Sex Differences in Sport Fan Behavior
and Reasons for Being a Sport Fan

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The purpose of this study was to examine similarities and differences between male and female college students with regard to their sport fanship and sport fan behavior. Participants completed a questionnaire designed to assess whether they considered themselves to be sport fans, their sport fan behavior, and their reasons for considering themselves a sport fan. The results showed that an equal number of males and females considered themselves to be sport fans, although males identified more strongly with being a fan than females. Males also engaged in more sport fan behavior than females, with the exception of attending sporting events. Finally, females were more likely to report being a sport fan because they attended and watched sporting events with friends and family, while males were more likely to consider themselves to be fans because they played sports and wanted to acquire sports information.

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We thank Mary McDonald for her helpful suggestions about the study.

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In a national opinion survey conducted for the *New York Times* (1986), 71% of respondents considered themselves sport fans. Despite the large number of sport fans that exist, researchers know surprisingly little about them (Russell, 1993). For example, Wann and Hamlet (1995) found that only 4% of articles published in sport psychology and sport sociology journals between 1987 and 1991 examined sport fans. There has been even less research examining similarities and differences between male and female sport fans (notable exceptions include Gantz, 1981; Gantz & Wenner, 1991; Gantz & Wenner, 1995). Although research indicates that most people believe sport fans are predominantly male (End, Harrick, Jacquemotte, & Dietz-Uhler, 1997; Gantz & Wenner, 1995), recent reports suggest that females may be just as likely as males to report being a sport fan. For example, in 1990, females represented 33% of the NFL's fan base. In 1997, they represented 44% of NFL fans (*USA Today*, 1997). In 1994, Hofsare reported that women represent 50% of all major league soccer fans. As further evidence of an increasing female fan-base, coverage of the 1996 Olympics was geared more toward females than any other Olympics (*Newsweek*, 1996). It seems important to characterize the similarities and differences between male and female sport fans.

There has been a fair amount of research comparing the coverage of male and female athletes on television (e.g., Duncan, Messner, & Williams, 1991) and magazines (e.g., Lumpkin & Williams, 1991), but none of that research focuses on male and female sport fans. The purpose of the present investigation is to examine the number of males and females who consider themselves sport fans, the reasons they consider themselves to be fans, and to assess the behavior of male and female sport fans. It is hypothesized that an equal number of males and females will consider themselves to be sport fans (in light of figures reported recently), but their sport fan behaviors and reasons for being a sport fan will differ. Given the recent increase in the number of female fans (*USA Today*, 1996; *Newsweek*, 1996), as well as the number of female athletes, we believe that it is important to examine the similarities and differences between male and female sport fans.

Although there have been few investigations of the behavior of sport fans, some research has focused on sport fans’ perceptions and attributions of a sporting event. Briefly, this research shows that sport fans tend to be fairly biased in their perceptions of a sporting event, typically in ways that support their favorite team (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Lalonde, 1992; Lalonde, Moghaddam, & Taylor, 1987; Mann, 1974; Peterson, 1980; Watkins, 1987). Other research has examined the perceptions and behavior of fans who identify strongly with being a sport fan or who identify strongly with a particular team. This research has found that those who identify strongly with their team attend more games and predict more future success for their team (Murrell & Dietz, 1992; Wann & Dolan 1994), tend not to waver in their commitment to their team over the course of a season (Dietz-Uhler & Murrell, 1998; Wann,
1996; Wann & Schrader, 1996), and have greater knowledge of the team’s players and history (Wann & Branscombe, 1995). There has also been research that has examined the purpose that fanship serves for people, focusing primarily on self-esteem. For example, research suggests that sport fans often publicize their commitment to a highly successful team (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, & Sloan, 1976) and derogate or minimize their connection with an unsuccessful team (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980), presumably to preserve their self-esteem.

There have been a few studies which have examined males’ and females’ television sports viewing experiences (Gantz, 1981; Gantz & Wenner, 1991; Gantz & Wenner, 1995). It is important to note that this research differs from that of the current investigation in that it focused primarily on television sports viewing. Gantz and Wenner (1991) found that men spent more time watching sports on television than women, had greater knowledge of sports than women, and had different motivations for watching sports on television than women. Similarly, Gantz (1981) found sex differences in behaviors prior to watching sport on television, feelings while watching sports on television, and in behaviors while watching sports on television. Finally, Gantz and Wenner (1995) found that male and female fans did not differ on a variety of pre-viewing and post-viewing behaviors, as well as motivations for watching. However, the standards for being categorized as a fan (which were determined by their sport-viewing behavior) differed for males and females. If the standard had been the same, then there probably would have been more sex differences in sport viewing behavior and motivation.

As mentioned earlier, there has been a fair amount of research examining differences in the amount and type of media coverage that male and female athletes receive. It is important to examine this research, as it provides a context for sport and possibly offers insight for examining male and female sport fans. Research examining the amount of media coverage that male and female athletes receive shows that there is a noticeable underreporting of female athletes and their sporting events throughout the mass media. For example, Duncan and Hasbrook (1988) and Duncan, Messner, and Williams (1991) found that female sports received significantly less airtime than male sports. In terms of magazine (e.g., Sports Illustrated, Runner’s World, Sports, Tennis) coverage, research has found that female athletes tend to be under-represented and de-athleticized (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983; Bryant, 1980; Kane, 1988; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Rintala & Birrell, 1984).

Research which has examined the type of media coverage that male and female athletes receive shows that when females are depicted in the media, they tend to be presented in sexist ways which trivializes the small amount of coverage they do receive. Duncan, Messner, and Williams (1990) found that televised coverage of female sports tends to display women in sexual and trivial ways. In terms of magazine coverage, research shows that women are often portrayed in sexualized, stereotypical, and passive ways, while men are portrayed in strong,
athletic, and agentic ways (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983; Duncan, 1990).

This research suggests that the media portrayal of females in sport serves to trivialize and undermine their athletic achievements (Kane & Greendorfer, 1994). This summary of the media coverage of female athletes is consistent with theoretical accounts of women’s role in sport. Many sport theorists and researchers have suggested that sport is primarily a male preserve which serves to further reinforce the stereotypes of and division between men and women (Bryson, 1990; Dunning, 1986; Messner, 1988; Whitson, 1994; Willis, 1982). It is further suggested that when women participate in sport, they are either presented in stereotypical ways or are negatively evaluated (Willis, 1982). These actions serve to exclude women from sport, thereby protecting the male domain.

Thus, when females attempt to participate in sports, they are either ignored or their performance is trivialized. If females’ participation in sport is ignored and trivialized, then their participation as a sport fan may also be ignored and trivialized. In order to avoid being trivialized, female sport fans may engage in fewer masculine-oriented sport fan behaviors. This suggests that although many females consider themselves to be sport fans, they probably will not engage in these “traditional” sport fan behaviors such as reading about and discussing sports. However, it seems clear from recent reports of the NFL, professional soccer league, and the 1996 Olympics that women consider themselves fans of sport. It is important to explore the behaviors that men and women engage so as to identify these sport-fan behaviors that are not male-oriented.

The purpose of the present investigation is to determine how women consider themselves sport fans if they do not engage in traditional (masculine) sport fan behaviors. The first hypothesis is that male and female college students will be equally likely to report being a sport fan. This hypothesis was derived from the growing number of females who attend professional football (44%) and indoor soccer (50%) games. The second hypothesis is that males will be more likely than females to engage in traditional, masculine sport fan behavior. This hypothesis was derived from the idea that sport is still primarily a male domain (Bryson, 1990; Dunning, 1986; Messner, 1988; Whitson, 1994; Willis, 1982). If females attempt to enter that domain, then they might receive negative attention. The third hypothesis is that males’ reasons for being a sport fan will be different from females’ reasons for being a fan. Because this part of the study is largely exploratory, the direction of this difference is not immediately obvious.

Method

Participants

Participants were 76 (36 males and 40 females) undergraduates who completed a questionnaire in exchange for extra credit for a course. The mean age of the sample was 20.57 (SD
= 4.23) years. The sample was primarily (96%) White, but had 1% Black, and 3% Asian respondents as well.

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire designed to assess their sport fan behaviors and reasons for being a sport fan. The questionnaire (described in detail below) contained a number of items designed to ascertain whether participants believed they were a sport fan, the extent of their identification with being a sport fan, their sport fan behavior and knowledge of sports, as well as their reasons for being a sport fan.

In this study, a sport fan is defined as someone who considers him/herself to be a fan of sport. Participants who responded affirmatively to the question, “Do you consider yourself a “sports fan”?” were categorized as sport fans. Participants were also asked to respond to Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) Sports Spectator Identification Scale (SSI). The SSI consists of seven items with responses ranging from one to eight. A high SSI score indicates higher levels of identification with being a sport fan. The SSI was found to be reliable in the current sample (Cronbach’s alpha = .95). Participants were then asked a number of questions related to traditional sport fan behavior. They were asked how many hours per week they discussed sports with someone, how many hours per week they watched sports on television, how many sporting events they attended in an average week, how interested they were in sports in general 1 = (not interested) to 7 = (very interested), and how knowledgeable they thought they were about sports 1 = (not knowledgeable) to 7 = (very knowledgeable). Participants were also asked to complete a 20-item sport knowledge scale. This scale was designed to assess how knowledgeable participants were about sports in general. Sample items on this scale include, “In baseball, what does ERA stand for?”, “How many players must be on the line of scrimmage in professional football?”, and “In professional basketball, a player fouls out after committing ____ fouls”. Each item on the scale was scored as correct or incorrect. Thus, a high score indicates greater knowledge of sports. This scale was shown to be reliable in the current sample (Cronbach’s alpha = .89).

Finally, participants were asked, in an open-ended format, to indicate the reasons why they considered themselves a sports fan. All of the reasons for being a sport fan were coded by two trained research assistants. The research assistants were shown to be reliable (Cohen’s Kappa = .88). The reasons for being a sport fan were coded into 13 categorizes (summarized in Table 1). Participants who did not consider themselves to be sport fans were asked to list the reasons why they did not consider themselves sport fans. These latter responses were not coded.

When participants completed the questionnaire, they were debriefed and thanked for
Table 1
Reasons for Being a Sport Fan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Sex of Participant</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plays sports</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoys cheering</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watches sports</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attends sporting events</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoys watching with friends and family</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other exposure to sports (e.g., reads)</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes sports</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoys learning about sports</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feels loyal to a team</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grew up liking sports</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has sports memorabilia</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has sports heroes</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Table entries include percentages of males and females reporting each reason.

Results

The purpose of this study is to understand if and when males and females differ in their sport fan behavior and reasons for being a sport fan. Thus, the independent variable in all analyses was sex of participant. The first analysis focused on the number of males and females who considered themselves to be sport fans. In response to the question, “Do you consider yourself to be a sport fan?”, 73% of females and 83% of males did consider themselves to be a sport fan. This difference was not statistically significant, \( \chi^2(1) = .26, p > .05 \). Thus, consistent with the first hypothesis, males and females equally consider themselves to be sport fans.

The second analysis focused on the extent to which males and females identified with being a sport fan. The means and standard deviations for this item are presented in Table 2.
Table 2
Male and Female Sport Fan Identification, Behavior, and Knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex of Participants</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sport fan identification (SSI)</td>
<td>36.47</td>
<td>(14.62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours discussing sports</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>(3.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours watching sports</td>
<td>8.53</td>
<td>(7.52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of events attended</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>(1.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in sports</td>
<td>5.86</td>
<td>(1.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reported knowledge</td>
<td>5.44</td>
<td>(1.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport knowledge</td>
<td>11.42</td>
<td>(4.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26.40</td>
<td>(11.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>(2.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>(2.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>(.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>(1.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>(1.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>(4.07)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Table entries include means and (standard deviations).

The results of an independent samples t-test showed that males identified with being a sport fan significantly more strongly than females, \( t(74) = 3.40, p < .001 \).

The third analysis focused on the sport fan behavior of males and females. The means and standard deviations for the sport fan behavior items are presented in Table 1. The results of independent samples t-tests showed that males spend significantly more time than females discussing sports with someone, \( t(74) = 3.50, p < .001 \), and watching sports on television, \( t(74) = 4.84, p < .001 \). Males also possess more sport knowledge than females, \( t(74) = 7.55, p < .001 \). The results also found that males report having a significantly greater interest in sports, \( t(74) = 2.64, p < .001 \) and possessing more knowledge of sports, \( t(74) = 3.49, p < .001 \) than females. Males and females spend an equal amount of time attending sports events, \( t(74) = 1.59, p > .05 \). Thus, in partial confirmation of hypothesis two, males seemed to engage in more traditional sport fan behavior than females, with the exception of attendance at sporting events.

The final analysis focused on males' and females' reasons for being a sport fan. The percentage of males and females reporting each reason is presented in Table 1. The results of a chi-square analysis showed that males and females differed in their reasons for being a sport fan, \( \chi^2(12) = 22.66, p < .05 \). Inspection of Table 1 reveals that females seem more likely than males to be a sport fan for "social" reasons. That is, females report being a sport fan because they attend more games, like to cheer, and enjoy watching sports with friends and family. Males, on the other hand, report being a sport fan because they play sports, like sports in
general, and seem to enjoy acquiring information about sports through such means as reading the sports page.

**Discussion**

The purpose of the present investigation was to examine the similarities and differences between male and female sport fans, their behaviors, and their reasons for being a sport fan. The results of the study were generally supportive of the hypotheses. It was found that approximately three-fourths of the sample considered themselves to be sport fans. This finding is consistent with the *New York Times* (1986) poll that found that 71% of people considered themselves to be sport fans. Also, an equal number of males and females considered themselves to be sport fans, in support of the first hypothesis. Although many people consider sport fans to be predominantly male (End, Harrick, Jacquemotte, & Dietz-Uhler, 1998; Gantz & Wenner, 1995), it appears that females are as likely as males to consider themselves to be sport fans. However, females are not as likely as males to highly identify with being a sport fan. Even though females consider themselves to be sport fans, it is not an identity that is especially important to them. This is probably due to the fact that sport has typically been perceived as a male domain. Males have been socialized in sport significantly more than women (Gantz & Wenner, 1991). For males, being a sport fan is an important part of their identity.

The fact that sport seems to be a primary or important identity for males may serve as another way females are excluded from sport. For example, according to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), people gain a sense of who they are and derive much of their self-esteem from their memberships in social groups and categories. Thus, people's identities are very important to them. Further, if these identities are threatened in any way (e.g., if the status of the group becomes lower), then group members respond in a manner designed to protect or maintain their positive feelings toward their group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Because sport has traditionally been defined as a male domain, the presence of women (as fans) may threaten the status of "sport fans". Males might perceive that it is in their best (psychological) interest to exclude women from participating as sport fans.

The major questions that this study sought to address were whether or not females are as likely as males to consider themselves sport fans, and whether male and female sport fans are equally likely to engage in traditional sport fan behavior such as discussing sports with friends and claiming expert knowledge of sports. It was hypothesized that females would be as likely as males to watch sports on television and attend sporting events. It was further hypothesized that females would not engage in other typical sport fan behavior such as
discussing sports, claiming or having knowledge of sports, or expressing a general interest in sports. The first part of the hypothesis was partially confirmed; females and males attended an equal number of sporting events. However, males reported watching more sports on television than females. The second part of the hypothesis was confirmed. Males were more likely than females to spend time discussing sports, show a greater interest in sports, and have more self-reported and actual knowledge of sports. Thus, it appears that for females, being a sport fan involves attending games, but not engaging in other sport fan behaviors. Other than attending games, it is not clear why females consider themselves to be sport fans. To address this question, we examined the reasons that males and females gave for being a sport fan.

The results of the open-ended reasons for being a sport fan showed that males and females reported different reasons. The general pattern of responses suggests that females tend to think of themselves as sport fans for primarily social reasons. These reasons include watching a sporting event with friends and family, cheering at a sporting event, and watching and attending sporting events. It appears that males think of themselves as sport fans because they play sports and because they have other exposure to sports in addition to watching or attending sporting events.

In summary, the results of the study showed that males and females are equally likely to consider themselves to be sport fans. Yet, females appear unlikely to engage in all of the behaviors that have typically been used to define a sport fan. For females, being a sport fan means attending, watching, and cheering at sporting events, preferably in the company of family and friends. For males, being a sport fan means playing sports and acquiring sports information.

There are a number of strengths and weaknesses of this study that are worth mentioning. One strength of this study was that we defined sport fans as anyone who perceives themselves to be a fan of sport. We perceive this to be an improvement over previous research which has defined a sport fan according to the behavior (e.g., watching sports on television) exhibited by the participant (e.g., Gantz & Wenner, 1995). It seems that one’s perception of whether or not he or she is a sport fan is a better way of defining a sport fan than categorizing someone as a sport fan based on their sport fan behavior. As the current study shows, if one defines a sport fan according to whether someone engages in traditional sport fan behavior, then females would not likely be considered sport fans. Further, because a portion of our study involved asking people why they thought they were a fan of sport, it seems even more essential to determine whether they think they are a fan of sport.

A second strength of the study was that it is one of the few studies (with the exception of Gantz and his colleagues) on sport fans that examined the characteristics of female sport fans relative to male sport fans. As previously discussed, it is important to examine the
characteristics of female sport fans because there are a growing number of them. As they become increasingly important in sport, it will become increasingly important to understand who they are and what they like and dislike about sports.

As with any investigation, this study has its weaknesses. One weakness of this study was that it relied on a fairly small sample of college students. This is not to suggest that college student sport fans are unimportant and not worthy of investigation. Instead, by restricting our sample to college students, the generalizability of our results is somewhat limited. Future research should explore the characteristics of both female and male sport fans from a variety of populations to begin to understand the complexity of this gendered phenomenon. A second weakness of the study as well as the previous research on sports fans was that it did not assess what sport or sports males and females are fans of. This is an issue that may prove to be an important determinant of sex differences in sport fans. Future research should examine what sports males and females consider themselves to be fans of.

There are a number of issues for future research in the area of gender and sport fans. First, this study was one of the first studies that defined sport fans according to the participants' perceptions of themselves as sport fans. Other studies have defined sport fans according to sport fan behaviors (e.g., Gantz & Wenner, 1995), level of identification as a sport fan (e.g., Wann & Dolan, 1994), and attendance at a sporting event, (e.g., Murrell & dietz, 1992). These different definitions make it difficult to compare across studies. For reasons already discussed, we suggest that future research define a sport fan as one who perceives themselves to be a sport fan.

Second, as noted above, future research needs to consider the sport(s) that individual sports fans identify with being a fan. The sport that one is a fan of may influence many aspects of sports fanship including which types of sport fan behaviors one exhibits, the type of sport knowledge one possesses, and the motivations for being a fan. Because sport is a male preserve, most sports coverage includes the major male-dominated sports (e.g., football, baseball, basketball, hockey). Although women are equally as likely as men to be fans of certain male-dominated sports such as football, women sports fans are more likely to also be fans of non-male-dominated sports (e.g., tennis, gymnastics, figure skating). However, there are fewer opportunities for exposure to these "alternative" (non-mainstream) sports in both the newspaper and television and radio coverage. In that these non-male-dominated sports have less coverage, information about these sports is less often disseminated into the public domain and is less likely to be the topic for discussion. It is possible that women are less able to exhibit these traditional male sport fan behaviors due not to a lack of interest (female fans would like to discuss sports as often as male fans), but to a lack of the opportunity to do so (which is limited due to the lack of exposure their sport receives in the media). Therefore, if there are differences between which sports female and male sports fans identify with, this could have a great impact on empirical work on sports fans. It is important that future research
include which sport/s these fans identify with as a potential moderating variable. Additionally, with
the recent advent of the Women’s National Basketball Association, a fruitful line of research could
be to explore the similarities and differences between fans of the same sport (basketball) played by
female versus male athletes. Understanding the complexity of the gendered nature of sports
fanship could prove to be crucial to the continued success of professional women’s sport leagues.

Finally, it has been suggested that females may be unlikely to engage in “traditional” sport
fan behavior because doing so may breed negative consequences such as derogation or exclu-
sions. It would be interesting to examine peoples’ perceptions of males and females who engage in
sport fan behavior such as reading the sports page, watching ESPN’s Sportscenter, attending sport
events, or discussing sports. It is anticipated that when females engage in sport fan behavior that
has typically been performed by males, then they will be evaluated negatively. But when females
engage in sport fan behaviors that are traditionally feminine (cheering) or becoming more accept-
able for females (such as attending sporting events), they will be evaluated more positively. In
addition, given the arrival of the WNBA, which traditional sport fan behaviors are acceptable for
women might be changing. It is important to explore these gendered issues in order to understand
the variety of sports fans, their behavior and the ways in which it both blindly reinforces and
reflexively challenges sport as a male preserve.

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