Three Strikes Against You?: An Examination of Highly Identified, Displaced, Female Sport Fans

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The presence of female fans at sporting events is increasing (Markovits & Albertson, 2012). Data from 2010 showed that women make up 41% of MLB fans, 40% of NFL fans, 41% of NHL fans and 36% of NBA fans (Fan Demographics Among Major North American Sport Leagues, 2010). Additionally, females are becoming more involved in fandom through participation in fantasy leagues (Ruhihey & Billings, 2012) and merchandise consumption (Dosh, 2012). With more research focusing on women’s experiences (e.g., Mewett & Toffoletti, 2012; Pope, 2011; 2013), we are beginning to further our understanding of this specific group of fans. However, it is important to note that: “women’s fans experiences [are] more varied and complex” (Mewett & Toffoletti, 2012, p. 1).

Acknowledging the complex and sometimes competing identities of female fans, this research looks to gain an understanding of the intersectionality of displacement, identification, and gender.

Few studies have focused on displaced fans, or those who are geographically distant from their team (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Farred, 2002; Kraszewski, 2008). This is an area of sport fandom that requires attention as sports have a significant range due to globalization of media coverage (Whitson, 1998), as well as the fact that people live in geographically remote areas where there are no professional sport teams. Kraszewski’s (2008) ethnographic study focused on displaced fans and the role of sports bars in connecting with other team fans and to their geographical identity. Farred (2002), in reflecting on his experiences as a displaced fan, touched on the importance of sport media, as well as how fandom is powerful enough to overcome the barrier of distance. Lastly, Branscombe and Wann (1991) focused on identity and displaced fans. They found that these fans more likely to increase their identification when their team is successful. They also noted those fans may not have feelings of belongingness or attachment to their team, unlike fans who are located near their team. While little research has solely focused on displaced fans, no research has examined how these experiences of displacement could vary by identification or gender.

Much of the sport fan and spectatorship literature has focused on identification (e.g., Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Sutton, McDonald, Milne & Cimperman, 1997; Wann, 1995; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). In regards to gender differences, Ware and Kowalski (2012) suggested that women are less likely than males to be die-hard or highly identified fans. Additionally, James and Ridinger (2002) found that men not only enjoy sports but also derive an important social identity from it whereas females do not. Research has also discussed the characteristics that have been associated highly identified fans (e.g., Wann & Branscombe, 1995; Wann & Dolan, 1994; Wann & Nolan, 1994), some of which include a social identity with the team, being affected by wins and losses, and possessing objective and subjective knowledge. Interestingly, little research has focused solely on female highly identified fans. Farrell, Fink and Fields (2011) recognized the need to research women who are intrinsically motivated in their fandom.

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of highly identified, displaced female sport fans. This study will focus on three main areas: (a) level of identification, (b) being a displaced fan, and (c) gender. The framework for this study will borrow from performative gender theory as it describes how gender is at the core of our actions and these acts either confirm or challenge expected gender norms (Butler, 1988). It also will draw on Osborne and Coombs' (2013) theory of performative sport fandom, which describes that: “individuals become sport fans through the performance of fandom. Those performances are socially constructed and vary based on context and audience” (p. 677). This theory seeks to determine how meanings are created and strengthened by fans as well as the role that social identifiers (e.g. gender, race, class) play in fan performances. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, performative sport fandom recognizes the fluidity of social and fan roles; they are not fixed but continue to change over time and across different situations.

This study used an individual case study design to explore and understand fan experiences. Two to three individual interviews were conducted with 8 highly identified, displaced female fans of the NFL (n=5), MLB (n=1) and NHL.
(n=2). The women were recruited from a city that is geographically isolated from teams in the NFL, NBA, MLB, and NHL. Participants were required to possess a minimum of 2 out of 4 characteristics of highly identified fans that was previously mentioned. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The data are being analyzed through a process of assigning codes, and identifying categories and themes.

The preliminary findings suggest there are four areas that impact their experiences as fans: how they became fans and at what point they realized they were highly identified, their connection with other fans of the team, socialization and acceptance of men and their views of other female fans, and the intersectionality between these areas. While there are similarities in their experiences, the findings also show that heterogeneity exists among female sport fans. These women do not view fandom as a linear or singular experience, but rather as a complex identity in which different elements (being displaced, highly identified, and/or female) affects how they perform fandom. The findings show that while some previous research is being supported (i.e., those characteristics associated with highly identified fans), by spending more time with the participants, new perspectives are exposed about highly identified, displaced, female fans.

The findings of this research can be used for practical strategies. First, by understanding how women develop into highly identified fans, sport organizations can begin to capitalize and enhance their growing fandom. Second, the information regarding the importance of exclusivity of being a displaced female fan, sport organizations can incorporate marketing tactics that communicates to these specific consumers.