Sport sponsorship, as a marketing strategy, has seen an astonishing increase in recent years. At the Beijing Olympics alone, sponsorship spending was measured at $740 million (Sweet, 2008). Companies are seeking ways to more precisely know the value of sponsoring sport organizations (Mckelvey & Snyder, 2009). Sponsorship recognition is gaining popularity as a way of understanding and tracking return on investment for sport sponsorships.

The current study seeks to advance the study of sponsorship recognition, specifically exploring gender and identification-related differences in the Western Hockey League. In framing the study, it was believed that males would possess higher levels of fan identification, and thus would have greater interest, leading to higher sponsorship recognition scores than female fans. Secondarily, it was hypothesized that highly identified fans would report more positive behavioral intentions and more positive emotional perceptions with regards to sponsors.

Paper-and-Pencil surveys were hand-distributed to existing fans at the last home game for a team playing in the WHL (Western Hockey League). The five-part surveys were enclosed in self-addressed return envelopes. One thousand surveys were randomly distributed amongst the nearly 10,000 fans in attendance. Research assistants were trained to quickly ask existing fans if they would be willing to help the team by filling out the survey and mailing it back. Essentially, the plea acted as a means to both encourage participation and pre-screen the more interested potential respondents. Within a six week period, a total of 242 usable responses were received.

While Part One of the survey inquired about aspects of the atmosphere at games (and was in fact used in a report to the team’s management), Part Two of the survey utilized Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) seven-item team identification scale. The scale was tailored towards the hockey team; otherwise, it was implemented using the standard 5-point rating system. Part Three of the survey contained a sponsor recognition test. Here, three columns listed a full 60 company names. Fifteen false sponsors were listed amongst 45 official sponsors. Respondents were simply asked to check all the team’s sponsors that they recognized and scores were later recorded as “hits” (signifying correct recognition) and “misses” (errors in recognition). Part Four of the survey posed a set of twelve variables evaluating fan perceptions of sponsors. Respondents were asked to rate their levels of agreement utilizing a five-point Likert scale. The statements generally fell into ratings of fan behaviors (e.g., purchase preferences, usage patterns, purchase intentions, etc.) as well as ratings of emotional responses (e.g., pride, loyalty, a felt sense of “family,” etc.). Lastly, Part Five of the survey asked a set of demographic questions.

The data revealed a number of interesting findings. First, it was remarkable to note that women had identification scores essentially equal to men. Meaning that women were just as likely to be highly identified (i.e., “die hard”) hockey fans (means of 3.82 for women, with an n of 117, and 3.90 for men, with an n of 123). Additionally, while ANOVA tests did not uncover significant age-related or income-related differences in identification scores, there were significant differences between education groups. In this instance, less educated fans maintained higher levels of identification (F = 5.33, p < .01). (Table 1)

Second, the twelve variables evaluating fan perceptions of sponsors were tested across gender and identification groups. Across all twelve t-tests, there were no significant gender differences. Men and women had nearly equal mean ratings of purchasing preferences, loyalty to sponsors, and pride in owning sponsors’ products. Further, the gender groups had similar ratings of usage patterns, perceptions of quality, and purchase intentions for sponsors’ products. Using ANOVA to test perception means across identification groups yielded significant differences. As expected, more highly identified fans had higher perceptions of sponsors. (Table 2)

Third, sponsorship recognition rates were tested. Measurements across gender groups showed only slight differences. Statistically, female fans were just as likely to recognize sponsors. While men recorded higher sponsor “hits,” women had fewer “misses,” and accuracy rates were nearly equal. As one might expect, using ANOVA to test recognition means across identification groups yielded significant results. That is, significant linear trends emerged...
wherein across three identification groups higher recognition means and greater accuracy rates (recognizing correct sponsors) were recorded for more highly identified fans. (Table 3)

In essence, this study found incredibly few gender differences amongst hockey fans. Not only are female fans likely to be equally highly identified, but they are also just as likely to recognize sponsors. Moreover, their perceptions of sponsors, their loyalty to sponsors, and their behaviors with regards to sponsors are essentially the same as their male counterparts. These results may be a reflection of fan-demographic changes seen over the last 10-20 years. While historically, women's role in sport participation and consumption has been marginalized, women are now participating and consuming sport at historically high levels. Sport marketers should realize the potential for growth in the female market segment.

With regards to fan identification, this study largely supports prior research. We found that WHL fans are similar to fans of most other major sports. As fans become more highly identified they are more likely to recognize sponsors and have greater accuracy in their recognition rates. Furthermore, highly identified fans have more positive emotional ratings of sponsors and report more positive behavioral intentions.

This study is unique in that some of its contribution comes from a lack of statistically significant results. In a sporting context such as professional hockey, where many sport managers might have expected to find a number of significant gender differences, this study found almost none. The implications of this study are therefore far reaching. There is no reason to seek out sponsors whose businesses are male-consumer dominant. Perhaps sports like hockey, that were once perceived as male dominated, can now serve as a platform to market to both genders equally. Sport managers would be well served in spending their time trying to move fans towards higher levels or identification. Even in the realm the WHL, the issue of fan identification has direct, and significant, repercussions for effective sponsorship.