

**Marginalization or Empowerment? A Case Study of Lived Experiences of Female Sport Fans**

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(including questions)**

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Sport, in many forms of participation, is commonly viewed as a male dominated area (Bryson, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Davis & Duncan, 2006), yet female fans are becoming more present in the world of sports. A poll conducted by ESPN in 2008 showed that in four major leagues in North America women accounted for 34% (National Football League) to 40% (National Hockey League) of fans ("Comparing Fan Demos", 2009). There has also been a growth in merchandise for female fans of sport teams. For example, actress Alyssa Milano created merchandise targeted for women who follow the NFL, MLB and NHL ("Marketing to Women", 2010). In addition, female fans have gained a presence on the Internet with websites such as femmefan.com and femalefan.com. Although research shows women attend sport events and purchase sport-related products (e.g., Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002; James & Ridinger, 2002; Robinson & Trail, 2005), there has been very little research on the experiences of highly identified and involved female fans (Davis, McDonald, & Karg, 2010; Farrell, Fink, & Fields, 2011), and of female fans outside of Europe, Australia and the United States. Wann, Melnick, Russell and Pease (2001) note that fan research must not be generalized to a population that was not represented by their sample, whether that be the participants or geographical location.

The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of female sport fans in Canada. This study examines two key areas of interest: (a) marginalization of fans because they are women, and (b) empowerment of women because they are fans. The framework for this study is hegemonic masculinity as it draws attention to unequal gender relations, in particular the subordination of women, through taken for granted forms of masculinity (Donaldson, 1993; Messerschmidt, 2012).

Female spectators are often marginalized as inauthentic sport fans because they are assumed to lack knowledge about the sport and teams, and to attend sport events only to socialize (Crawford & Gosling, 2004; Dietz-Uhler Harrick, End, & Jacquemotte, 2000; Gosling, 2007). Women who view themselves as authentic fans have a desire to be recognized as equivalent to their male counterparts, however it has been acknowledged that there is an obvious distinction (Sherlock & Elsdon, 2000). This may be a result of men controlling the rules and boundaries of their participation in leisure pursuits like fandom (Ben-Porat, 2009; McGinnis, Chun & McQuillan, 2003).

In contrast, it is possible that a sense of empowerment can arise from being a sport fan. Currently, empowerment of female sport fans has been relatively ignored in the literature. The few exceptions acknowledge females who challenge the views of masculine hegemony (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), including within the realm of sport fandom (Mewett & Toffoletti, 2012). McGinnis, Chun and McQuillan (2003) note that women's participation in male dominated areas results in an increased sense of self and autonomy. Additionally, Gosling (2007) acknowledged that being a sport fan is important for some women and plays a role in the construction of their identity. She added: "what remains missing from research is the role that sport fan culture can play in women's every lives and in particular its significance in challenging gender role and empowering women" (p. 260).

The research will be based on a qualitative approach, using a case study design and semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. A case study approach is appropriate as it limits the focus to fans of a specific team, thus controlling for the context (Yin, 2003). This study will compare the experiences of 6 – 8 women total, 3-4 in two age groups (18 - 30; 31 - 50), who self-identify as fans of a professional football team in Canada. The purpose of separating participants by age is to examine generational differences in the experiences of these women (Pope, 2011; Pope & Williams, 2011). During the interviews, participants will be asked to discuss their experiences as female fans, with a particular emphasis on how 'gender' and 'fan' influence their experiences. They will also be asked to reflect upon their experiences relative to other male and female fans. Interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The data will be analyzed through a process of assigning codes, and identifying categories and themes.

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On a practical level, the findings of this study can provide knowledge to sport organizations in the areas of marketing, game day operations, and merchandise. By understanding how women experience sporting events, these organizations will be better equipped to address the needs of these specific fans. Additionally, this study will add to our understanding of the “often complex position women occupy in the supporter base of many mass spectator sports ... [and] the subjective meanings and location spectator sports occupy in many women’s lives” (Crawford & Gosling, 2004, p. 491). It can also contribute to our understanding of the contexts in which female sport fandom challenges and/or reinforces hegemonic masculinity. As Messerschmidt (2012) explains: “in studies of hegemonic masculinities, the focus can no longer center exclusively on men and instead must give much closer attention to both the practices of women and the social interplay of femininities and masculinities” (p. 70). Lastly, in order to contribute to the current understanding of sport fans, we must examine the lived experiences they face. As Melnick (1989) notes: “what matters is that we begin listening to what the sports fan can tell us about ourselves and the sociocultural system that shapes and molds our everyday lives” (p. 171).