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# **Becoming Fans: Socialization and Motivations of Fans of the England and United States Women's National Football Teams**

## **Abstract**

The professionalization, commercialization, and mediatization of women's football have opened new opportunities for fan attachments, engagements, and identities. Yet limited empirical research has addressed how or why fandom develops for women's football, particularly in comparative perspective. We rely on in-depth interview data collected with adults in England (N= 49) and the United States (N= 53) who attended live matches of the 2019 Women's World Cup to address pathways into and motivations for fandom. We find that awareness of and attachment to women's football developed through exposure to women's football mega-events or online women's football communities, through having played football, or after being recruited by existing fans. For English fans only, fandom developed when men's teams added women's sides or through attending local women's matches. Motivations for fandom include connections to players, family, and friends, appreciation of athletic talent, a commitment to gender equality, entertainment, and the inclusivity of fan cultures.

*Keywords:* gender, fandom, women's football, Women's World Cup, cross-national

The prevalence of sports fandom and its centrality in the lives of many, as well as nearly omnipresent opportunities for fandom presented in contemporary society, have made fandom a topic of substantial interest to scholars of sport (Crawford, 2003; Markovits & Albertson, 2012; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010). While a growing body of literature has recognized that women comprise a large proportion of sport fans and has critically examined gender relations and fandom, studies of women's fandom most commonly address men's sport contexts (Dixon, 2015; Farrell et al., 2011; Jones, 2008; Toffoletti, 2017). Research is scarcer on fandom in women's sport, a likely result of the historically fewer opportunities to participate in sport for women than for men, the more limited availability of women's sport to potential followers, and persistent constructions of women's sport as less exciting and worth following than men's (Delia, 2020; Funk et al., 2003; Meân, 2012). In football [soccer], specifically, most research on fandom has examined men, including recent studies of women fans of men's football (Author; Chiweshe, 2014; Jones, 2008; Markovits & Albertson, 2012; Radmann & Hedenborg, 2018; Toffoletti, 2017; for exceptions, see Dunn, 2016; Guest & Luijten, 2018; Toffoletti et al., 2019).

Lack of attention to fandom in women's football is a major omission given that "interest in women's football is at unprecedented levels" (Cleland, 2015, p. 75), as evidenced by large in-person and television audiences and high online and social media engagement for Women's World Cups, friendly matches, regional tournaments and national professional league matches (Coche, 2014; Dunn, 2016; Krasnoff, 2019; Markovits & Albertson, 2012; Nielsen, 2019). The growing professionalization, commercialization, and mediatization of women's football have opened new opportunities to follow and watch the women's game, although mainstream mass media coverage of women's leagues is often limited and professionalization and commercialization vary within and across national boundaries (Caudwell, 2011a; Pfister, 2015; Williams, 2013). As fandom in men's sport has long been central to the

cultivation of masculine identities among men implicated in the reproduction of men's dominance over women, fandom of women's sport represents a site for the construction of new, perhaps distinct fan identities and negotiation of, even resistance to, gender inequalities (Jones, 2008; Meân, 2012; Mewett & Toffoletti, 2011).

In this analysis, we consider socialization into and motivations for self-identified fandom in the context of elite women's football. We compare fans in England, which has seen most analyses on (men's) football fandom with fans in the U.S., considered the "standard bearer" (Krasnoff, 2019, p. 2) for women's elite football. In doing so, we respond to calls for comparative research to investigate varied "configurations of social inequality" in sport across national boundaries (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2003, p. 351). We address the how and why of fandom, considering the social processes through which individuals develop awareness and attachment to women's football and the motivations for their attachments. Understanding fan identities and experiences around women's sport is important given the instability and lack of resources that women's elite teams and leagues commonly face, as commercial growth requires connection to and expansion of the fanbase. In contextualizing fan development relative to gender inequalities in sport, we also shed light on the evolving status of women's elite sport.

## **Background**

### **Women's Football in Comparative Perspective**

The cultural, material, and organizational standing of elite women's football is both similar and different in the United States and England, making for compelling comparison (Dunn, 2016; Markovits, 2019). Gender inequality in football remains a pressing and persistent issue in both countries; women's football lags significantly behind the men's game in mainstream media coverage, contract terms, compensation, and sponsorship (Author; Pielichaty, 2020; Williams, 2007). However, it is undoubtedly

also the case that the resources and status accorded to women's elite football in both these countries has grown (Author; Pfister, 2015; Pielichaty, 2020). Sport governing and organizing bodies began to recognize and develop the commercial elements of women's football in the 1980's and 90's, with greater paid opportunities to play, increased corporate sponsorship, and larger marketing budgets (Author; Jones, 2007; Williams, 2013). Commercialization and mediatization have been organized and controlled largely, though not exclusively, by Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the International Olympic Committee given the pre-eminence of Women's World Cup and Olympic tournaments.

Since the 2000's, women's football has professionalized through the development of professional and semi-professional leagues, the expansion of regional and international tournaments, and the growth of "ancillary occupations" (Williams, 2013, p. 54) in women's football coaching, training, sports psychology, and sports medicine. Both England and the United States have women's professional leagues, although as in many elite women's leagues, pay is often insufficient for football to be a full-time job (Author). Both countries have elevated the profile of their women's national teams through hosting and performing well in Olympic and Women's World Cup tournaments. Women's football has also experienced growing mediatization in both national contexts, notably through online, digital streaming, and social media platforms (Author; Coche, 2014; Toffoletti et al., 2019).

Related trends of professionalization, commercialization, and mediatization make women's football more visible for fan attachments and present new opportunities to express fandom. Accordingly, there is substantial, even rising, interest in women's football. In England, the Women's FA Cup Final has seen growing attendances over the past five years, while average attendance at National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) matches in the U.S. has slowly risen since the league's 2013 kickoff (Author; Guest & Luijten, 2018; Krasnoff, 2019). In 2018, Nielson reported that 43% of adults in multiple

countries, including the U.S. and U.K., reported an interest in women's football (Nielsen, 2018). 38% of adults in the U.K. and 27% of U.S. adults were interested in streaming women's sport online (Nielsen, 2018). And a Nielsen Sports study following just under 30,000 U.K. adults between 2017 and 2019 found that self-reported fandom of women's football rose from 12 to 19 percent (Pearce Bates, 2019).

The Women's World Cup represents perhaps the pinnacle of recent transformations, with tournaments characterized by "record-setting crowds, television audiences, and mediatization" (Krasnoff, 2019, p. 1). 63% of adults across eight countries reported an awareness of the 2019 Women's World Cup a year before it began, and just under 1 billion people watched at least 1 minute of this tournament live on television, a 30% increase from 2015 (FIFA, 2019; Nielsen, 2018). In the U.S., over 14 million viewers watched the 2019 Women's World Cup final, more than for the 2018 men's World Cup final, and the 2015 Women's World Cup final is the most-watched football [soccer] game of all time (Hess, 2019). Of course, commercialization and mediatization by no means represent only change towards greater and more inclusive access to the women's game. In men's football, hypercommercialization has been subject to much discussion, with concerns that this makes the sport inaccessible, alters the nature and depth of fan connections to teams and leagues, and raises questions about control, regulation, and (in)equity (Crawford, 2003; Williams, 2007; 2013). While not presenting commercialization as the harbinger of equality, this process has produced a new social context in which fandom may develop (Hyatt et al., 2018; Pielichaty, 2020). Fan identities in women's sport develop relative to this context and may variously reproduce, negotiate, or resist broader cultural associations between sport and gender, indicating that the study of fandom in women's sport is significant to understanding both the state of gender inequality in elite sport and challenges to it (Dixon, 2015).

What football cultures in England and the U.S. have in common is a history and legacy of overt sexism and gender discrimination, as well as women pushing against these to advance equality in both

sport and society more broadly (Author; Caudwell, 2011a; Dixon, 2015; Jones, 2007; 2008; Markovits, 2019; Williams, 2007). Yet while women football players across both contexts have historically faced a lesbian stigma given the assumed masculinity (and thus gender transgression) of sports participation, this stigma appears most enduring where the sport of football is “gender typed” as masculine, as in the U.K. (Caudwell, 2011b; Cleland, 2015; Scraton et al., 2005). In England, an FA ban on women’s football being played at FA affiliated grounds was in place from 1921 until 1971, a fact that hindered growth and development and reinforced the idea of football as a male domain (Markovits, 2019; Williams, 2013). Even with the growth of women’s football participation, the idea that the sport is masculine and most appropriate for men persists (Author; Dunn, 2016; Jones, 2008; Pielichaty, 2020). Women’s elite football has developed largely through incorporation within men’s football, under the control of the men who predominate in leadership and ownership and who frequently treat women’s teams as secondary (Scraton et al., 1999; Markovits, 2019; Williams, 2013).

In the U.S., in contrast, football has a more gender-neutral or even feminized reputation and policies prohibiting opportunities for women have never been in place (Author; Jones, 2007). As a result, women’s participation in the sport grew rapidly, also boosted by Title IX legislation, the incorporation of the sport in colleges and universities, and the hosting of international tournaments in 1994, 1996, 1999, and 2003 (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2003; Krasnoff, 2019). The 1999 Women’s World Cup, in particular, “engendered a newfound popularity and respect for women’s soccer” in the U.S. (Markovits & Hellerman, 2003, p. 21). Women’s professional football has historically operated independently of men’s football, though this has recently begun to change with Major League Soccer (MLS) ownership of several women’s NWSL teams. Markovits and Hellerman (2003) argue that where football has been the center of sports cultures, and thus male-dominated and masculine-defined, women have most struggled for opportunity, resources, and recognition (see also Markovits, 2019).

Accordingly, as Markovits (2019) argues, “Precisely because soccer has had a subordinate position in the history of America’s male-dominated hegemonic sports cultures was the path for women to succeed in this game much easier because unlike their European sisters, they did not have to enter an already occupied space and contest it against much opposition, derision and ridicule” (p. 145). The unique cultural positioning of football in the U.S. and England amid similarly growing support and resources makes for an especially interesting comparative focus.

### **The Development of Fandom**

Many theories of sports fan development have been social psychological, focused on individual cognitive attachments to sport and the behaviors that follow (Mewett & Toffoletti, 2011; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010). Primary among these is the Psychological-Continuum Model of a progression from awareness to attraction to deeper forms of identification and connection, referred to as stages of attachment and allegiance (Funk & James, 2001; Wann & James, 2019). Within this model, awareness requires knowledge that an athlete, team, or league exists, while attraction involves learning more and intentionally choosing the sports object. Attachment signals a durable connection based on the meaning attributed to an athlete, team, or league, and allegiance is a sense of loyalty that involves significant resources or even sacrifice to maintain (Wann & James, 2001). Similarly, Crawford’s (2003) model of fan induction and then typical career progression includes points of interested, engaged, enthusiastic, devoted, professional, and apparatus, with induction taking place through both the instruction of others and observing others in live game spaces, as well as “through information and resources obtained through the mass media and consumer goods” (p. 229).

Beginning with McPherson (1976), there has been a strong focus on socializing influences in the processes of awareness and attraction necessary to the development of fandom (Hyatt et al., 2018; Mewett & Toffoletti, 2011; Parry et al., 2014; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010). These influences include

family members, peers, athletes, teams, and leagues, mass media, and geographic proximity to stadiums (Markovits & Albertson, 2012; Scraton et al., 1999). In this study, we draw on models of fan progression and consider socializing influences, yet also draw on a sociological perspective to locate these social interactive processes within broader cultural and material conditions. Dixon's (2015) analyses of women's football fandom uses structuration theory to argue that structure and agency are co-determinative of fan identities and experiences, with social interactions unfolding within organized contexts in which power and resources are unevenly distributed. Like Dixon (2015), we see the interactions that may generate awareness and interest in sport as taking place given a structural "gender order" (Connell, 1987) that defines sport and fandom in gendered terms that contribute to the marginalization of women and women's sport (see also Jones, 2008; Scraton et al., 2005). Specifically, sport is culturally defined as masculine and valued for its contributions to men's dominance, meaning that, "serious sports fandom is typically associated with men's sports as the manifestation of *real* sport" (Meân, 2012, p. 169), and women's sport receives less material support than men's (Author).

This theoretical grounding also has methodological implications. In management and marketing fields, especially, studies of fandom have often applied typologies of fan behaviors and motivations developed from research on men's sport (Funk et al., 2001; 2002; 2003). In contrast, we take an inductive, qualitative approach informed by sociological perspectives, building from and privileging the voices of fans by drawing upon a large-scale qualitative dataset. Studies of the subjective perceptions and experiences of fans avoid the limits of deductive approaches that may not fully capture fandom in women's sport and enable researchers to avoid replicating easy, stereotypical ideas about gendered fandom, for instance that women are less knowledgeable or passionate fans than men (Dixon, 2015; Jones, 2008; Meân, 2012).

Within existing research on the development of sports fandom, a common finding is that parents, especially fathers, are particularly important in introducing their children to sport, an indication of the persistent cultural links between sport and masculinities (Dixon, 2015; Hyatt et al., 2018; Scraton et al., 1999; 2005; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010). For instance, Dixon's (2013) interviews with 56 men and women fans of men's football in England found that family, and particularly fathers, were reported as the primary influence on club team fandom. However, there were "additional...interactions and consumption experiences which have the potential to initiate fandom" (p. 343), including adult friends, television, and gaming. Mewett and Toffoletti's (2011) study of women fans of Australian Rules football, too, found that beyond family members, friends and television brought people into fandom. Similarly, Parry et al. (2014) surveyed college students in the U.K. and found that fathers were reported to be the major socializing agent, with friends also important. In the U.S., Farrell et al.'s (2011) study of women who held season tickets to a college men's basketball team found the strong influence of men on women's fandom. Women were taught fandom by fathers, husbands, uncles, brothers, and sons, and in line with the broader cultural and structural gendering of sport, these "gatekeepers" assumed that "only men's sport is important and worth watching" (p. 193). Markovits and Albertson (2012) argue that while the "doing" and "following" of sport have no necessary connection among men, playing is of central importance to women "sportistas," or highly devoted, knowledgeable fans of men's sport. Echoing previous research, these women reported their fathers to be most influential to their sports socialization.

What is important to fan development is that progression into greater commitment involves motivations for continued involvement that may be "pleasurable or socially stimulating" (Wann & James, 2019, p. 31). Motivations are important drivers of connection to sport; we cannot fully answer the how of fandom without the why. Empirical research has uncovered several dozen unique motives for sports fandom, from entertainment to spending time with friends and family to feelings of achievement

through the victories of one's team (Wann & James, 2019). Some research in the U.S. has considered the motives of those who consume and follow women's sport, finding that while these are often similar to motives for fandom of men's sport, they can also be distinct, reflecting the unique cultural and material position of women's sport compared to men's, notably constructions of women's difference to men. For instance, Funk et al.'s (2003) research on basketball fans unearthed motivations for fandom unique to women's sports, such as perceptions of "wholesomeness," "family friendliness," and the positive role modeling of female athletes. And Delia's (2020) interviews with fans of U.S. women's professional basketball found fandom motivated by a desire to effect change towards greater gender equality and a belief that women's basketball was a "purer" form of the game.

Turning to women's football, two decades ago, Funk et al. (2001) used a survey to examine the motives of adults who attended games in the opening round of the 1999 Women's World Cup. Top motives for attendance were interest in team, excitement, interest in soccer, vicarious achievement, drama, and support for women's opportunities. Open-ended survey question responses showed four additional motives: players as role models, the financial value of the entertainment, family bonding, and a wholesome environment. In a survey of those attending a U.S. women's national team game in October 1999, Funk et al. (2002) found that the most important motivating factors were role modeling, excitement, drama, and wholesome environment. Guest and Luijten's (2018) mixed-methods study of the NWSL's Portland Thorns found that fan investment was driven by athletic excellence and commitments to gender and sexual equality. And most similar to the current study, Dunn's (2016) interviews with fans attending the 2015 Women's World Cup found that fan engagement and player accessibility, lack of poor on- and off-field behavior, a desire to support women, and appreciation for lesbian and bisexual role model players motivated English fandom, with many contrasting the men's and women's games. English attendees were more recent fans of women's football, with the 2012 London

Olympics introducing some to the sport. In contrast, Americans were longer standing fans and many had also played football as children. For U.S. fans, the competitive successes of the U.S. Women's National Team were a distinct motivating factor for fandom.

These studies are important in illustrating how gender is central to many fans' motives for involvement with women's football, for example through the belief that supporting women's sport advances gender equality. As a counterpoint, however, both Author and Jones (2007) found that adults without children disliked and felt somewhat excluded by marketing that emphasized children as target fans and U.S. women's pro soccer as "family friendly." In this analysis, we extend and advance this body of work by examining the social processes and motivations that underlie women's football fandom among English and U.S. adults who attended the 2019 Women's World Cup.

## **Methods**

### **Data**

Before commencing the study, ethical approval was gained from each author's host institution. We draw on 102 in-depth interviews with English (N= 49) and U.S. (N= 53) adults who attended one or more games of the 2019 Women's World Cup in France. We use the term "fan" to refer to our participants, who could also be called "spectators," as they attended live matches. In-person event attendance may certainly not reflect subjective self-defined fandom or other behavioral expressions of fandom, and a robust literature has debated how best to define and measure sports fandom. This task is complicated by codes of "authenticity" in many sports cultures that define fandom in ways that exclude some as the cost of including others (Author; Toffoletti, 2017; Wann & James, 2019). In fact, Crawford (2003) prefers the term "supporters" to avoid associations with "authentic" fandom altogether. We retain the term "fan," as it reflects our recruitment materials, the self-identification of most participants, and the wide ranging engagement with women's football of many interviewees, from watching matches to buying merchandise

to following or participating in Twitter commentary. In doing so, we do not suggest that “real” women’s football fans are those who purchase tickets for Women’s World Cup matches – given the costs of travel and availability of the tournament on television, most of those who profess belonging in women’s football fandom do not. We chose to recruit from those at the Women’s World Cup because of the intense commercialization and mediatization of this event and because it gave us access to a large and diverse group of attendees. Many in our sample were also fans of domestic league women’s football.

Participants were recruited and interviewed between April 2019 and May 2020. We employed purposeful sampling that involved both criterion sampling following criteria for inclusion determined by the researchers and snowball, or referral, strategies. For criterion sampling, England or U.S. adults (18+) who attended at least one match at the 2019 Women’s World Cup were eligible to participate. Recruitment materials that were jointly created by the authors were posted to Facebook and Twitter and sent via email to journalists and those who work in women’s football. Most participants responded to our social media posts, while ten participants were referred from other participants. The vast majority of interviews were one-to-one but a small number took place with two participants, typically partners wishing to participate together. A subset of U.S. fans who were interviewed prior to the tournament’s kick off in June 2019 were contacted afterwards to ask about their experiences in France. 3 participated in short follow up interviews, while 22 others sent emails describing what the Women’s World Cup had been like for them.

All interviews were undertaken by the authors, along with an English postdoctoral research assistant with expertise in women’s football. Interviews averaged between one to two hours in length, with the shortest 35 minutes and the longest 185 minutes in duration. 60 took place over the phone, while 31 took place over video applications such as Skype, FaceTime, or Google Duo and 11 took place in person. The authors used an interview guide that was created collaboratively to include questions about participants’ lifetime experiences playing and/or following sport, their pathways into and motivations for

women's football fandom, their experiences attending or watching women's football matches, for example. While all participants were asked similar questions, each interview also included unique follow up questions and probes for detail.

Table 1 provides a demographic description of the interview sample. All of the names of participants used in this manuscript are pseudonyms and limited identifiers are presented in order to protect confidentiality. The overwhelming majority of U.S. (85%) and English (74%) participants were cisgender women. About a third of U.S. participants and just under half of English participants were between 20-29 years of age, with most others in their 30's or 40's. 98% of English participants and 79% of U.S. participants described their race or ethnicity as White.

#### **INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

Participants were asked about their educational attainment and current occupation as indicators of socioeconomic status. The sample is highly educated and affluent, on average, a perhaps unsurprising fact given the financial resources required to travel to France for many. All but 4 U.S. participants and 7 English participants had earned at least a 4-year college or university degree (U.S.) or 3-year university degree (U.K.) or were current students at the time of their interview. Nearly all participants were employed in jobs that located them within the middle- or upper-middle classes, such as lawyer, business consultant, or project manager. Only a small number of participants described their trip to the Women's World Cup as a financial strain, although many reported saving money for their trip in advance.

#### **Data Analysis**

Following transcription and the removal of direct identifiers, the authors followed Deterding and Waters' (2021) "flexible" coding method for in-depth interviews, an approach described as ideal for projects with large sample sizes and using structured interview schedules, with both inductive and literature- or theory-driven aims, and where multiple analytic outputs are intended. A first-round index

coding organized larger chunks of data based on topics addressed in the interview schedule, as well as emergent topics of importance to participants. Then, the authors conducted a second-round coding of data within the first-round index codes “development of fandom,” “motivation for fandom,” “background: sports participation,” and “background: sports fandom,” as these had been jointly identified as all codes relevant to the study’s research aims. This stage involved the application of analytic codes to capture the how and why of fan development. Each author coded the data that they had collected and/or that corresponded to their own nationality, as this enabled the greatest understanding of context. To ensure procedural rigor, each author served as a ‘critical friend’ to check progress, indicating a dialogue between authors that was an exercise in reflection on the coding choices made, rather than a search for the “correct” coding (Smith & McGannon, 2018). As Smith and McGannon explain of ‘critical friends,’ “The role is to provide a theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection upon, and exploration of, multiple and alternative explanations and interpretations as these emerged in relation to the data and writing” (p. 23). At both stages of analysis, the researchers coded a portion of data and then brought their work to the other for comparison and review, a process that involved ongoing discussion, revision and renaming of codes to ensure clarity and interpretive consistency, and the joint development and naming of themes. Data analysis also included individual participant memos that summarized answers to the study’s research questions for that participant and included illustrative direct quotations. Both researchers then jointly created and discussed cross-case memos that compared and contrasted participants within and across nationality relative to the themes derived from coding until reaching consensus on the study’s findings.

Four themes were developed that capture pathways into fandom among both U.S. and England fans, while two themes are unique to England fans. Six themes capture motivations for fandom among all participants. Below we present these themes, as well as the percentage of participants within each as

a snapshot of theme prevalence across national context. We include either (England) or (U.S.) after participant quotations to indicate nation.

## **Results**

### **How Fandom Develops**

#### *Women's Sport Mega-Events*

By far the most frequently discussed precipitator of fandom was exposure to women's football mega-events, especially Olympic tournaments and Women's World Cups (91% of U.S. fans, 69% of English fans). Exposure most commonly occurred through television, although some fans had also attended live matches. Although tournaments broadcast live generate interest in many countries, our participants often referenced tournaments that had taken place close by like the 1999 Women's World Cup in the U.S. or the 2012 London Olympics. When asked how she first became a fan of women's football, 21-year old Chrissie (England) replied, "By watching it in the Olympics, 2012. Yeah, because I didn't really hear of it before then, it wasn't televised that I can remember." Chrissie recalled being "intrigued" by the tournament and sought out opportunities to watch women's football afterwards. As she described, "Obviously when you saw the Great Britain team you thought like, wow they are actually doing something. Why is it not being shown, why is the women's game not being shown? And that was just the point of thinking I need to find where they play, or if they've got any local teams around where I can go and watch them."

Similar to Chrissie, 24-year old Anna (England) reported a vague awareness as a child that English women played elite football but said, "I never really was able to watch it; it wasn't on telly then. There wasn't anywhere to go. So it wasn't until probably the 2011 World Cup when I could watch it, replays on YouTube, that I could start watching it." Anna vividly remembered Abby Wambach's late-match header against Brazil to send that quarterfinal into penalty kicks and noted, "I've just been

watching since then... I'd watch it on TV all the time and then I watched 2015 World Cup and that's when, after that I started going [to live matches]." At 30, Rochelle (U.S.) was a little older than either Chrissie or Anna but had also first become aware of and interested in women's football through watching a mega-event. Rochelle detailed a process of watching Women's World Cups on TV and gradually learning more about the U.S. team's players and history. She said, "I remember the '99'ers, which I feel like is like a really iconic year in women's soccer. But I was watching that game at home and I remember watching the whole game. I remember Bri Scurry saving the PK [penalty kick]" Rochelle also watched the 2011 and 2015 tournaments. She was pulled in to fan attachment by the emotional force of the competition and a growing knowledge of the players. As she explained, "I remember the final in 2011 and losing that final and watching us lose and feeling heartbroken. Just feeling like we could've won that. PK's are just really hard to lose."

### ***Playing Football***

A second factor that fostered fandom was the experience of playing football (42% of U.S. fans, 16% of England fans). While many participants had played on an organized football team, only some linked their playing with their fandom. Importantly, this pathway existed only among women; having been a woman player meant an interest in the women's game that motivated finding opportunities to watch and follow it. Thus, links between playing and following relied on an understanding of the women's game as distinct to the men's. 24-year old Abigail (U.S.) had played football from the age of five, joining a private club team a few years later and participating in the sport as her only "extracurricular activity" through high school. "I remember just playing, growing up as a girl playing soccer...I don't remember learning about that team [1999 World Cup], but it was just part of the DNA of being a female soccer player at that time was this awareness of Mia Hamm, and Kristine Lilly, and Brandi Chastain and those were the figureheads for us. I had that fascination especially with those

players the same way that everyone else my age playing soccer did.” While Abigail’s fandom waned during her college years as she stopped playing and was exploring other interests, she connected with the sport again shortly after graduation, feeling like she was rediscovering a part of herself. As Abigail explained, “It took me by surprise how much it mattered again. Coming back to the sport for the fan side of things. It was a reconnection with that, I guess, part of my personality and that aspect of my life.”

Clare (England), a 27-year old woman, also tied her experiences as a player to her interest in watching women’s football. While Abigail had sought out fandom because of the strength of her identity as a player, Clare’s playing led to fandom through outreach to youth players on the part of elite women’s football, a phenomenon also true for multiple U.S. women fans. When asked how she had become a fan, Clare noted,

I guess just because I played it... I didn’t really...probably not until, you know, secondary school really did I realise that there was even an England women’s team...And then I remember, when we were a Centre of Excellence, Hope Powell [former England player and manager] came and delivered a session. And, you know, she was – the session was great, and she was brutal, and I remember thinking, *wow, like, other people do play at a good level*. And then, yeah, I guess, from there we, kind of – we went to – I remember they did a couple of the women’s FA Cup Finals...So we went every year and that was probably the biggest thing, or the first big memory I have of going to watch women’s football.

### ***Recruited into Fandom***

26% of U.S. fans and 18% of English fans were recruited into women’s football fandom by others, typically girls or women with a strong interest in women’s football. Notably, this included just under half of the men in the total sample (N= 9). Some fans, like 46-year old Keith (England), described “reverse socialization” (Hyatt et al., 2018) from daughters who played football. Keith attended local women’s matches and watched women’s football online with his 14-year old daughter, an avid player who found elite women players “inspiring.” Of his women’s football fandom, Keith said, “It’s partly to do with the fact that it’s a bonding thing with my daughter, so we’ve got something, because I don’t live with her. So it’s like we’ve got something to talk about always and, you know, it’s our thing...But I

think I do actually like it anyway, so yeah I think it's pretty important." Other fans, like 35-year old Ana (U.S.), were brought into fandom by friends. Ana had never played football and had little knowledge of the women's game. She said, "One of my best friends was in Florida and she's been trying to get me to watch any sort of soccer for years. It's one of her favorite things...she just pushed me to watch it. I agreed to go to a game and eventually did go to a game." Of that game, Ana said, "I was pretty hooked. I've done now quite a lot more travelling to see the games than I ever expected to." She had become a season ticket holder for the NWSL's North Carolina Courage and travelled to Germany in 2018 with her friend specifically to watch women's football.

### ***Online Spaces/Digital Technologies***

Additionally, just under a quarter of fans reported that their fandom developed through online spaces including websites, streaming services, and social media (23% of U.S. fans, 22% of English fans). 55-year old Andrea (U.S.) had first become a fan in the early 1990's. "That was around the time when the Internet actually started taking off in the early 90's," she explained, "And there were a couple of listservs devoted to soccer and one of them was women's soccer listserv. And so I got on that...and that's where I started hearing more about the [national] team." For some of the youngest fans, their interest in women's football began with social media sites or applications such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. Felicity, a 25-year old English woman, had been aware of the existence of the English women's national team but only became a fan of this team and the domestic Women's Super League once she stumbled across a digital platform called *This Fan Girl*. As she explained,

I became aware of that and I was like oh my god there's other women that like football and they're my age, this is mad! Through that, I started making some really good friendships and it was the first time I could bond with other women over football and it was the most enlightening and refreshing experience I have ever had. We started going to games and the great thing is you can build up your knowledge quite quickly...It doesn't take long to be someone who knows about women's football.

### ***Men's Club Adds a Women's Team***

Among English fans alone, fandom of a professional men's club extended to their women's side when a women's club was added (27% of English fans). Additionally, some English fans (10%) reported that their fandom began when they attended matches of a local women's team out of attachment to the place where they lived. Diane (England), in her 40's, described herself as a "football mad" fan of the men's Manchester United team, an attachment that had been in place since childhood. She knew there was a women's national team but "couldn't have picked players." Diane's fandom of women's football began when Manchester United added a women's team and she first watched a televised match. As she recounted,

United scored with two or three minutes to go if I'm not mistaken. And at that point what surprised me was that we all jumped up. And I thought, hang on; I didn't think I'd have this level of care. And something just triggered at that moment and when it was just the two of us [Diane and her husband] afterwards, right, when's the next game? And within that moment I realised that I gave a damn about this team.

## **Why Fandom Develops**

### ***Social Connection***

The predominant motivation for fandom was social connection, whether to women players (68% of U.S. fans, 53% of English fans) or to friends and family members (36% of U.S. fans, 27% of English fans). Many fans argued that women players were accessible, for instance by giving autographs after games, and had compelling personal stories, often ones that they communicated via social media. 37-year old Russell (England), for instance, said that, "I think you're a lot closer to the players in the women's game, not just physically but you see them waiting behind and signing autographs and doing selfies and stuff like that and they're a lot more active on social media and things like that, than what you would get from all the male players that are heavily media trained." Gina (U.S.), in her 20's, also reflected,

I thought a lot about women's soccer fans and why I'm a fan and why other people aren't. I think what occurred to me is that part of it was the story lines for me. I've tried to watch men's soccer,

but I just don't have an entry point. I don't know any of them. So for me, it was like feeling a personal connection to a couple players and wanting to know what was going on with them. So I started following them really closely.

Women's football fandom also helped some to solidify existing relationships or build new ones with other fans. Simon (England), a 50-year old man who had become a fan following the interests of his football-playing daughter, saw fandom as a family interest. He said, "I mean the last year, it's been great because it's something we do as a family." And U.S. fan Kim (age 33) said, "I like that it's something I can do with my friends and a common point of interest to chat about. We chat about a lot of things, but that's definitely been a big way I've stayed connected with people, talking about soccer." In fact, Kim had planned a trip to the Women's World Cup with two of her closest friends who she talked about football with daily through a group chat.

### ***Gender Equality***

Women's football fandom was also motivated by a commitment to gender equality. The theme we call "Fighting for Change" expresses many fans' perception that gender inequality is rife in football and needs to be actively challenged, including through fandom (62% of U.S. fans, 22% of English fans). Fans supported the opportunity and empowerment for women that women's football represented, perceived themselves as part of a battle for equality in society, and wanted to expand the commercial growth of the women's game through their presence and purchases. As Jane, a U.S. woman in her 40's said, "We kind of set ourselves a goal in my household last year of putting our money where our mouth was in terms of supporting women's sports." 47-year old Cameron (U.S.) called himself a "social justice warrior," noting that, "I know women's sports in general is underrepresented by the media. And I think the WNBA has been around for twenty years now and it's breaking through especially...But between women's soccer and probably college volleyball, it's going crazy! I think those are ways [watching] for people to really find value in women athletes, female athletes." And Felicity (England) concluded, "I

think there is an element of gender equality in women's football because the more exposure the public have to women's football, it will have an impact on gender equality, breaking down barriers and potentially reducing sexism in football in general."

### ***Entertainment***

Factors related to football as an entertainment product were also a motivation for fandom (32% of U.S. fans, 43% of English fans). Women's football matches were affordable and accessible, with a known, 2-hour demand on time, and provided chances to learn the strategies and tactics of the sport. Short time demand was a notable perceived advantage among U.S. fans, with implicit contrast to sports like gridiron football or basketball where games extend several hours and frequently stop for televised advertising breaks. "Soccer's great," 45-year old U.S. fan Bonnie argued, "It's two hours. You know when it starts, you know when it ends with the exception of playoff games, you know for extra time." Similarly, 20-year old Harriet (England) liked the ease of purchasing tickets for women's matches. She said, "A lot of the time, you can turn up on the day and buy a ticket. It requires a lot less planning. You don't have to turn up an hour in advance to make sure you can just get in."

### ***Inclusivity of Fan Communities***

Fandom was also motivated by the inclusivity of women's football cultures (21% of U.S. fans, 39% of English fans). Women's football was experienced as welcoming to women, children, and queer fans; this culture commonly contrasted against men's football fan cultures. While several U.S. fans like Bonnie called women's football "family friendly," English fans were particularly likely to contrast the atmosphere at women's matches from that of men's, with many finding women's football to be a "safer" environment with less vulgarity, drunkenness, and physical aggression than they sometimes experienced at a men's match. U.K. men's football culture was perceived as "daunting" because of the "hooligans" (Francesca), "angry" and "hostile" (Harriet). "But when we went to the women's games it was just so

inclusive. And everyone talked to everyone,” Amelia contrasted. U.S. fans were somewhat more likely to note an acceptance of lesbian and gay fans, perhaps a partial result of the number of publicly “out” lesbian players in U.S. women’s elite football. For example, 27-year old Elizabeth (U.S.) said, “Part of the motivation for what got me more into it as well is like, I was aware that I’m gay and I was aware that some of the players were also gay. Around that Olympics was when Megan Rapinoe and Lori Lindsey came out and I was like oh, these are like really cool role models. And there weren’t that many out people then. It was a big factor in why I was so drawn to the team.” Andrew, a 35-year old man (U.S.) concluded, “There is a really cool atmosphere of inclusion and welcoming and diversity in this community that I have not experienced even remotely in any other kind of sporting culture that I have been around, and I have gone to a lot of games in my life.”

### ***Athletic Successes***

Finally, and mostly among U.S. fans, an appreciation of athleticism and competitive victory motivated fandom (74% of U.S. fans, 6% of English fans). This finding can be understood in the context of the U.S. women’s national team’s record of Women’s World Cup and Olympic wins and number one FIFA ranking. Certainly, English fans discussed their enjoyment watching the athletic talent of women players. 29-year old Gaby (England), for instance, said that, “I think growing up and then having played at the highest level against pretty much most of these players I think I have like a newfound appreciation for them and what they could do. Yes I looked at them as athletes, I was, god I played against you, you are actually unreal!” However, among U.S. fans, an appreciation of athletic skill was tied to the U.S. team’s winning record. As Brandon, a 30-year old man (U.S.), argued, “I think also just the quality of the game play is really good. I was actually talking about this with a few people just randomly that we met at the World Cup this year, but it’s like the tactics and the skill level of the women is really high.

And I think they play a really sound game that's fun to watch. It's always fun to watch a team that's winning.”

## **Discussion**

This study draws on a novel and large-scale dataset of qualitative interviews with adults in England and the United States who attended the 2019 Women's World Cup (N= 102) to examine how and why fandom develops in women's football. In contrast to quantitative studies that catalog the prevalence of certain defined motivations for fandom, ours is an inductive analysis of fan experiences and attachments, a methodological advantage given that existing measures may fail to fully capture how and why fans are attached to women's sport, rather than men's (Delia, 2020; Funk et al., 2001; Funk et al., 2003). Additionally, we compare across two national contexts that are similarly characterized by the growing commercialization, professionalization, and mediatization of women's football, yet also distinct in the cultural positioning of the women's game and in its elite organizational structures (Author; Dunn, 2014; 2016; Markovits, 2019). While our findings show similarities with previous studies of fan development and motivation in men's sport, we also find differences, notably at the point of initial awareness.

To summarize, we find four experiences among both English and U.S. participants that generate awareness of and interest in women's football. Two of these, exposure to women's football mega-events and online women's football communities, are clearly related to the role of media in sparking fandom. While mainstream media outlets persistently offer little coverage of women's sport, including football, mediatization via online, digital, and social media is on the rise, with evident implications for both visibility and interest (Author; Coche, 2014). Matches that were televised or available through online streaming, presented to the audience as exciting and competitive, generated interest among many of those who later became invested fans, and online and social media spaces enhanced participants'

knowledge and provided opportunities to discuss the women's game. There are certainly valid concerns about the increased commercialization and mediatization of women's football, including whether the utility of social media for women's football is attenuated by its continuing absence from mainstream outlets and how the benefits of commercialization will be controlled and distributed. Still, commercial and media successes are important to improving the stability of women's elite leagues, as well as the financial standing of women footballers, and expanded, respectful media coverage should continue to be a central goal for the sport moving forward. As media coverage of women's mega events was the single greatest precipitator of fandom, opportunities exist during Women's World Cup and Olympic tournaments to also provide information about domestic women's leagues and teams to further grow the fan base.

Other socializing influences on fandom included having played football for women and being recruited into fandom by others, mostly by girls and women. While some research has found that young women's playing a sport does not necessarily lead to them to follow this sport later in life (Author; Farrell et al., 2011; Markovits & Albertson, 2012), our study, similar to Markovits and Albertson's (2012), suggests that for many women who *are* fans of women's sport, their fandom began with childhood, adolescent, and even young adult experiences as a player. This pathway seems most true for highly identified and engaged fans, which Markovits and Albertson (2012) term "sportistas," a group that we likely capture as well by including those who expended resources of both time and money to attend a tournament that they could have watched on television.

What is striking in these findings is the near-total absence of fan socialization within families of origin. Many studies of fan socialization locate the development of fan attachments with family members, and with men in particular. Reflecting the "masculine" coding of sport as a social institution and the role of sport in generating social capital and cultivating masculine identities among men, men

are often the “gatekeepers” of sports fandom and work to inculcate their allegiances in others (Dixon, 2013; Farrell et al., 2011; Mewett & Toffoletti, 2011). Our research adds an important counterpoint: women may be the primary “gatekeepers” of fandom for women’s sports. Among those recruited into fandom, for instance, all were brought in by either girls whose participation made them want to find opportunities to watch or by women friends or family members who were already fans. Additionally, women’s football fandom developed largely among our participants as adults; while childhood experiences playing football became relevant later on to some, the majority of those we interviewed came to women’s football in adulthood, sometimes almost accidentally when they stumbled upon a live broadcast or made a new friend at work who was already a fan.

The primary distinction we found across national context was the relevance of both men’s professional football teams that added a women’s team and place attachments among English fans alone. These findings undoubtedly reflect the cultural and organizational dominance of men’s football in the English sporting landscape and the strength of English football fan attachments to men’s clubs within their localities. While interest in U.S. men’s Major League Soccer (MLS) has grown since the league’s inception in the mid 1990’s, attendances lag well behind those at professional gridiron football and basketball games and the sport of soccer still occupies a comparatively marginal position in sports culture (Author). This finding also should be understood in light of organizational differences whereby women’s elite football in England is organized under the purview of men’s football, while U.S. women’s football has been organized mostly outside of men’s leagues. Additionally, among the six motivations for fandom that we find, one, an appreciation of athletic talent, also illustrates cross-national variation. While athletic skill was noted by both U.S. and English interviewees, the U.S. women’s team’s history of competitive victories, including in the 2015 and 2019 Women’s World Cups, was highly enjoyable to many U.S. fans, with some framing their fandom as a love of winning.

Other motives for fandom illustrate a widespread perception and experience of women's football as distinct from men's football and other men's sports. Women's football was *entertaining* as a supposedly "pure" variant of the sport, as well as in its known time commitment, and was more *inclusive* of women, children, and queer fans than men's sport. Further, women's football players were more *accessible* and *personable* than men and supporting women's football evidenced a commitment to *equality* of women athletes with men. As Author has argued, constructions of gender difference have long been central within efforts to market and sell women's professional football. Simultaneously, women footballers and fans have strategically endorsed ideas of difference, embracing them as a unique source of value and reward for women's football (Author). These constructions use men's sport as an inherent point of comparison and exist within the continued financial and cultural dominance of men's sport (Author; Pielichaty, 2020; Toffoletti, 2017; Williams, 2007; 2013). Yet paradoxically, as Delia (2020) notes, growing commercialization of women's sport is likely to erode many of the supposed bases for the superiority of women's sport over men's. For example, the hypercommercialization of women's football may result in women players being less accessible to fans, and successful campaigns for pay equality may eliminate concerns over inequality that animate many current fans. It remains to be seen whether and how pathways into and experiences of women's football fandom shift with continued commercial growth. What happens to fandom when or if women's elite football more closely resembles men's football, or men's elite sports?

What we find in both the how and why of fandom is that while some experiences of and reasons for following women's football were true for men and women alike, women found value and importance in following women athletes *as women*. Women fans felt a connection to women players based on their shared gender and a sense of collective struggle against the restrictions of sexism, both in sport and in society, that they had personally faced. For many women, then, fandom expressed a deep sense of

identification where their own sense of self was connected to professional women athletes and what they were perceived to represent. Our sample of adult fans attending Women's World Cup games is comprised mostly of women; while this may reflect selection bias, some research suggests that women's football fanbases, as well as audiences for other women's sports, are predominately female (Author; Dunn 2014; 2016; Guest & Luijten, 2018). Our findings suggest that women's football holds unique attractions for women, though there are certainly many highly invested men fans as well. Of course, men also construct their own gender and fan identities in relation to shared gender with men athletes (Chiweshe, 2014; Markovits & Albertson, 2012; Parry et al., 2014).

While not a central part of our presentation of findings, it is undoubtedly the case that the largely White and affluent participants in this study speak from positions of both racial and class privilege, and our findings should be understood in this light. Beyond the resources needed to stream women's games or attend live women's matches, racial and socioeconomic disparities in girls' and women's participation in football may make playing and recruitment pathways into fandom less available to people of color and the poor and working classes (Author; Scraton et al., 2005). And in both national contexts, the gendered meanings attached to women's football are also classed and racialized, with the result that White middle-class women's interests and experiences are often centered. *Inclusivity* certainly motivates fandom among many, but it is less than clear that inclusion extends beyond (White, middle-class) groups with diverse gender and sexual identities (Author).

There are other limits to this research that provide opportunities for future investigations. Notably, ours is a cross-sectional analysis that relies on retrospective reports of fan development. While we expect these reports to be accurate, especially given the recency of fan development among many, our data cannot "see" or trace fan interests and attachments as they develop. We also consider those fans who attended at least one Women's World Cup match, a group who may have little in common with the

women's football fans who did not. By recruiting primarily via social media posts and referral, including from journalists working in women's football, we disproportionately reached those who have social media accounts, who follow women's football closely, and those within our own and journalists' networks and time zones. Finally, we include fans across two nations, finding a comparative lens useful in unpacking fan identities and processes within these contexts. However, as professionalization, commercialization, and mediatization continue apace in women's football across the world, more expansive and comparative future projects will be essential for capturing both similarities and differences in fan development, motivation, and experience over time.

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