a White passing Latina, felt excluded from her predominately White community. So, her description of “it not be[ing] a thing” at Liberty games to have different kinds of people communicated that Melissa

was not only aware that Liberty games have diverse audiences, but also that she was intentional in bringing her son to Liberty games to expose him to diverse people. In doing so, she was able to experience identity integration because being a Liberty fan allowed her to demonstrate her values to her son and to support the New York Liberty at the same time.

Napoleon similarly discussed the importance of attending women's sport events to foster inclusion. One initiative that was particularly important to him was the Native American heritage night. He noted, "I think it's important for young women to see that on that big stage... like, I'm Ojibwe, so I wanted her [his niece] to see that too so she can feel included in that community." Napoleon, in calling the Minnesota Lynx game "the big stage", spoke to the fact that he sees value in women's sporting events. In addition, by emphasizing that he wanted his niece to see Native American culture being displayed at Lynx games, Napoleon indicated that his choice to bring his niece to the Native American heritage night at the Lynx game was intentional. Therefore, Napoleon experienced identity integration because being a Lynx fan allowed him to demonstrate to his niece the importance he placed on honoring his heritage, empowering his niece, and supporting the Lynx at the same time.

#### **4. Identity Integration: Former athlete**

Beyond being an ally, a partner, or a role model for children, some fans cited that being a former athlete intersected with the role identity of being a fan of women's sport. As such, this theme featured the experiences of those fans who described themselves as fans of women's sport and as former athletes. For instance, Jackie emphasized:

I always start that I'm a soccer player. So I played, you know, all throughout my youth. I played in college, so I follow [soccer] very, very intensely now. So, I always make sure that when I introduce myself, people understand my level of love and passion for soccer.

In announcing herself as a soccer player first, Jackie imparted to others that being a soccer player was an important aspect of her identity. Moreover, being a former athlete was so important to her that she decided to work in sport and to “support women’s sport through and through” as a consumer. When asked why she wanted to support women’s sport through and through, Jackie explained:

I think it's different for me too, because I experienced it right, like so I played. I know how it made me feel. I know that it created all these great... opportunities for me... in terms of meeting the right people or just feeling good about myself winning the game...It's just really important in my personal life... that I'm, like, doing everything that I can to showcase that passion.

The notion that “it’s different for her” communicated that Jackie felt as though playing the sport left her with a sense of obligation to promote the professionalization of the sport. Furthermore, in wanting to “showcase that passion” for women’s sport whenever given the opportunity, she demonstrated that supporting women’s sport was just as central to her identity as being an athlete was. As such, Jackie experienced identity integration as consuming women’s sport allowed her to honor the former athlete inside of her.

In a similar vein, Amelia felt her experience playing ice hockey as a kid compelled her to be a fan of the PWHL. When asked why being a fan of the PWHL was so important to her, Amelia answered:

I think it's cool to see something that I didn't get to see as a kid... to use my dad, my brother, like they grew up watching the NHL, and they didn't go to the NHL because they weren't good enough, that wasn't my experience. It wasn't about being good enough. It was, like, I never knew that could even be an option. So knowing that...kids can grow up and, like, legitimately say, I want to be a professional women's hockey player, and that it can be their full time job. Like, that's going to just change the face of sports in this country.

In acknowledging that she did not get to see professional women's hockey as a child, Amelia expressed her awareness of the fact that women's professional sport was not always there. Back then, this frustrated her because she felt like she was talented enough to play, but that there was no team for her to play on at that time. Her experience was the opposite of her father's and brother's experiences; there was a team for them to play for, but they did not have the talent. Therefore, Amelia felt compelled to promote women's hockey so that other girls who found themselves in her position continued to have a team to play for in the future.

Moreover, when asked why she considered herself to be a fan of women's sport in general, she shared:

I think as a female athlete, you can't not want them to succeed. And I also think that ... you have to be [a supporter] because there's so many people that are not just out of hate.

By identifying herself as a female athlete, Amelia asserted that being an athlete was central to her identity. In addition, in sharing that she can't, as an athlete, "not want them to succeed", Amelia demonstrated that she felt that same obligation that Jackie felt to

support women's sport. She also felt compelled to support women's sport due to the sheer number of people that "are not just out of hate." Therefore, Amelia also experienced identity integration as consuming women's sport allowed her to honor the former athlete inside of her and to advocate for the continuation of women's sport too.

### **5. Identity Conflict: "If am a fan when I can"**

While some fans were able to integrate their multiple identities, others infrequently consumed women's sport because doing so took them away from prioritizing their central role identities. In doing so, these fans experienced an identity conflict between being a fan of women's sport and enacting another one of their multiple role identities.

In discussing her fandom of the WNBA, Janice shared, "I just don't feel ...that I'm a typical WNBA fan demographically... if I come here with my ... girl space friends [friends who are girls], they will make some assumptions about me." The assumption she alluded to here is that other people would assume that she was a lesbian when she was not. In the pre-screening survey, she identified herself as a heterosexual female, so this hypothetical assumption was at odds with how she sees herself. Thus, Janice acknowledged that she experienced an identity conflict between her understanding of the WNBA fan role identity and her identity as a heterosexual woman.

Bryce was another fan whose experiences highlighted an identity conflict. He explained:

We have the flex pack, which I think gives us six or seven games a season, but once the personal life settles down, so engaged and getting married next year. So a

lot of planning, a lot of time has been put into that. But once, once things settle down, we're looking to either become half season or full season ticket holders.

In effect, Bryce shared that he was prioritizing being a good partner more so than he was being a fan of women's sport because he was wedding planning more so than he was attending women's sporting events. This was an example of identity conflict because the wedding planning was taking him away from being a fan. However, there was hope that he may consume more women's sport in the future once the wedding planning was done, which spoke to the ever-fluid nature of role identification (Heiss, 1981).

On the other hand, Lachelle discussed that over time she began to prioritize her role identity as a fan of women's sport less. She lamented:

I'm in school right now, but I have to pay once a month but it's just like, so much. I feel like I have dedicated so much time, because its online, and it's just hard... I'm a fan of the Storm, so of course, I support them. I will go see the games or everything else like that. But I feel like I'm just not as engaged as I used to be... I guess I am just not in the space to just dedicate so much time to just doing that and I hate that for me right now.

In sum, Lachelle's experience highlighted the fluctuations that can happen in how a person evaluates the centrality of their role identities. Stated differently, depending on life's circumstances, some role identities can become more or less important to a person's understanding of themselves. For Lachelle, in the early two thousands, there were fewer things that took precedence over her Storm fandom. However, as she noted, she enrolled herself in school and that has taken her away from engaging with the Storm. Lachelle's

experienced identity conflict, in turn, has decreased the importance of being a Storm fan at this stage of life and her consumption habits have followed suit.

Taken together, these examples underscored how identity negotiation shaped not only the patterns of engagement fans had with women's sport but also the meanings they associated with their fandom. When fans experienced identity integration, fandom served as a reinforcing space for their role identities and their values. Yet, others faced tensions associated with identity conflict and that limited their engagement. Identity conflict emerged when fans could not simultaneously prioritize women's sport fandom alongside other valued roles, such as being a student or a partner. Collectively, these findings highlight that fandom of women's sport is not a static commitment, but a negotiated practice shaped by the evolving constellation of fans' broader life roles and priorities.

### **B. Meanings Associated with Fandom in Women's Sport**

As the preceding section illustrated, the ways fans prioritized and enacted their multiple role identities shaped not only how they engaged with women's sport, but also how they made meaning of their fandom experiences. Importantly, these meanings were not constructed in isolation. Through social validation, receiving encouragement, affirmation, and recognition from others, fans' understandings of what it meant to be a "women's sport fan" were reinforced, negotiated, and refined. Thus, identity construction and meaning making were mutually reinforcing processes. In the next section, I explored the shared meanings fans attached to their fandom and how these meanings were enacted, validated, and co-constructed across women's sport communities.

## 1. Inclusivity Toward the LGBTQ+ Community

In thinking about what it meant to be a fan of women's sports, most fans understood that being a fan of women's sport meant being inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community. For instance, Eli, a non-binary queer person, shared:

There's also not really any other place I can think of in sports where they are explicitly like pro queer and pro LGBTQ and very like enthusiastically so. You know, I think even when other like men's sports teams have pride games or whatever, like, it's a little bit more like ally, but not like this is part of our community.

With this statement, Eli drew a distinction between being an ally and having someone be a part of the community. In this case, men's sport teams and their fans were described as being allies. In distinguishing them as allies and not as community members, Eli conveyed that while men's sports teams may be accepting of the LGBTQ+ community, LGBTQ+ members did not yet feel the sense of belonging from men's sport teams that they felt from women's sport fans and teams.

The sense that fans of women's sport actually consider LGBTQ+ community members as part of the community was articulated by Dawn, a Minnesota Frost fan:

I mean, I'm your white, middle aged, hetero, you know, mom in a small town, Wisconsin, but like being able to, like, just talk about this, my seat mates next to me, and not have it be a big deal that it's her and her wife, you know, and ... when there's a kiss cam, sometimes there's a lesbian couple or a gay couple or whatever on the Kiss Cam, and it's not a deal.

By identifying herself as a heterosexual woman, Dawn was establishing that she does not share the same identity as the LGBTQ+ community members. However, in sharing that she appreciated that it was not “a big deal” that her seatmates were a lesbian couple or that lesbian and gay couples were shown on the Kiss cam, Dawn communicated that being a member of the LGBTQ+ community was normalized and accepted amongst fans of women’s sport.

Similarly, when asked how she would describe the community of Aces fans, Madeline, another heterosexual white woman, detailed, “I mean, it's just everyone's there. No one's hiding like you have your lesbian couples, you have your inner-racial couples. You have everybody's all sitting together, everyone's all interacting, and we're all rooting for the same team.” In sharing that “no one’s hiding”, Madeline alluded to the fact that LGBTQ+ individuals are not always comfortable being forthcoming about their sexuality in settings. However, she drew a distinction between those settings and Aces games because at Aces games, according to Madeline, no member of the LGBTQ+ community had to hide their sexuality.

That said, this perception that LGBTQ+ members felt included amongst fans of women’s sport was not just held by heterosexual individuals. Notably, the sample in this study included 14 people that identified as LGBTQ+ community members and 17 people that identified as being heterosexual or straight. So, fans across the sexuality spectrum discussed the felt inclusivity for LGBTQ+ community members. As an example, consider the perspective of Janet, a non-binary queer person, who is also an Angel FC season ticket holder. When asked what being a fan of women’s sport meant to Janet, they shared:

It means, I think, like queer joy... I would say it feels like connection. It feels like belonging. It feels like just unbridled fun. It feels playful. And it's specifically all of those things with fellow queer and trans people, and specifically without... cis het [cis-gendered (i.e., aligned with the gender a person is assigned at birth) heterosexual] structures, power dynamics, social dynamics, things like that. It feels like a decidedly queer way to be and to engage in the fun and play of sports without the other stuff that maybe comes with, like more like hetero culture stuff.

In sharing that being a fan of women's sport meant "connection" and "belonging," Janet revealed that, as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, they felt a sense of inclusion and camaraderie within women's sport fandom. Furthermore, by stating that women's sport exists "without cis het structures, power dynamics, social dynamics, things like that," Janet expressed appreciation for the ways in which women's sport spaces diverge from dominant cultural norms. They emphasized that supporting women's sport allowed them to disengage from traditional masculinity and to withhold their "time and attention" from systems and institutions that, in their view, already received disproportionate cultural focus. In this way, Janet positioned their fandom as both a personal refuge and a subtle act of resistance.

This sentiment – that fans of women's sport both included and affirmed both cisgendered and transgendered persons - was echoed by Marita, a self-identified bisexual fan of the Washington Spirit. She provided an example from the Spirit's supporter section, "they like, show up in different costumes and, like, they have so many different identity flags, like loud and proud, like pride flags everywhere they'll put up, like specific like banners." Pride flags have been widely recognized as symbols of support for

LGBTQ+ community (Wolowic et al., 2016). As such, their visible presence within the supporters' section served as a clear signal of advocacy and inclusion and illustrated how the fan community actively affirmed and celebrated LGBTQ+ identities as part of the broader culture of women's sport fandom.

More to the point, however, Edie expressed that being inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community was a core aspect of being a fan of women's sport. Edie emphasized:

I think that if you're a true and actual fan of women's sports, you have to recognize that that includes queer women, that that includes women of color, that that includes non binary folks. And you have to, if you are a true and actual fan, you have to recognize the skill in those athletes, and hopefully it translates to your support of these athletes and these people in day to day issues...but you know, I feel like if you are a true fan of any of these leagues, that you have to really be able to prioritize being inclusive and being supportive of everybody.

Taken together, the perspectives of Eli, Edie, Janet, Madeline, Marita, and Dawn demonstrated that fans of women's sport from across the sexuality spectrum were not merely allies of the LGBTQ+ community. Rather, LGBTQ+ individuals were recognized as integral members of the fan base itself and this was seen through the mutual recognition and affirmation of LGBTQ+ within fan communities. Furthermore, this meant that inclusivity for the LGBTQ+ community was in effect normalized by fans of women's sport, and this stood in contrast to the often-exclusionary environments of men's sports (King, 1997; Magrath, 2018; Walser et al., 2021).

## 2. Advocacy for Gender Equity

In addition to being inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community, most fans mentioned that being a fan of women's sport meant that you advocated for gender equity. Some fans passively advocated for gender equity by sharing with me how they felt women in sport had been historically underappreciated. Madeline, for instance, made the case that:

The ladies are as talented as the men, sometimes more so. I mean, often more so. And I mean, it's a discrimination issue, it's an equality issue, and it needs to be addressed. They should have the same opportunities.”

In sharing that female athletes faced “discrimination” and “equality issues”, Madeline voiced her awareness that female athletes are neither paid nor given benefits to the same extent that male athletes are. Furthermore, it communicated that she wanted someone to rectify these discrepancies.

Likewise, Henrietta sympathized, “I think women athletes are incredible and obviously do not get their due in any facet of sports. You know, whether it comes to media, you know, airtime, pay, respect, they don't get their due.” Her repeated emphasis on this phrase – do not get their due- reflected a clear awareness of the systemic disparities women athletes face compared to their male counterparts. It also conveyed how important it was to her that these discrepancies got addressed.

In an attempt to rectify these discrepancies, some fans of women's sport adopted a more proactive role in advocating for gender equity. Jane called local bars and asked them, “hey, are you gonna show the game...with sound? I will go there and patronize your establishment if you play it” to demonstrate that consumer interest in women's sport and boost viewership. Similarly, Dawn organized bus trips from her hometown to Minnesota

Frost games with the goal of “just bring people into it” because she saw it as her “job to get it [women’s hockey] out there”. In organizing bus trips, Dawn was actively promoted women’s hockey and made it easier for people to come to games. Through this effort, Dawn not only promoted women’s hockey but also removed logistical barriers to attendance, helping to grow the fan base. In both cases, Jane and Dawn actively contributed to advancing gender equity in sport by creating visibility and increasing access to women’s sporting events.

Similarly, other fans championed gender equity in sports by challenging others to care. Marita, for example, shared that she often engaged with naysayers to “prove to the world—and men specifically”—that there were valid reasons behind the inequities between men’s and women’s sports. By bravely stepping into these conversations, Marita demonstrated her willingness to advocate for women’s sports. She shared that she had “arguments prepared to go for why they [female athletes] deserve to have, like, more money spent on them.” In preparing these arguments, Marita positioned herself as a grassroots advocate—practically lobbying on behalf of women’s sport organizations.

Likewise, when Jackie was asked how she supported women’s sport, she noted that she does the usual things—like “buy tickets” and “contribute to fundraisers supported by the NY Liberty”. However, she also described what she called “delulu [delusional]” forms of support—actions driven by deep emotional investment. She explained:

The deluluness [the state of delusionally supporting your team] is me taking the day off to go to the championship parade, me getting in heated arguments with people.... I'm just that passionate about it where I'm just like, No, they need to

know that they're wrong. They need to, like, have the facts ... so that they can go to the next person and make sure that they are representing the Liberty, the Gotham, the leagues itself, overall, these players, like they're operating with accurate information that is very important to me.

By drawing a distinction between “normal” and “delusional” fan behavior, Jackie acknowledged that her support for women’s sport extended beyond conventional notions of fandom. Her desire to ensure that naysayers “have the facts” mirrored Julia’s lobbying-style advocacy, reflecting a deeper sense of responsibility. Taken together, the perspectives of Dawn, Henrietta, Jackie, Jane, Madeline, and Marita illustrated how gender equity advocacy was seen as an essential part of what it meant to be a truly committed fan of women’s sport. Furthermore, in framing these advocacy efforts as normative expressions of good fandom, these fans demonstrated how gender equity advocacy was embedded into the fan of women’s sports role identity.

### **3. Broad Support Across Women’s Sports**

Fans of women’s sport described an expansive consumption pattern, extending their support across women’s sport teams and leagues rather than concentrating loyalty on a single women’s sport franchise. For instance, when asked how she supported women’s sport, Amanda shared, “I definitely try to make a concerted effort that if, like, a woman is doing a thing, to, like, watch it or stream it, or whatever ups the numbers for advertising stuff...” In “doing whatever ups the numbers,” Amanda acknowledged the persistent gap in viewership between men’s and women’s sports—and the significance of individual action in helping to close it. Moreover, her effort to watch or stream events simply because “a woman is doing a thing” suggested that her fandom extended across multiple

women's sports and was rooted in a deeper commitment to supporting women as participants in sport, not just as representatives of a single team or league.

Similarly, Madeline proclaimed, "As a supporter, I think when given the opportunity to watch women's sports, I'm not going to turn it off." In echoing Amanda, Madeline reinforced the idea that committed fans of women's sport will choose to watch it—even if it isn't their favorite sport. Interestingly, both Amanda and Madeline acknowledged having a preferred women's sport that they followed more closely. Yet, regardless of their individual preferences, they expressed a sense of obligation to watch women's sport content simply because it featured women. For them, supporting women's sport meant showing up across leagues and disciplines. Thus, part of the role identity of a women's sport fan involved intentionally consuming a wide range of women's sport—not just out of personal interest, but as an act of solidarity and support for women in sport more broadly.

Moreover, when asked whether their fandom of Angel City FC ever conflicted with being a fan of women's sport more broadly, Eli explained, "I genuinely do feel like, even when we don't win, I'm just so excited to be part of women's sports, so I don't feel like I have to prioritize one over the other." Their comment signaled that they did not draw a boundary between team-specific fandom and general support for women's sport.

Collectively, the perspectives of Amanda, Madeline, and Eli illustrated that expansive, cross-league consumption was not viewed as an optional behavior but as an expected and integral part of the fan of women's sport role identity. Furthermore, by framing support for women's sport broadly, not just for individual teams, as a normative expression of good fandom, these fans demonstrated that collective commitment to the

visibility and advancement of women athletes was deeply embedded within the meanings they attached to being a fan of women's sport.

#### **4. Creation of Emotionally and Physically Safe Spaces**

Lastly, fans of women's sport understood that creating emotionally and physically safe spaces for others was part of their role as fans. Safety within women's sport spaces was described in both physical and emotional terms. Emotional safety, in particular, was fostered by fans who made themselves approachable and welcoming to newer or more hesitant fans. For example, when asked what it meant to be a fan of women's sport, Amelia poignantly explained:

It may be harder to find, but to actually say you're a fan of, I think it is easier to get that statement to hold water. No one's going to be like, oh, you're a fan of the Sirens, name five players... They're like, oh, no way, did you go to a game? Like it's less gate kept, in a way, which is ironic, because some of the streaming platforms make them, gate kept viewership wise. But, when you actually talk about X's and O's and like liking the sport, in my experience, I've seen people be able to interact without the need to substantiate their knowledge in a toxic way.

Like, literally, I don't want to name five players, but also, who cares?

By stating, "It's less gatekept in a way, which is ironic, because some of the streaming platforms make them gatekept viewership-wise," Amelia highlighted the distinction between structural barriers created by media companies and the welcoming attitudes of fans themselves. While access to women's sport content might be restricted by external platforms, Amelia emphasized that fans of women's sport do not actively block or exclude newcomers. She further illustrated this openness by contrasting the inclusive,

nonjudgmental interactions among women’s sport fans with the gatekeeping behaviors often found in men’s sport fandom—such as demanding someone “name five players” to prove their legitimacy. In doing so, Amelia underscored how emotional safety is cultivated through a culture of openness and mutual respect.

Specifically, in stating “No one's going to be like, oh, you're a fan of the Sirens, name five players,” Amelia alluded to a common gatekeeping practice that participants in this study reported encountering in men’s sport settings. This practice—where fans are asked to prove the legitimacy of their fandom by naming five players—was frequently described as exclusionary and alienating. Several participants noted that such interactions discouraged them from engaging with men’s sport fandom altogether. In contrast, many shared that the absence of this gatekeeping behavior within women’s sport spaces was precisely what made those environments more welcoming—and ultimately, what drew them into becoming fans of women’s sport. Consider Janet’s perspective:

Even if I did care and I loved football enough ... any conversation that I would have ... feels chronically like, oh, you like that band. Can you name three songs? Like that kind of energy where it just feels like you don't want me there, and I don't want to be there, so I'm gonna go over there, you know?

In describing this gatekeeping behavior as “the kind of energy where it just feels like you don't want me there,” Janet conveyed how such interactions made her feel unwelcome in certain sport fan spaces. Her follow-up remark “so I'm gonna go over there” signaled her decision to seek out alternative communities where she felt a greater sense of belonging. Specifically, she turned to women’s sport, sharing, “ It’s[women’s sport] had me meet new people and be able to talk to new people about this thing... it's brought me this set of

relationships, you know, that feels very connective and generative.” Janet’s reflection highlighted how women’s sport fandom offered more than just entertainment - it fostered community, emotional safety, and interpersonal connection. As such, fans of women’s sport not only consume content but also see it as part of their role to help create inclusive, emotionally safe spaces where others can feel seen and connected.

On the other hand, some fans of women’s sport emphasized the sense of physical safety they experienced within women’s sport contexts. When asked what they appreciated about being a fan of women’s sport, Kali shared, “I feel like I’m protected, and that anybody that I bring into that environment is also protected.” This feeling of safety held particular significance for Kali, a transmasculine fan who had experienced social othering in the past and often attended games via public transportation with their niece and nephew. For Kali, this sense of safety extended beyond the stadium itself and into the surrounding fan community. They explained, “If I’m with a bunch of Storm fans, I don’t worry about my safety at all because we’re all together—we band together and make sure everybody’s safe.” This solidarity was made visible through small but powerful acts—fellow fans stepping in when Kali was being harassed, saying “hey, no, that’s not acceptable behavior,” or physically positioning themselves to shield Kali from confrontation, ensuring that they were “not directly in the fire.” For Kali, and likely others with marginalized identities, women’s sport fandom provided not just a sense of belonging but a tangible experience of protection and collective care.

Another fan reflected on the contrast in feelings of safety when leaving women’s versus men’s sporting events. Madeline noted that the walk from the venue to her car felt noticeably safer after attending women’s games. As she put it:

When I have gone to hockey games. There's a lot of really big male energy, and I'm uncomfortable... there's a lot more anger there... so, walking through a parking garage would I walk alone through the parking garage after an Aces game? Yeah. Would I walk through the parking garage alone after a Golden Knights game? Nooo.

In sharing that “there’s a lot more anger there” at a Las Vegas Golden Knights game, Madeline conveyed that the atmosphere at men’s sporting events felt more aggressive than at women’s games—and that this aggression contributed to her feeling less safe walking back to her car afterward. She added that “there's a lot of really big male energy” that made her uncomfortable, reinforcing the idea that hypermasculine environments can alienate fans and deter their interest in men’s sport. For fans like Madeline, the absence of this energy in women’s sport spaces was not only refreshing but deeply appealing.

Janice echoed this sentiment, stating, “There’s just fewer men there... and like, I think, in a way, it makes it feel like a safe space for women to cheer on sport without like being yelled at or questioned.” Her comment underscored the importance of gender dynamics in shaping fans’ perceptions of safety and belonging.

Overall, these perspectives illustrated that fans of women’s sport not only value emotional and communal connection but also understand their role as co-creators of physically safe environments, spaces where enthusiasm for sport can be expressed without fear, judgment, or hostility. Fans of women’s sport did not simply appreciate the existence of safe spaces, they actively understood fostering emotional and physical safety as a core part of the fan of women’s sport role identity. Creating inclusive, welcoming, and protective environments therefore was not framed as an extra or optional behavior;

rather, it was seen as a normative and essential element of good fandom. By centering safety and belonging as shared values, fans reinforced the idea that protecting and uplifting others was as fundamental to the role of being a fan of women's sport as cheering for a team. In doing so, they helped build a fandom culture where care, inclusion, and solidarity were celebrated as defining features of what it means to be a fan of women's sport.

## **5. Conclusion**

Overall, the findings demonstrated that fans' multiple role identities critically shaped their experiences of fandom in women's sport. When fans experienced identity integration, meaning their fan identity aligned with other salient roles such as partner, ally, role model, or former athlete, they were able to sustain high levels of engagement with women's sport. Conversely, when fans experienced identity conflict, fandom was deprioritized in favor of more pressing or socially reinforced role identities. This negotiation between role identities illustrated that fandom was not a static affiliation but a dynamic process embedded within broader life contexts.

In addition to these patterns of identity integration and conflict, this study illuminated how fans constructed and shared the meanings attached to the fan of women's sport role identity. Through social validation and perceived role support, fans reinforced a collective understanding of fandom centered on inclusivity toward LGBTQ+ communities, advocacy for gender equity, expansive support across women's sport leagues, and the creation of emotionally and physically safe spaces. These meanings were not peripheral to fandom; they were core expectations embedded within what it meant to enact the fan of women's sport role identity.

Thus, rather than viewing fandom as mere affiliation with a team or league, fans of women's sport constructed fandom as an expression of personal values, social solidarity, and collective empowerment. By weaving together their lived identities and shared understandings, fans transformed women's sport fandom into a meaningful site of identity construction, affirmation, and community-building. These insights deepened theoretical understandings of role identity salience, meaning making, and consumer behavior within women's sport contexts, setting the stage for the broader contributions outlined in Chapter V.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

In this study, I drew from identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000; McCall & Simmons, 1978) to examine how fans of women's sport constructed, negotiated, and prioritized multiple role identities and how these identities shaped the meanings fans attached to fandom. While identity theorists have typically emphasized the importance of salience hierarchies and behavioral enactment (Hogg et al., 1995; McCall & Simons, 1978; Stryker & Serpe, 1994), the findings of this study indicated that the fan of women's sport role identity was shaped not only by internal prioritization but also by how fans experienced support, validation, and meaning within specific social contexts. In the sections that followed, I detailed how this study's findings reinforced the utility of role identity theory in sport fandom while extending it to consider how role salience for fandom in women's sport was shaped through emotional, relational, and environmental forms of support that enabled fans to continuously enact and affirm their identities.

#### **A. Identity Negotiation Amongst Fans of Women's Sport**

To begin, identity theory posited that individuals hold multiple role identities, and that the salience and integration of these roles shape behavior (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Consistent with this, fans frequently described alignment between their fan identity and other identities, such as being a partner, parent, ally, or former athlete. This alignment facilitated identity integration, allowing fans to express multiple roles simultaneously. For example, fans whose partners or families were also involved in women's sport described attending games as a meaningful way to reinforce both relational and fan identities. Similarly, those who identified as role models or

advocates used fandom as a platform to express broader commitments to equity and social justice.

However, fans also revealed moments of identity conflict. In these moments, competing demands from other roles, such as school obligations or relationship responsibilities, occasionally led to the fan of women's sport identity being deprioritized. This meant that the importance of their fan identity decreased, though it was not discarded. This was in line with prior theorization which established that role identity salience was contextually influenced (McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker, 1968; Wiley, 1991).

Taken together, these findings underscored the theoretical importance of attending to how identities interact dynamically in lived experience, particularly within underexplored fan contexts like women's sport. That said, these patterns of integration and conflict revealed that prioritization alone could not fully explain sustained identity salience. Therefore, understanding other factors that influenced the salience and understood meanings of the fan of women's sport role identity, such as perceived role support and self-verification became equally important.

### **B. Social and Affective Conditions that Sustain Role Identity**

Perceived role support, the sense that others validated and affirmed one's role enactment, has been posited as a crucial factor in sustaining identity salience (Hogg et al., 1995). Consistent with this perspective, fans engaged more deeply with women's sport when their fan role was acknowledged by family, friends, fan communities, or even organizational structures (e.g., inclusive venues, family-friendly environments). Thus,

these forms of social validation provided the feedback necessary to reinforce a fan's commitment to their fan of women's sport role identity (Burke & Reitzes, 1981).

However, fans emphasized that emotional and physical safety were equally integral to their experience of feeling supported in their fandom of women's sport. The sense of emotional safety was closely tied to the absence of exclusionary dynamics, such as gatekeeping and hypercompetitive posturing, that participants associated with other sport settings (Esmonde et al., 2015; Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; James & Ridinger, 2002; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016). This absence allowed fans to engage in women's sport contexts without having to defend their legitimacy as fans, overperform their knowledge, or fear social correction. In parallel, fans described moments in which fellow fans actively contributed to physical safety, by intervening during incidents of harassment or challenging harmful behavior. Together, these experiences reinforced that fans were not merely tolerated, but rather actively protected and valued. Thus, this sense of safety, both emotional and physical, created conditions for fans to inhabit the role fully, without hesitation or self-monitoring. In doing so, it enabled more authentic role enactment and laid the groundwork for self-verification (Burke & Stets, 2023; Riley & Burke, 1995).

While identity theorists have long recognized the role of self-verification in sustaining identity salience (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Burke & Stets, 2023), their focus has primarily emphasized how interpersonal feedback affirmed or disrupted an individual's understanding of who they were in a given role (Riley & Burke, 1995). Within this framework, structural elements, such as understood role expectations (Stryker & Serpe, 1982) and one's embeddedness within social networks (Stryker, 1968), have been acknowledged for their influence on identity processes. However, these conditions were

theorized as external constraints or resources, rather than as factors that were internally felt. As a result, identity theory has not yet fully accounted for conditions that made self-verification viable in practice.

This gap became especially clear when considering how participants described the relationship between safety, both emotional and physical in nature, and identity support. They defined support not only in terms of interpersonal validation from others, but also in terms of what I referred to here as affective and physical safety. In effect, fans felt that women's sport contexts afforded them a space that was both affectively and physically safe, which enabled fans to enact the role without fear of judgment, contradiction, or harm. In this way, salience was not only sustained through affirming interactions, but also through the absence of threat and the ease of inhabiting the role in a low-friction environment. Thus, attending to these experiential dimensions of structure is important; without doing so, identity theorists risk overstating the role of feedback alone and underestimating the importance of conditions, like affective and physical safety.

This reframing of support as something shaped by affective and physical safety raised important theoretical considerations for identity theory. Although interpersonal feedback has long been recognized as a mechanism for sustaining role salience (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Burke & Stets, 2023), the ability to interpret and internalize such feedback depended on the emotional and structural conditions in which role enactment occurred. Without this sense of affective and physical safety, individuals may have been unable or unwilling to absorb affirming cues, even when they were present. Thus, support could not be reduced to interpersonal affirmation alone; it must also be understood as a function of

whether the environment allows for unguarded role enactment and the reception of role-consistent feedback.

Moreover, understanding how affective and physical safety conditions shaped identity salience required closer attention to the distinct forms of social input that support role identity maintenance. Perceived role support and self-verification are two such inputs that are contingent on environments that allow role enactment to feel affectively and physically safe. Perceived role support sustained the fan identity when it signaled that one's presence and participation were welcomed and affirmed, which in turn reinforced the fan's sense of belonging and encouraged the ongoing enactment of the role. Self-verification, by contrast, reinforced identity salience when individuals perceived that the meanings they associated with the role were recognized and mirrored by others. Yet, for either perceived role support or self-verification to function, individuals must have felt safe enough to participate without fear of judgment or harm.

Therefore, affective and physical safety were not ancillary to these processes but foundational to their operation. They enabled perceived role support by making participation feel unthreatened and viable, and they made self-verification possible by ensuring that feedback could be received without fear or contradiction. In such settings, support was not only expressed but internalized in ways that made the role feel inhabitable, sustainable, and real. This perspective extended identity theory by showing that salience depended not only on consistent feedback, but on the emotional and structural conditions that allowed a role to be enacted and affirmed without compromise.

This foundation of emotional and structural support not only made role enactment possible but also shaped the meanings fans associated with the role itself. In other words,

the conditions that enabled participation did more than sustain salience; they informed how fans defined what it meant to hold the fan identity. In the following section, I turned to this question of meaning and examined how fans of women's sport understood their role through a moral lens grounded in values such as inclusion, advocacy, and collective care.

### **C. Moral Coherence and the Meaning of the Fan Role**

While role salience was sustained through affective and physical safety and social affirmation, participants also described the fan identity in terms that extended beyond behavior or recognition. The fan role, as constructed in women's sport contexts, was not merely something individuals performed; it was something they believed in. Participants consistently articulated that being a fan of women's sport carried with it a set of values, such as inclusion, advocacy, and collective care. These values were not incidental; they shaped how participants understood what it meant to inhabit the role and why it mattered. In this way, the fan identity achieved a form of moral coherence, rooted in the alignment between personal convictions and role expectations. This section explored how that coherence was constructed, and what it revealed about the meanings associated with the role of being a fan of women's sport.

According to McCall and Simmons (1978), role identities were shaped not only through behavioral enactment but through the meanings individuals constructed in relation to them. In this study, fans of women's sport described the fan role as being an extension of their ethical commitments. Through repeated engagement in spaces where inclusion, advocacy, and care were visible and affirmed, fans came to understand the role not just as an activity, but as a reflection of their core values. The fan role became

meaningful not only through social participation but through the alignment it offered between personal convictions and role expectations.

LGBTQ+ inclusion was a particularly salient expression of the collective care ethic that underpinned fans' understanding of the role. While scholars have long documented the relationship between LGBTQ+ communities and women's sport fandom (Cunningham, 2024; Krane, 2001; Melton & MacCharles, 2021), particularly in the WNBA (Dolance, 2005; Muller, 2007; Mumcu & Lough, 2017; Weldon & Ziegler, 2022), this study demonstrated that inclusion was not merely a demographic feature, but a defining component of role meaning. Participants described welcoming LGBTQ+ individuals as a core expectation of fandom, regardless of their own sexual orientation or gender identity. Inclusive practices—such as queer couples being featured on kiss cams or the normalization of LGBTQ+ presence in fan spaces—were interpreted not as symbolic gestures, but as expressions of the role's ethical core.

This ethic of care also extended into broader forms of social advocacy. Supporting women's sport was frequently described as an act of value alignment. In fact, many fans viewed their behaviors (e.g., attending games, promoting events, buying merchandise) as a form of activism and allyship. Rather than viewing advocacy as separate from fandom, participants described it as embedded in the role itself. To be a fan of women's sport was, for many, to support gender equity and to participate in collective efforts toward social justice. These expressions of care and advocacy were not seen as political add-ons or optional behaviors, but as constitutive of what it meant to inhabit the fan role. In this way, collective care—expressed through LGBTQ+ affirmation and gender advocacy—

functioned not only as a pattern of behavior, but as a deeply held moral orientation that shaped how participants understood and sustained their fan identity.

While identity theorists have long recognized that the internalized meanings associated with particular role identities were shaped by past experiences, role expectations, and cultural norms (Burke & Stets, 2023; McCall & Simmons, 1978), they have given less attention to how these standards may be structured around ethical values. For many fans in this study, the fan identity remained salient not merely because it was enacted frequently or socially affirmed, but because it allowed them to express values they saw as ethically non-negotiable—such as inclusion, equity, and care. This perspective advanced identity theory by demonstrating that moral coherence, defined as the alignment between a role and an individual’s ethical commitments, could contribute to identity stability alongside more established factors such as social reinforcement (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Burke & Stets, 2023) and role centrality (Hogg et al., 1995; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker & Serpe, 1994).

This understanding of the fan role being sustained because of moral coherence laid the foundation for a broader orientation toward fandom. Because participants defined fandom through values such as advocacy, inclusion, and collective care, the meaning of the role was not confined to allegiance to a specific team or league. Instead, the ethical commitments that shaped the fan identity inspired a wide-ranging investment in women’s sport as a whole. In the following section, I detailed how this expansive interpretation of what it meant to be a fan informed participants’ patterns of support and offered a theoretical extension of how identity meanings can shape the scope of affiliation.

#### **D. Fans of Women's Sport Enact an Expansive Approach to Fandom**

Building on the ethical commitments that underpinned the fan identity, participants described an approach to fandom that prioritized the advancement of women's sport broadly, rather than allegiance to any single team or league. This perspective challenged dominant paradigms in sport fandom research, which have long emphasized loyalty to a single team or organization as the primary axis around which fan identity formed and endured (Funk & James, 2001; Lock & Funk, 2016). In these models, fan commitment was typically tied to long-term attachment to a specific club (Trail et al., 2003), reinforced by repeated behaviors (e.g., attending games, buying merchandise; Biscaia et al., 2021; Shapiro et al., 2013), affective identification with teams (Heere & James, 2017; James et al., 2019), and enduring rivalries with outgroups (Tyler & Cobbs, 2015; Wann & Grieve, 2005). However, fans of women's sport, as described in this study, constructed their role identity around values, such as equity, inclusion, and advocacy, rather than allegiances to individual teams.

As a result, their fandom was expressed not through exclusivity, but expansiveness: following multiple teams within the same league, supporting new leagues, and promoting visibility across all women's sports contexts. In light of these patterns, I proposed that the fan of women's sport role identity often involved an expansive role identity that prioritized the advancement of women's sport broadly, before it expressed any loyalty toward individual teams. This values-based model of fandom observed in this study indicated that when a role identity was defined by ethical commitments, such as inclusion, advocacy, and collective care, it could remain salient even as the specific objects of support shifted. In doing so, this adds a layer of nuance to fan identification in

sport contexts by showing that identity stability could be maintained not only through consistent affiliation, but through continuity in the values that imbued the role with meaning."

### **E. Limitations and Future Research Suggestions**

While these findings offered new insights into role identity construction in women's sport fandom, the study's scope and design also presented certain limitations. These limitations pointed to key opportunities for further research that could deepen, complicate, or extend the current findings. In what follows, I outlined potential directions for future inquiry that would help refine our understanding of fan identity formation, performance, and salience in diverse contexts.

In conducting this research, I chose to focus on the experiences of U.S. based fans of teams within the WNBA, PWHL, and NWSL. As such, while my investigation is insightful, in that it allowed me to uncover the role identities that these fans had and their prioritizations, future researchers should consider studying the role identities that fans in other leagues have as well. One could consider exploring the perspectives of the Canadian based fans of the same leagues or even fans of other women's professional sport leagues globally, to understand if there were similarities or differences compared to the context of this study.

Additionally, the interviews that were conducted with these fans were cross sectional in nature, and so I was unable to understand how their role identities and their prioritization may change over time. There is evidence from this work that prioritization does change over time as it did for one of the fans whose commitment to the Seattle Storm waned. However, future scholars should conduct longitudinal research with

individuals to understand how their support of women's sport may become more or less important to fans over time. Longitudinal research could also potentially elucidate other role identities that were not brought up in this research that could make fans more or less interested in women's sport.

Moreover, while this sample included participants of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds, the study did not conduct a focused analysis on how race and ethnicity may shape the experience of fandom, role identity, or feelings of safety and inclusion. Future research should explore how intersecting identities inform fan experiences in more depth.

Future research should also explore fan role performance in more depth. While this study identified behaviors such as advocacy, inclusion, and content consumption as expressions of fan identity, further work is needed to understand the range of behaviors fans associated with satisfactory role performance. Scholars might consider examining how fans define "good" fandom in women's sport settings, how they negotiate conflicting expectations, and how these performances are validated or challenged by other fans.

Lastly, the emergence of the values-based fan orientation invites further theorization. Future scholars might investigate whether the expansive orientation that is encapsulated within women's sport contexts is unique to this sociocultural moment in women's sport history or if there may be similar expansive role identities that emerge in other underrepresented sport contexts.

## APPENDIX A

### Women's Sport Fan – Semi Structured Interview Guide

*Estimated Length: 60 minutes*

#### Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. I have us scheduled for an hour together. Does that still work for you?

Great, before we get started, I wanted to revisit the consent form that you signed, did you have any questions?

I also want to remind you that your participation is voluntary. So, if there are any questions you'd rather not answer or if you want to withdraw from the study at any point, you may do so without impacting your participation. How does that sound?

Lastly, are you okay if I record our conversation? It will be confidential and only my advisors and I will have access to this data.

Awesome, let's get started. For the purposes of maintaining your confidentiality, what would you like your pseudonym to be?

As mentioned in the pre-screening questionnaire, I am doing research with women's sport fans to understand their experiences as a fan. So, before we discuss your fandom, I have a few general questions.

#### A. Role Identities General

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself? (e.g., hobbies, interests, profession, etc.)
2. Could you describe for me the different roles you see yourself taking on in your everyday life?

Note for researcher: write down what they say for the different roles

3. On a day-to-day basis, how do you prioritize these roles?
  - a. Why are these important to you?
  - b. Do you view any of these roles as the most important to you?

## B. Women's Sport Fan Identity (Specific League)

4. In the survey, you mentioned that you are a fan of a team in the WNBA, NWSL, or PWWL. Of which team are you a fan ?
5. How did you become a fan of that team?
  - a. Probe: Have you always been a [insert women's sport team name] fan?
  - b. How long have you been a supporter of the [insert women's sport team name]?
6. Why is being a fan of [insert women's sport team name] important to you?
7. Has your fandom of [team] changed overtime?
  - a. Please provide any stories or examples of how your fandom as evolved
8. What fan activities (e.g., watching the team, following news articles online, attending games or watch parties, discussing the team with friends) do you regularly engage in?
9. Do you follow other teams in the league?
  - a. If yes, why do you follow the other teams?  
Probe: How do follow the other teams?
  - b. Do you follow other teams in women's professional sport?  
Probe: Which teams/leagues? Why?
10. Would you consider yourself a fan of women's sport in general?
  - a. Why?
11. What does it mean to you to be a fan of women's sport?  
  
Probe: Do you think this meaning is shared by other fans of women's sports?  
  
Probe: When thinking of your fandom of your team and your fandom of women's sports in general, can you provide any stories or describe when you may be more likely to choose one fandom over another?
12. What is your favorite part about being a fan of your team and/or a fan of women's sport?

C. Closing

13. Is there anything else that you'd like to tell me that we haven't discussed yet?
14. Do you have any other questions about the interview or the rest of the research process?
15. Is there anyone else with whom you would recommend we discuss this topic?

**APPENDIX B**  
**SCREENING INSTRUMENT**  
**Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study**  
**University of Massachusetts Amherst**

**Researcher(s):** Danielle H. McArdle  
**Study Title:** Fans of Women's Sport

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**What is this form?**

This form is called a Consent Form. It will give you information about the study so you can make an informed decision about participation in this research. We encourage you to take some time to think this over and ask questions now and at any other time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and you will be given a copy for your records.

**What are some of the important aspects of this RESEARCH study that I should be aware of?**

The fact that consent is being sought for research and that participation is voluntary;  
The purpose of the research, the expected duration of your participation, and the procedures to be followed in the research;  
The reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts to you;  
The benefits to you or to others that may reasonably be expected from the research; and  
Appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that might be advantageous to you.

**Why are we doing this research study?**

The purpose of this research study is to understand how the different roles people have in society influence their consumption of women's sport.

**Who can participate in this research study?**

Participants must be at least 18 years of age and reside within the United States to participate in this study. Participants must also identify themselves as fans of a team in the National Women's Soccer League, the Women's National Basketball Association, or the Professional Women's Hockey League to be considered for inclusion in this study.

### **Where will this research study take place and how many people will participate?**

For this portion of the study, we are asking you to take an online screening survey. We anticipate about 30-60 people will be included in the final study.

### **What will I be asked to do and how much time will it take?**

If you agree to take part in this part of the study, you will be asked to take a survey that will take approximately 5 minutes to complete. The survey asks you about your women's sport fandom and some demographic information.

### **Will being in this research study help me in any way?**

You will not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study may advance our understanding of fandom in women's sport and that this enhanced knowledge will help sport fans, athletes, and their teams.

### **What are my risks of being in this research study?**

We believe there are minimal risks associated with this research study; however, a risk of breach of confidentiality always exists and we have taken the steps to minimize this risk as outlined in section 9 below.

### **How will my personal information be protected?**

Your privacy and confidentiality are important to us. We, as researchers, acknowledge that a breach of confidentiality is possible. That being said, we will take efforts to minimize any risks by: 1) storing all data in a password-protected onedrive account to which only limited researchers have access; 2) destroying all identifiers as soon as the data collection is complete; 3) reporting the results of this study without any personally identifiable information. Although your response can be used for research purposes (e.g., publication, paper), the results of this portion of the study will be de-identified and only reported in an aggregate form.

If the data is not used within the next three years, the data will be permanently deleted. In addition, should a participant withdraw from the research project, their data will be permanently deleted. Lastly, the researcher will store the Zoom interviews in a password protected OneDrive folder and only members of the research team will have access to the hard drive.

### **Will I be given any money or other compensation for being in this research study?**

Participants will not receive any compensation for their participation. However, a 5-dollar donation will be made to the Women's Sports Foundation on behalf of each participant that is qualified for inclusion in the study. The Women's Sports Foundation was established in 1974 to advance the lives of women and girls through sports and physical activity. Specifically, their mission is to enable all girls and women to reach their potential in sports and life.

**Who can I talk to if I have questions?**

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We will be happy to answer any questions you have about this study. More specifically, if you have questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the researcher, danielle mcardle, dhmcardle@umass.edu.

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts-Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or humansubjects@ora.umass.edu.

**What happens if I say yes, but change my mind later?**

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.”]

**What if I am injured?**

The University of Massachusetts does not have a program for compensating subjects for injury or complications related to human subjects research, but the study personnel do not foresee a reason for injury to come from your participation in this study.

-----Page Break-----

By clicking "I agree" below you are indicating that you are at least 18 years old, have read the information regarding consent, and agree to participate in this pre-screening survey.

|         |                |
|---------|----------------|
| I Agree | I Do Not Agree |
|---------|----------------|

-----Page Break-----

1. \* Please check if you agree with the following statement.

I identify with a team that plays within the National Women's Soccer League, Women's National Basketball Association team, or the Professional Women's Hockey league.

Yes

No

-----Page Break-----

2. Please check if you agree with the following statement.

I identify as a women's sports fan in general.

Yes

No

-----Page Break-----

3. Within which age range do you fall?

- a. Less than 18 years of age \*\*
- b. 18-24
- c. 25-34
- d. 35-44
- e. 45-54
- f. 55-64
- g. 65-74
- h. 75 or older

-----Page Break-----

Efforts are being made to recruit participants for this study who represent the diversity of the women's professional sport fanbase. Please note, the following questions are for recruiting purposes only; your answers to them will be confidential and will only be reported in aggregate.

-----Page Break-----

4. Which best describes your ethnicity?

- a. Asian
- b. Black
- c. Latina/e/o/x
- d. Multiple ethnic groups
- e. White
- f. Other

-----Page Break-----

5. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- a. Below High School Graduate
- b. High School Graduate
- c. Some College, No Degree
- d. Associates Degree
- e. Bachelor's Degree
- f. Master's Degree
- g. Professional Degree
- h. Doctoral Degree

-----Page Break-----

6. What is your annual household income (in US dollars)? [entry box]

-----Page Break-----

7. What is your gender identity?

- a. Woman
- b. Man
- c. Transgender
- d. Non-binary/non-conforming
- e. Other (please specify) [entry box]

-----Page Break-----

8. Do you consider yourself to be:

- a. Heterosexual or straight
- b. Gay or lesbian
- c. Bisexual
- d. Other (please specify) [entry box]

-----Page Break-----

If you qualify to participate in the study, we will reach out to you via email. Please enter your name and preferred email address in the space below.

[Name] [Email]

-----Page Break-----

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. If you qualify, you will be contacted soon with more information on participating in the study. In the meantime, if you have any questions, please contact the researcher, Danielle McArdle ([dhmcardle@umass.edu](mailto:dhmcardle@umass.edu)).

----end questionnaire--

## NOTES

### A. Consent Section

If the participant gives their consent, they will be allowed to continue taking the survey.

If the participant does not give their consent, they will be shown the message below and the survey will end.

As you have indicated that you do not give your consent to participate in this study, you were removed from the qualification process to participate in this study. Nevertheless, thank you for your time. If you have any further questions, please contact the researcher, Danielle McArdle ([dhmcardle@umass.edu](mailto:dhmcardle@umass.edu)).

### B. Survey Section

\*Branch Logic will be applied to Question 1 and 2 such that if a participant selects No, they will be directed to a message that thanks them, informs them that they did not qualify for inclusion, and ends the survey.

\*\* Branch Logic will be applied to Question 3 such that if they select that they are less than 18 years of age, then they will be directed to a message that thanks them, informs them that they did not qualify for inclusion, and ends the survey. If the participant chooses any other age range, they will be directed to the remaining demographic questions.

### C. Survey Ending Messages for Disqualified Participants:

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. As we were looking to speak to fans that were both 18 years of age or older and an identified with a team that plays within the National Women's Soccer League, Women's National Basketball Association team, or the Professional Women's Hockey league, you were not qualified to participate in this study. Nevertheless, thank you for your time. If you have any further questions, please contact the researcher, Danielle McArdle ([dhmcardle@umass.edu](mailto:dhmcardle@umass.edu)).

APPENDIX C  
RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Sample Instagram Post



**ARE YOU A FAN  
OF A WNBA,  
PWHL, OR NWSL  
TEAM?**

**PARTICIPATE IN THIS SURVEY  
FOR A CHANCE TO HAVE \$5  
DONATED TO THE WOMEN'S  
SPORT FOUNDATION IN YOUR  
NAME**

FOR MORE INFO, PLEASE  
CONTACT LEAD  
RESEARCHER:  
DANIELLE MCARDLE  
DHMCARDLE@UMASS.EDU

SURVEY LINK:

## APPENDIX D SAMPLE TABLE

| #  | Interview Date | Pseudonym | Age   | Ethnicity                            | Income | Gender identity | Sexual identity          | Occupation                     | Work status      | Education           | Postcode/location     | Sports/teams/athletes followed  |
|----|----------------|-----------|-------|--------------------------------------|--------|-----------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---|
| 1  | 12/8/2024      | Collin    | 25-34 | White                                | 200K+  | Man             | Heterosexual or Straight | HVAC Sales                     | Full             | Bachelor's          | Minneapolis,MN        | Minnesota Lynx; KC Current;Cologne FC   |
| 2  | 12/8/2024      | Nike      | 45-54 | White                                | 300K   | Woman           | Heterosexual or Straight | Marketing Exec                 | Full             | Bachelor's          | Minneapolis,MN        | Minnesota Lynx; MN Twins; MN Timberwolves; MN Frost; MN Wild; MN Vikings  |
| 3  | 12/9/2024      | Michaela  | 35-44 | White                                | 360K   | Woman           | Gay or Lesbian           | Medical Device Sales           | Full             | Bachelor's          | Georgia, USA          | STK Holder Aces and Dream; secondary fan of the storm; Supports OL Reign but follows all NWSL teams on social; follows all PWHL teams on social   |
| 4  | 12/10/2024     | Edie      | 25-34 | White                                | 200K+  | Woman           | Bisexual                 | Physical Therapist             | Full             | Professional Degree | Minneapolis,MN        | MN Lynx;MN Frost; KC Current;Aurora FC  |
| 5  | 12/16/2024     | Haha      | 45-54 | White                                | 75K    | Woman           | Gay or Lesbian           | Cat Sitter                     | Full             | Bachelor's          | Bellevue, Washington  | Seattle Storm   |
| 6  | 12/16/2024     | Henrietta | 35-44 | White                                | 200K+  | Woman           | Gay or Lesbian           | Loan Officer                   | Full             | Associate's         | Kansas City, Missouri | KC Current; Angel City FC secondary but also actively follows Ali Riley and Paige Diehlson; follows NWSL teams general; casual fan of WNBA  |
| 7  | 12/19/2024     | Jane      | 45-54 | White                                | 150K   | Woman           | Heterosexual or Straight | Biotech Employee               | Full             | Master's            | Seattle, Washington   | Seattle Storm; Phoenix Mercury (second); will follow league generically   |
| 8  | 12/20/2024     | Aggie     | 45-54 | White                                | 60K    | Woman           | Gay or Lesbian           | U.S. Park Ranger               | Full             | Master's            | Petersburg, Virginia  | OL Reign; Washington Spirit; Seattle Storm; Tottenham Spurs; Texas A&M  |
| 9  | 12/22/2024     | Madeline  | 45-54 | White                                | 210K   | Woman           | Heterosexual or Straight | Attorney                       | Full             | Professional Degree | Henderson, NV         | LV Aces; UNLV Women's Bball; follows All Aces on social; follows Dawn Staley  |
| 10 | 12/22/2024     | Lachelle  | 25-34 | Black                                | 55K    | Woman           | Bisexual                 | NonProfit Employee             | Full             | Some College        | Seattle, Washington   | Seattle Storm;Washington Spirit; Follows Nneka Ogwumike, Skylar Diggins Smith; Followed Lynx during dynasty time  |
| 11 | 1/5/2025       | Lucia     | 25-34 | White                                | 50K    | Woman           | Heterosexual or Straight | Professor                      | Full             | Professional Degree | Indiana, USA          | Follows women's sport generally; basketball is favorite sport and number 1 team is NY Liberty followed by MN Lynx as close second; soccer is number two and Washington Spirit is her fave team but also supports Angel City; big USWNT soccer fan and watches women's soccer in the EPL and La Liga Femenil |
| 12 | 1/6/2025       | Kali      | 25-34 | White                                | 30K    | Non-binary      | Gay or Lesbian           | Did not disclose               | Did not disclose | Associate's         | Seattle, Washington   | Seattle Storm; OL Reign; Valkeries; follows women's sport generally   |
| 13 | 1/7/2025       | Brad      | 45-54 | White                                | 150K   | Man             | Heterosexual or Straight | Construction Business Owner    | Full             | Some College        | Revere, MA            | Boston Bruins, Boston Fleet; Ottawa Charge  |
| 14 | 1/7/2025       | Sonja     | 25-34 | Asian                                | 45K    | Woman           | Heterosexual or Straight | College Athletics - DEI Fellow | Full             | Master's            | Champaign, Illinois   | Aces, NY Liberty, Supports WNBA generally; Angel City FC; follows McBride/Collier from MN, Wilson/Colson/Plum for Aces  |
| 15 | 1/7/2025       | Napoleon  | 25-34 | Multiple (Native American and White) | 120K   | Man             | Heterosexual or Straight | Educator                       | Full             | Bachelor's          | Minneapolis,MN        | MN Vikings; MN Lynx   |
| 16 | 1/9/2025       | Melissa   | 25-34 | Latina/e/o/x                         | 160K   | Woman           | Heterosexual or Straight | Professor                      | Full             | Professional Degree | Queens, NY, USA       | NY Liberty; Follows the WNBA generally; has attended Gotham FC games; Ohio State, Butler, Cleveland Pro Teams   |

| #  | Interview Date | Pseudonym | Age   | Ethnicity | Income               | Gender identity | Sexual identity          | Occupation                              | Work status | Education           | Postcode/location     | Sports/teams/athletes followed   |
|----|----------------|-----------|-------|-----------|----------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|---|-------------|---------------------|-----------------------|--|
| 17 | 1/14/2025      | Janice    | 25-34 | White     | 94K                  | Woman           | Heterosexual or Straight | Premium Ticket Rep                      | Full        | Bachelor's          | Brooklyn, NY, USA     | Giants, Bruins, Patriots, NY Liberty, and Boston Fleet   |
| 18 | 1/14/2025      | Amanda    | 25-34 | White     | 120K                 | Woman           | Heterosexual or Straight | Assistant Location Manager (L&O SVU)    | Full        | Bachelor's          | Brooklyn, NY, USA     | NY Sirens; NY Liberty; Ilona Maher; Rangers  |
| 19 | 1/16/2025      | Charlie   | 25-34 | White     | 45K                  | Man             | Heterosexual or Straight | Unemployed                              | Unemployed  | Master's            | Cleveland, OH         | MN Lynx; Bay FC; Gotham FC; MN Frost   |
| 20 | 1/19/2025      | Langston  | 35-44 | Black     | 115K                 | Man             | Heterosexual or Straight | Professor                               | Full        | Master's            | Kansas City, Missouri | KC Current; Dallas Wings; Sha'Carri Richardson; Cynt Marshall; Serena Williams   |
| 21 | 1/19/2025      | Janet     | 25-34 | White     | 56K                  | Non-binary      | Queer                    | Sexual Health Educator                  | Full        | Doctoral            | Durham, NH            | Angel City FC; Washington Spirit; Racing Louisville; follows women's soccer in NWSL generally; attended PWHL Boston Fleet Game |
| 22 | 1/21/2025      | Jessica   | 25-34 | Black     | 120K                 | Woman           | Heterosexual or Straight | Lawyer                                  | Full        | Professional Degree | Houston, TX           | Chicago Sky; Dallas Wings  |
| 23 | 1/21/2025      | Mary      | 55-64 | White     | 110K                 | Woman           | Prefer not to answer     | Hospital Manager                        | Full Time   | Bachelor's          | Somerville, NJ        | NY Sirens; Gotham FC; NY Liberty   |
| 24 | 1/25/2025      | Jordan    | 25-34 | White     | 92K                  | Transgender     | Gay or Lesbian           | Lawyer                                  | Full Time   | Professional Degree | Brooklyn, NY, USA     | NY Liberty; NY Sirens; LA Dodgers; LA Lakers   |
| 25 | 1/25/2025      | Amelia    | 25-34 | White     | 55K                  | Woman           | Gay or Lesbian           | Engineering Student                     | Full Time   | Bachelor's          | Baltimore, MD, USA    | NY Sirens; Montreal Victoire   |
| 26 | 1/25/2025      | Max Power | 25-34 | White     | 58K                  | Man             | Heterosexual or Straight | Copy Manager                            | Full Time   | Bachelor's          | Jersey City, NJ       | NY Sirens; Gotham FC; NY Liberty   |
| 27 | 1/27/2025      | Jackie    | 35-44 | Multiple  | 150K                 | Woman           | Heterosexual or Straight | Consumer Engagement Manager, NBC Sport  | Full Time   | Master's            | New York, NY          | NY Liberty; Gotham FC  |
| 28 | 1/27/2025      | Marita    | 25-34 | White     | 82K                  | Woman           | Bisexual                 | Environmental Social Governance Manager | Full Time   | Master's            | Washington, DC        | Washington Spirit; NWSL Generally  |
| 29 | 2/2/2025       | Eli       | 35-44 | White     | 77K                  | Non-binary      | Queer                    | Therapist                               | Full Time   | Masters             | Portsmouth, NH        | Angel City FC; NWSL Generally; Boston Fleet  |
| 30 | 2/2/2025       | Dawn      | 45-54 | White     | 50K                  | Woman           | Heterosexual or Straight | Financial Assistant                     | Full Time   | Masters             | Menomonie, WI         | Minnesota Frost; Montreal Victoire; PWHL Generally; Aurora FC  |
| 31 | 2/12/2025      | Alex      | 25-34 | White     | Prefer not to answer | Woman           | Asexual/Biromantic       | Substitute Teacher/Welder               | Full Time   | Bachelor's          | Wallingford, CT       | Connecticut Sun; USWNT Soccer; Ilona Maher   |

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