Despite the vast team identification literature, nearly all inquiries have focused on men’s sport. Recognizing social identities are context-dependent as well as known disparities between men’s and women’s sport, the purpose of the current study was to understand the experiences of individuals who identify with a women’s sport team, and how they explain the psychological meaning of the identity.

Team identification (Lock & Heere, 2017) is guided by the social identity approach (Turner et al., 1987). Individuals realize positive social identity via favorable group comparisons. Groups vary in status, and in instances where a group is perceived as low-status, individuals may make the ingroup positive through various means (Hornsey, 2008). As mentioned, nearly all team identification studies have focused on men’s sport, with only a handful on women’s sport (Fink et al., 2002; Heere & Newland, 2013; Lee et al., 2017; Madrigal, 1995; Schramm & Knoll, 2017). The findings of these studies align with team identification knowledge in men’s sport, including the effect of team identification on consumer thoughts and behaviors and the influence of other identities. Researchers have found motives to consume women’s sport may differ from men’s sport (Funk et al., 2002), yet our understanding of how this impacts the psychological meaning (Fournier, 1991) of the team is minimal. This is particularly concerning since men’s and women’s sport differ historically, socially, and economically (Berri, 2018; Cooky & Messner, 2018).

An interpretive approach was used in the current study (Markula & Silk, 2011). Using an instrumental case study design (Stake, 2003), the research focused on identified fans of the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) Minnesota Lynx, one of the most successful teams in the league’s history (Megdal, 2018). Individuals were recruited to participate in an interview via the Lynx and were representative of the team’s fanbase. McCracken’s (1988) long interview was used, allowing for unstructured and semi-structured conversation. Interviews averaged 75 minutes and were conducted until data saturation was met (Smith & Sparkes, 2016), resulting in 17 participants. Analysis began while conducting interviews and continued through post-transcription. Transcripts were analyzed in two phases—first inductively, then deductively—allowing for data-driven findings and recognition of existing theory (Braun et al., 2016). A relativist approach was used to evaluate the research (Burke, 2016).

Two unique elements of psychological meaning were found: the opportunity to enact social change (gender equality) and the purity of the team. These components jointly contribute to a relatively unique team identity while also revealing a paradox, in that realizing social change might compromise the perceived purity of the team. These findings have implications concerning the ability of teams to represent politicized identities, and highlight the potential for scholars to examine team identities to understand power relations between groups, and/or among inferior groups. The findings also illustrate how individuals may need to shed status-irrelevant aspects of the identity’s psychological meaning in seeking to lift the status of an identity. In the presentation, in-depth discussion of findings (including verbatim quotes) and theoretical and practical implications will be provided.