

Women's following of men's professional sport in Canada: Evidence of the 'feminization' of sports fandom and women as omnivorous sports consumers?

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Abstract

Women sports fans have been substantially understudied compared to their male counterparts. While a growing number of studies seek to redress this, there remains a stark absence of quantitative approaches that would allow investigations regarding patterns of women's sporting consumption and historical trends in the potential growth of this fandom. Using large-scale survey data from Canada from 1990 through to 2015, and employing quantitative methods of latent class and regression analysis, this study seeks to redress these issues by testing the 'feminization' thesis of increased women's sporting fandom over the past three decades. In addition, we consider whether women's fandom has become increasingly 'omnivorous' over this time period and the nature of this consumption today. Results show support for the feminization thesis. These findings are significant as through the use of quantitative methodologies we evidence the narrowing gender gaps in professional sports following between men and women, and women's increasingly omnivorous consumption of sports. However, we find substantial gender gaps and inequalities in omnivorism by which the evidence suggests increased socio-economic and cultural barriers to omnivorous consumption of sport for women. We suggest that these women omnivores may be able to utilize their sporting knowledge in an instrumental way for benefits in various social settings, especially workplaces. It is hoped that this article will pave the way for further quantitative studies on women sports fans across different contexts.

Introduction

This article examines women's consumption of professional men's sports leagues in Canada. Sport has traditionally been a profoundly 'male preserve' (Pitti, 2019), and there is correspondingly a lack of research on women sports fans (Pope, 2017; Toffoletti, 2017). In recent years, the relationship between women and sports fandom has undergone significant

changes and global sport has perhaps offered women newly visible roles as consumers and fans in the global sporting economy (Toffoletti, 2017). This is reflected in the growing body of work that is developing in the area of women sports fans (e.g. Dunn, 2014; Esmonde *et al* 2015; Jones, 2008; Pope, 2017; Toffoletti, 2017). Pope (2017) theorizes that there has been a ‘feminization’ of sports fandom from the 1990s onwards, with increased opportunities for women to become involved in sport as fans, meaning that women now make up a sizeable component of sports followers. However, most existing studies on women’s sports following draw on qualitative methods (Lagaert and Roose, 2018), making it difficult to ‘measure’ any changes in the numbers of women followers. Also, with the exception of Sveinson and Hoerber’s (2015; 2016) qualitative research on women fans of men’s Canadian football, there is a lack of research on women Canadian fans.

This article offers new insights by furthering and developing the slowly growing corpus of research on women fans, thus challenging dominant ideologies and gendered assumptions that sports fandom is not an important part of women’s leisure lives. It also makes one contribution towards changing the dearth of research on sports fandom in Canada. Although sports fandom plays a prominent role in Canadian society and there is a breadth to the sporting landscape in North America that is not matched in other areas of the world, research on sports followers is generally absent (Gemar, 2019b, 2020a, 2021). The originality of this article also lies in our use of quantitative research methodologies to examine women fans. Most existing studies on women fans draw exclusively on qualitative research methodologies (Lagaert and Roose, 2018). The article also offers the first study to test theories of the ‘feminization’ of sport in the Canadian context by drawing on historical data and thus contributing new insights into women’s long-term consumption patterns, as well as providing the first analysis of the styles and consumption patterns of women in Canada. Finally, the article theoretically addresses contemporary issues in the study of the cultural omnivore and omnivorous consumption patterns through the relatively ignored cultural domain of sport.

Our analysis of women’s consumption of men’s professional sports in Canada draws on the feminization of sports fandom, which we extend to also include women’s omnivorous and voracious following. This approach informs our research questions. First, we seek to assess how many women follow a major professional (men’s) sports league in Canada. We also examine this number over time to assess any patterns of feminization in this domain. Second, we ask, what are the styles and consumption patterns of women’s sports following in

Canada? To answer this question, we assess which sports leagues and combinations of sports leagues Canadian women follow. Considered within this assessment is how closely they follow these leagues. Therefore, we are able to address both breadth and depth of any patterns of omnivorousness. We suggest that determining if women constitute omnivorous sports fans and if this figure has increased over time can also be used as further evidence of the feminization of sports fandom, in addition to the numbers of women who follow a major professional men's sports league in Canada, as this also represents increased opportunities for women to become involved in sport as fans. Finally, in order to fully understand these patterns of women's professional sports following, we analyse if different groups of women sports consumers are socio-economically stratified or demographically differentiated, or not, and the meaning of these results.

The Feminization of Sports Fandom Thesis

It is important to emphasise that women do have a history of sports fandom – even if they formed a small percentage of the sports crowd in earlier years (Lewis, 2009) – so women's fandom is by no means exclusively a recent phenomenon. However, although the sports stadium can operate as one of the few spaces in which men can still be 'real' men (Antonowicz *et al.*, 2020), it has been proposed that there have been increased opportunities for women to become involved in sport as fans in recent years. Drawing on research in the UK, Pope (2017) argues that in contemporary society there has been a 'feminization' of sports fandom, with more opportunities for women to become involved in sport as fans, meaning that women now make up an integral component of the sports crowd. In their important work on women's fandom in Central and Eastern Europe, Jakubowska *et al.*, (2021) suggest that the process of 'feminization' is 'sociologically fascinating', as women's admission into the world of men has mainly been studied in regard to politics and the workplace. However, the world of fandom is very different to these arenas; in the case of football fandom, for example, there is a strong sense of brotherhood and togetherness that plays an important role amongst supporters; fandom culture has a strongly homosocial nature, with strong male bonds that may also involve objectifying women; and fandom is also entertainment by nature. In this section, we offer an overview of this 'feminization' thesis, which we use as one of the theoretical underpinnings for our article.

Pope (2017) uses the term ‘feminization’ to refer positively to the opening up of more opportunities for women to become active sports spectators today in the context of the UK. She argues that this process of ‘feminization’ began in the 1990s and theorizes that this can be attributed to two key factors. Firstly, major transformations (from 1960s) have occurred in women’s lives in the West which have enhanced women’s opportunities to engage in a range of leisure activities, including sports fandom. In Western Europe and North America, the women’s liberation movements of second wave feminism led to major changes in women’s lives (Charles, 2000), including a ‘gender revolution’ of increased access to workplace, education, and fertility autonomy (England, 2010).

Some feminists further claim a ‘genderquake’ since the 1990s (Wilkinson, 1999: 44), which led to ‘a fundamental shift in power and values between men and women’. Thus, arguably, this period brought about a major structural shift which has reoriented the balance of power between the sexes, consequently allowing more women greater control over their lives. Intersectionality has been important in showing how gender overlaps with multiple identities and categories of exclusion, including race, class and sexuality (Hines, 2015). However, whilst acknowledging that these changes will have impacted upon women to varying degrees, Pope (2017: 75) suggests that: ‘these major transformations that have increased the power of women to make choices in the work and leisure spheres are likely to have allowed more women to *choose* to engage in leisure activities that had previously been more exclusively for men’s leisure, including sports fandom’.

Secondly, it is argued that major changes have occurred in professional sport, including safer stadium spaces, improved facilities and in the context of the UK, this has also included the move to all all-seater stadia in the top divisions of men’s football (soccer). Such changes are argued to have created a more welcoming environment for women, making it more likely that they will choose to become sports fans. These changes have roughly spanned the same period of time as the transformations occurring in women’s lives from the 1990s. For example, in the UK there have been major improvements to professional sports venues from the 1990s as a result of changes implemented after the Hillsborough Stadium disaster of 1989 in football and rugby union’s move to professionalism in 1995. In Canada, this period also saw the building of new prominent stadia, such as Rogers Centre, which still houses the Toronto Blue Jays. Other prominent stadia were built in the late 1970s and through the 1980s, some of which underwent renovations in the decade of the 2000s and are still in use.

Pope (2017) suggests that these changes have also coincided with increased media and social media coverage of sports, both in its availability and its focus on ‘celebrity’ players. These changes in access and presentation of sport entertainment may have introduced these sports to some new women (and men) fans. The profile of sport has increased exponentially during this period; the media’s glitzy presentational styles and focus on ‘personalities’ has meant that there is generally more ‘glamour’ around sport and its ‘celebrity’ players, and this is argued to have contributed to the ‘feminization’ of sports fandom, ‘opening up’ sport to some new women fans.

This media expansion has only proliferated further in the most recent decades. For example, in the US, the Nielson Sports 2017 Year in Sports Media Report showed that there had been a 55% increase in the hours of sports content consumed since 2002, as a result of more programming and more platforms on which to consume sport (e.g. tablets, smartphones). 41% of sports fans were also shown to regularly engage with social media and 26% of sports fans sometimes used this platform, evidencing the importance of using social media for fans connecting to clubs and teams and building online communities. In Canada, 55% of the country reported watching or listening to sports content at least once per week and 29% watch sports every day or nearly every day (Rody, 2017). While traditional TV still dominates in Canada, 22% of sports fans have streamed online sports matches and 20% identify generally as ‘cord-cutters’ [those ending relationships with traditional TV packages and migrating to streaming services] (Rody, 2017). Since then, streaming has only increased, growing year-on-year, and with data showing women much more likely to be online streamers than men (Rody, 2019).

As a result of these changes, Pope (2017) suggests that women now make up a fairly substantial proportion of fans. For example, women football (soccer) fans have been estimated to make up 26% of fans at live Premier League matches and 30% of fans who follow or watch the Premier League on TV or online (Premier League, 2016, Global Web Index, 2019). In some countries, this ‘feminization’ is perhaps further along – for example, in Australia, women make up 40% of fans at Australian Football League matches (Toffoletti, 2017), and 44% of the National Football League fanbase in recent years (Forbes, 2012). Lagaert and Roose’s (2018) research shows varying levels by country; their findings demonstrate that gender gaps in sport event attendance are smaller in countries with higher

levels of gender equality so access to sport events is context related and affected by macro-level gender equality. This makes Canada an especially interesting case study focus for our research – a country which has comparatively high levels of gender equality (United Nations, 2018) but which, to date, has been neglected in academic research on women fans.

One critique of Pope's (2017) 'feminization' thesis is perhaps that this is too reliant on qualitative data and very recent statistics on the numbers of women fans involved in men's sport. This is an issue for much of the existing research on women sports fans; by drawing almost exclusively on qualitative research methods it is not possible to 'measure' patterns of women's sports following over time. Meier *et als* (2017) quantitative research on feminization trends examines the patterns of women's team identification and TV viewing of the men's national soccer team in Germany, finding increased team identification but not increased consumption by women. With the exception of this study using data from 2002-2014 on one sporting team, no research to date has 'tested' the 'feminization' thesis. This article offers quantitative data across three decades, and multiple sports, to assess the extent to which (if any) there has been a 'feminization' of sports fandom in Canada. Sport is often considered to operate as one of the 'last bastions' of male dominance (Pitti, 2019), so these findings are significant to examine the extent to which opportunities to follow sports have 'opened up' over time for Canadian women and the extent to which this male dominance has been challenged (or not). If there is indeed a 'feminization' of professional sports following in Canada, then this may also lead to women following a greater number of sports and doing so more frequently or voraciously. Therefore, the following section introduces work on the 'cultural omnivore' and the concept of voraciousness in consumption.

The Cultural Omnivore and Voraciousness

Studies in the US observed that those of elevated social position were also likely to consume forms of culture that were more characteristic of other (lower) social positions. This led to the coining of the phrase 'cultural omnivore' by Richard Peterson (1992) and colleagues (Peterson and Simkus, 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996). This eclecticism in consumption, however, was necessarily limited to those in privileged social positions because of the need to also necessarily access, both economically and culturally, elite cultural forms. Those consuming a more restricted basket of cultural products were termed 'univores' in contrast (Peterson and Simkus, 1992). These univores not only consumed a less varied group of

cultural forms in terms of status, but even within the same relative status locations consuming a limited number of forms by which they could differentiate themselves from others in similar social positions (Peterson and Simkus, 1992:170). Indeed, media consumption of sport, as a prominent area of sports following more often identified with lower levels of cultural capital, has been found to be a prominent field of class-based differentiation (Lenartowicz, 2016).

Peterson's studies dealt with a type of 'intra-domain' omnivorism within the domain of music, which is also the type we address in this paper. If addressing 'inter-domain' omnivorism across different cultural domains, consumption of one professional sports league may suffice as representative of this cultural domain within an omnivorous consumption pattern. We also consider a depth dimension of consumption, which is something that has been little considered in studies of cultural consumption or the cultural omnivore. It is a dimension, however, that can get from the *what* to *how* of cultural consumption that is reminiscent and highly relevant to these kind of debates regarding the nature of omnivorousness and the stratification of cultural behaviour more broadly. Previous measures of omnivorousness have primarily focused on the breadth of cultural taste and practices (Sullivan and Katz-Gerro, 2007). Yet a frequency or intensity dimension of depth can illuminate in greater detail levels of differentiation in consumption patterns and profiles. This depth dimension has previously been studied as a temporal dimension, i.e. how frequently an individual engages in x cultural practice (Katz-Gerro and Sullivan, 2010; Sullivan and Katz-Gerro, 2007). Thus, 'a voracious cultural consumer feels comfortable with switching and constantly making choices between activities, which s/he engages in for brief periods' (Sullivan and Katz-Gerro, 2007: 125). This element of omnivorism represents a type of instrumentalism and mirrors Swidler's (2001) description of a cultural repertoire, by which cultural elements can be used and drawn upon to inform behaviour and decision making, ideas that could also be seen to echo elements of Bourdieu's (1986) embodied cultural capital. Although, as Atkinson (2011) suggests, most omnivores reach a point of saturation at which point they are only able to fluently discuss a few, in his case, musical genres, voracious omnivorism may reflect an 'avoidance of immersion' (Sullivan and Katz-Gerro, 2007: 125) in order to maximise cultural competencies.

Regarding voracious cultural consumers, however, Sullivan and Katz-Gerro (2007: 133) argue that this voracity is a 'separate but related' element of cultural consumption,

particularly because their results show that high status groups consume a broader range of cultural products and consume them more frequently. They conclude that ‘since voraciousness seems neither to be about monetary access to leisure goods and services nor about the overall availability of leisure time, we argue that its significant feature is its role as a status marker, a cultural boundary, and a sign of social exclusion’ (Sullivan and Katz-Gerro: 133). Finding that a prominent exclusionary cultural boundary here is a type of ‘multi-cultural capital’ (Sullivan and Katz-Gerro: 133), it is fair to assert that the first comprehensive analysis of voracity in omnivorous profiles falls on the side that more closely resembles a new type of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) than anything else. In a subsequent study, Katz-Gerro and Sullivan (2010) found that men tend to be more omnivorous than women, although the most omnivorous consumers for both genders are the highest in socio-economic status. Because women face less and more fragmented leisure time (Mattingly and Bianchi, 2003), they conclude that:

Voraciousness is related more strongly to the discussion of constraints on women’s leisure (especially constraints on the leisure of women with low social status), while the literature on omnivorousness and cultural consumption in general focuses more on the participation in highbrow cultural activities of higher-status women, and their role in cultural maintenance. (Katz-Gerro and Sullivan, 2010)

This is mostly a reflection of the unequal distribution of non-employment labour for women and men. It is also claimed that sports following and knowledge of professional sports can serve as a discriminating factor for Canadian women inside employment conditions. In her Toronto case study of a corporate workplace environment, Bonnie Erickson (1996) argues that:

Sports discussions help to build cooperative ties across class levels. But, at the same time, women and foreign-born people know much less about sports, so they are marginalized in the informal networks that both keep companies integrated and help further individual careers. (P. 223)

It is the related dimensions of feminization, omnivorism and voraciousness in relation to women’s consumption of men’s professional sports that we seek to probe with this research.

Data and Methods

The data on women's following of men's professional sports used in this research comes primarily from a cross-sectional 2015 nationally representative online omnibus survey. It was carried out through a partnership between the private research firm Vision Critical and Professor Reginald Bibby at the University of Lethbridge. All responses from men are excluded from the sample, as are those between 18 and 24 years of age to allow for the highest level of education to be reached to allow for the most efficacious analysis of this crucial variable. With these exclusions applied, the total size of the sample included in the analysis of this paper is 1,850. The characteristics of this sample can be seen in Table 2. The relative frequencies for the sports following variables appear in Table 3. The survey asked respondents how closely they follow each of the professional sports leagues of National Hockey League (NHL-ice hockey), National Basketball Association (NBA), National Football League (NFL-Gridiron football), Canadian Football League (CFL-Gridiron football), Major League Baseball (MLB), and Major League Soccer (MLS), with response options 'very closely', 'fairly closely', 'not very closely', and 'not at all closely'.

We recognize that our results draw on the self-assessment of respondents regarding the extent to which they follow a certain league. A wide body of research, especially in the field of sport psychology, has debated how best to define fandom and how this can be 'measured' most effectively. Wann and Branscombe (1993), for example, originally developed the Sport Spectator Identification Scale to assist in the assessment of spectators levels of commitment or identification with a team. Wann and James (2019) also suggest it is important to distinguish between *sports fans* as individuals who are interested in and follow a sport and *sports spectators* who witness a sporting event in person but have little interest in identifying with a favourite team or player. However, in this paper we use the term 'fans' and our findings present 'fan groups'. We do not find distinctions between 'fans' and 'spectators' helpful, as arguably they serve to perpetuate hierarchies in fandom, whereby certain 'types' of fans (including women) and certain behaviours are seen as less 'authentic' than others.

Insert Table 1 here

We also utilize historical survey data from the mostly cross-sectional¹ Project Canada Survey

¹Surveys from 1990-2005 had a small, minority sub-sample comprised of those who had participated in the survey program in the prior cycle(s).

program conducted every five years by Professor Bibby from the 1970s and since 1990, has asked these same questions regarding professional sports following. The analysis of this paper proceeds first with a historical examination of women and men following over the period from 1990 to 2015, using relative frequencies and a linear regression to find trend data over time. We display the results of this analysis in Tables 3 and 4. Professor Bibby did not conduct the survey in 2010. Additionally, because of a lack of data, we are unable to carry out a similar analysis that includes women's following of women's professional sports leagues, but we would call on future researchers to carry out such surveys to address this gap and allow a more thorough understanding of women's broader sports following. Indeed, we have arguably entered a 'new age' of women's sport and women's sport coverage (Petty and Pope, 2019), and these dynamics are important for future research to empirically explore.

This study first performs a latent class analysis (LCA) for its ability to create groupings of shared characteristics. In this paper, the LCA results show consumption patterns of professional sport following among adult women in Canada. Through this type of quantitative analysis, we can start to say something definitive about the styles of women's consumption of (men's) professional sports in Canada. To analyse the socio-economic and demographic make-up of each consumption group, we deploy multinomial logistic regression modelling. These regressions are performed upon the modal latent class designation of each survey respondent (Table 4). The results of these regressions are included in Table 4. When undertaking the latent class analysis and multinomial logistic regression modelling, we drew on a 'critical friend' to check our progress and further ensure rigor in our data analysis approach (Smith and McGannon, 2018).

Results

In order to address our first research question, Tables 3 and 4 show the numbers of women following professional men's sports in Canada from 1990 to 2015. We focus on the period from 1990 because this is the period that corresponds to the 'feminization' thesis of women's sports fandom. The graph of Figure 1 shows the percentage of Canadians who follow to any degree a major professional sports league split by gender. As has been shown to be the case in numerous countries (Lagaert and Roose, 2018), a higher percentage of men follow a major professional sports league (85% of men in comparison to 69% of women in 2015). However, these results also show a clear increase in the numbers of women following professional sport in this time period – 55% (1990) to 69% (2015). The trendlines for women and men suggest

convergence over this period (see also appendix Table A1). The dip in women's following of these leagues from 1995 to 2000 is potentially a product of two NHL franchises, the Winnipeg Jets and the Quebec Nordiques, leaving in 1995 for Phoenix and in 1996 for Colorado, respectively. Because it has previously been found that women are more likely to only follow only the NHL (Gemar, 2019a), this change in the sporting landscape of Canada likely impacted women following to a greater degree.

Insert Figure 1 here

Latent Class Analysis

Our second research question asks, what are the styles and consumption patterns of women sports following in Canada? We address this using a latent class analysis to assess which sports leagues and combinations of sports leagues Canadian women follow. The first model to show a statistically significant chi-squared p-value is the six-class model solution (Table 3). This solution also represents the model where the Bayes Information Criterion (BIC) reaches its optimal (lowest) point for the model solutions. Therefore, both statistics support the six-cluster model solution as the model that best fits the data (Table 4).

Insert Table 2 here

The first cluster is distinguished by the high probability of people in this group to follow all of these sports leagues 'not closely at all'. There also appears to be a small number of more univorous respondents who follow the NHL at low intensity levels. This accounts for the slightly increased size of this cluster (39%). However, this cluster still does not follow sports closely and is labelled the 'non-sports following' group.

The second cluster (21%) is distinguished by lukewarm following of two leagues. The CFL and NHL show probabilities for following these leagues 'fairly closely' that exceed their relative frequencies for the sample. These two leagues show similar probabilities for following 'not very closely'. Because this group primarily follows these leagues in the two middle intensity categories, this group represents the 'NHL/CFL lukewarm' follower. The NFL also shows some lukewarm following in this group, however to a lesser degree.

The third cluster (15%) shows a similar lukewarm following for primarily the NHL, while the other sports primarily show non-following in this group. Therefore, this third cluster represents the ‘NHL/MLB lukewarm’ followers. MLS also shows lukewarm following to a lesser degree.

While the first three clusters showed cooler relationships to following, the next clusters show an increased level of following. The fourth cluster (11%) is distinguished by high levels of following save for the NBA. Therefore, this cluster is the ‘non-NBA omnivore’ group.

The fifth cluster (10%) shows similarly high levels of following for most leagues. This group does follow the NBA, along with elevated levels of following for the NHL, MLB, MLS, NFL, and to a lesser extent the CFL as well. For these reasons, this fifth cluster forms the ‘moderately voracious omnivore’.

The sixth cluster (5%) shows following for all six of these professional sports leagues and all show high intensity levels of following and low levels of non-following. Therefore, in the sixth cluster we find the ‘highly voracious omnivore’ fan group. We now move to a regression analysis to explore the socio-economic and demographic make-up of these six groups.

Insert Table 3 here

Regression results of LCA groups

Our final research question assesses if different groups of women sports consumers are socio-economically stratified or demographically differentiated. For this we use logistic regression analysis with the non-sports following group as the reference category.

Compared to that group, the NHL/CFL lukewarm follower shows elevated levels of education, with women who have graduate and professional school education more likely to be in this group than those with less than a high school degree. This second group is predicted by (older) age and by living in the Prairie and Western provinces.

The NHL/MLS lukewarm followers do not show any statistically significant parameters for either income or education, although those with the highest levels of education may be particularly less likely to be in this group compared to the non-sports group and only 2% of this group possesses graduate education. This group shows a similar, but even stronger relationship to age than the second group, with those over the age of sixty most likely to be in this group compared to younger age groups. Finally, The NHL/MLS lukewarm followers are most likely to reside in the English speaking east of the country, in Ontario and the Atlantic Region.

The non-NBA omnivores show the highest levels of income. This group also shows a similar relationship to age as the third, and particularly the second group. Finally, it shows a similar relationship to region as the second group, with those in the Prairie and the West much more likely than other regions to be in this non-NBA omnivore group.

Members of the moderately voracious omnivores show the strongest predictive levels of (elevated) education. This group also shows a similar relationship to region as the third group, with those in Ontario and Atlantic Region most likely to be in this group.

Finally, the highly voracious omnivores are most likely to have middle levels of income. Indeed, more than half of this group has an income of \$50,000-\$99,999. There are non-statistically significant results in support that this group may have elevated levels of education and this group has the third highest proportion (behind LC2 and LC5) of those with undergraduate education or above. Besides income, the only other statistically significant result for this group is that this group is particularly likely to live in Ontario.

Insert Table 4 here

An important finding from this LCA is that just over one-quarter of all women in the sample (26%) fall into one of the omnivorous groups, either the non-NBA omnivore group, moderately voracious omnivore group, or highly voracious omnivore group. Towards understanding how much feminization has occurred in omnivorous professional sports following in Canada, Figure 2 is the results of additional LCAs of each survey year for both men and women. These results show omnivorism among women growing, from 15% in 1990 to 26% in 2015. However, unlike following professional sport more generally, the gender gap

in omnivorous following has increased over this period, and trendlines suggest no convergence over this period (see also Table A1).

Insert Figure 2 here

Discussion

Feminization of sports fandom in Canada?

We set out to ‘test’ theories of the ‘feminization’ of sports fandom. Pope (2017) suggests that since the 1990s there have been more opportunities for women to become involved in sport as fans, with women becoming an integral component of the sports crowd. Our findings demonstrate a clear increase in the numbers of women following professional sport from 1990 to 2015 (Figures 1 and 2), thus quantitatively lending support for the ‘feminization’ of sports fandom thesis. These results may in part reflect a general global increase in the popularization of sport over this time, a product of new media proliferation and adjusted marketing strategies to reach new groups of fans. For example, it has been argued that there has been a ‘bourgeoisification’ of sport in recent decades, with increased middle-class consumption (Crawford and Gosling, 2004). Nevertheless, women’s following in Canada has grown more quickly than men’s. This is true even as clear gender gaps remain in following generally (although narrowing over this time), and especially in more omnivorous patterns of following.

Our regression results show that those women making up the fan groups with a weaker attachment to sports leagues are also likely to be older. The NHL/CFL lukewarm follower group is predicted by older age and the NHL/MLS lukewarm follower group is mostly made up of those over the age of 60. We can speculate here that women making up older age groups have perhaps been less impacted by changes from the 1990s which have arguably reorientated the balance of power between the sexes, opening up more opportunities for women to enter previously male preserves, such as consuming sport (Pope, 2017). Perhaps such changes have had more of an impact upon younger girls and women living through these changes (who would now be in their 30s, 40s and 50s)? Equality of opportunity and involvement in sports leagues following may look quite different for different generations of women, with younger age groups more likely to exhibit more increased levels of following.

These findings are supported by Meier et al. (2017) who found increased feminization of consumption and team identification among younger women in Germany, arguing this group has ‘been subject to less restrictive gender role socialization’ (p. 729).

Another important finding is that just over one-quarter of all women in our study (26%) are in one of the omnivorous fan groups. For us, this is a substantial minority of women fans, and the percentage of women omnivores has trended upwards since 1990. Sveinson and Hoeber’s (2016) qualitative findings with seven women fans of men’s Canadian team sports demonstrate the high levels of enjoyment and empowerment Canadian women can gain from their fandom. Our quantitative findings show evidence of omnivorism for women sports fans, demonstrating a number of women engaging with a range of sports – even if this requires higher levels of education and economic capital. Consequently, these findings challenge the typical assumptions that sport is not important in women’s lives and identities that have surrounded women fans (Pope, 2017; Toffoletti, 2017).

Despite signs of what appears to be a positive shift towards the ‘feminization’ of sports fandom or the ‘opening’ up following professional men’s sports leagues as one of the ‘last bastions’ of masculinity (Pitti, 2019), it is important not to lose sight of how more women followers does not necessary equate to greater gender equality. Indeed, as Esmonde *et al.*, (2015) point out, the inclusion of women into sports fan communities does not lead to a shift in hegemonic cultural discourses of sports fandom. In addition, and despite evidence of a number of women who are omnivorous in their sports consumption, our findings also illuminate gendered barriers to omnivorism in the field of major professional sports leagues in Canada, and omnivorous gender gaps remain wide. While men omnivores come from a range of social class backgrounds (Gemar, 2019a), our results show women in the omnivorous groups generally had higher levels of income and education, as discussed further below. This could be a reflection of gendered inequalities in both the quantity and quality of leisure time. Numerous research studies have shown how domestic responsibilities continue to restrict women’s access to leisure. For example, Miller and Brown (2005) link the ‘ethic of care’ to how women may not feel an ‘entitlement’ to leisure, yet men may feel able to prioritise their personal leisure over domestic responsibilities. Being an omnivorous sports follower requires ‘serious’ leisure (Raisborough, 2006), yet with women – especially mothers – still undertaking much of the ‘caring for’ and ‘caring about’ the family, they remain time-poor in comparison to men (Bowlby *et al.*, 2010). These inequalities could also be indicative

of subtle or more blatant exclusionary barriers to women in the traditionally male-dominated domain of professional sports following. Numerous studies have also highlighted how women's presence in this space represents a threat to male-dominance, with various strategies used by male supporters to undermine women's fandom and status as 'authentic' fans (see, for example, Esmonde *et al.*, 2015; Pope, 2017; Sveinson and Hoerber, 2016; Toffoletti, 2017). Women fans continue to be marginalized and misrepresented in media representations; for example, Wenner's (2012) analysis of worldwide, but US-centric, sports commercials found women were largely depicted as wives, girlfriends and mothers and in stereotypical roles such as cleaning and shopping. Such depictions continue to naturalize the imagined 'typical' sports supporters as white, heterosexual men (Jones *et al.*, forthcoming), as well as presenting barriers to women's pathways to fandom. Indeed, these continuing constraints on women's free time and barriers to increased quantity or quantity of engagement in fandom of sport are likely contributing reasons to why the gender gap in more omnivorous forms of professional sports following has not shown narrowing since 1990, even as women show increased following of professional sport and do show strongly omnivorous patterns of such following.

Instrumental omnivorism?

These results represent a first of their kind large-scale quantitative examination of the social patterning of women's professional sports following, especially omnivorous patterns of following. The quarter of women omnivorously following these sports leagues suggests that this sports following space may indeed be more feminized than traditionally thought and challenges stereotypes that assume women to lack interest in sport, especially given the high levels of commitment required to follow a number of sports. Because men have more time and are afforded more allowances to engage in 'serious leisure' than women (Raisborough, 2006), these high levels of commitment that are necessary for following many sports may also require increased levels of income and/or education to achieve for women. Indeed, this is what we see. Both of the voracious omnivore groups, along with the NHL/CFL Lukewarm group, represent the groups with the highest levels of education, while the three omnivorous groups of professional sports following are the groups with the highest levels of income. Thus, is it these four groups that represent women of the highest social position in this data.

These findings suggest that it is economic capital that is most important for breadth of engagement in following professional sports. The evidence around education is more complicated. Our findings suggest that it is not the groups of women that follow professional sports most closely that have the highest levels of education. Rather it is strongly the case that women who follow all major male professional sports leagues, but do so less intensely, have the highest levels of education. It is the group of women that follow only the NHL and CFL, and likewise do so less intensely, that have the next highest level of education. There are two main hypotheses as to why the most educated women may follow sports, and do so less voraciously.

The first is that people are likely to only have fluency in a few genres within each domain of culture. For instance, Atkinson (2011) argues that people likely only have fluency in a few types of music. This reasoning may also apply to sport. This saturation point is likely much more quickly reached for women because of non-employment labour inequalities that limit opportunities to obtain cultural fluency in as many areas.

The second reason is related, but reflects an instrumental relationship for these patterns of cultural knowledge. Erickson (1996: 224) argues:

...the most useful cultural resource is a little working knowledge of a lot of cultural genres combined with a good understanding of which culture to use in which context. Equipped with cultural variety and the rules of relevance, a person can navigate successfully in many settings.

Therefore, it is a shallow but wide knowledge base of cultural knowledge that is more advantageous than a deeper but narrower set of knowledge resources. It is also a way to maximize omnivorous consumption. This mirrors the original arguments of Peterson and Simkus (1992) surrounding the omnivore when they emphasised a 'passing' knowledge of many genres as highly advantageous.

As Erickson (1996) argues in a qualitative study of a business workplace in Toronto, cultural knowledge may be particularly important within workplaces. This is perhaps especially true in business environments, where highbrow culture is not looked upon as highly as in other contexts (Erickson, 1991). This dynamic is also reflected in Bourdieu's work (1984), where business executives were generally less endowed with cultural capital resources from

highbrow cultural knowledge. In particular, sport is the topic most often discussed at work and has been found to be by far the top non-work topic that people report having in common with their colleagues (Erickson, 1996). It is therefore a topic that can be critical to forming social connections and building an advantageous social network. These in turn lead to promotions and general success trajectories in work environs. These types of knowledges, especially broader knowledge bases represented by omnivorous consumption, can be a product and a catalyst for generating valuable social network connects, 'because contact with different types of people includes contact with different types of culture' (Erickson, 1996: 277). Some previous qualitative findings have shown that women can use their knowledge of sport as a form of cultural capital; for example, in the UK, football (soccer) is the national sport and a knowledge of men's football can be used as a form of communication to give an advantage in male-dominated workplaces such as business (Pope, 2014). So, whilst it certainly stands that a broader sporting knowledge base will allow for a broader range of social connections, particularly in the workplace, our findings also showed that women in all groups followed NHL, Canada's national sport at some level. Even the category who followed sport 'not closely at all' included a small number of respondents who follow the NHL at low intensity levels, perhaps recognising the importance of this form of cultural capital.

The differences between the two most educated latent class groups suggest geographic differences in the efficacy of this knowledge. For instance, the NHL and CFL lukewarm group of women followers is heavily predicted to be in the Prairie and West, while the moderately voracious group is strongly predicted to be in Ontario and the Anglo-East. The NHL, and to a lesser extent also the CFL, as representing normative Canadian masculinity and whiteness (Krebs, 2012), also represent a location by which women can operationalise their passing sporting knowledge of these forms for the accrual of capital resources. Likewise, because Ontario has teams in all six of these professional sports leagues, a knowledge base for all sports is necessary to deftly navigate the various social interactions in which this knowledge could be utilised for personal and professional advantage.

We thus hypothesise that these findings could be signalling a more instrumental omnivorism by which a passing knowledge of all professional sports leagues is part of a cultural repertoire (Swidler, 2001). This is one that helps within professional environments that require high levels of education, many of which are still male-dominated. It then represents evidence, or

even an argument, against voraciousness in consumption. It is a dynamic, however, that carries much higher stakes for women. This is the case both because of the need to optimise comparative scarcities in leisure time and because of the need still to navigate the relatively treacherous terrain of employment environs. Further qualitative research could unpack if and how women are using sports knowledge to navigate male-dominated work spaces.

It is also important to acknowledge a limitation of this study; that is how survey research has generally ‘measured’ fandom, with respondents asked to self-assess how closely they follow professional sports leagues in our case (see also Data and Methods section of this paper). While beyond the scope of this particular study to develop a comprehensive approach for addressing such issues, future research should work to improve measurement of women’s fandom through methodologies that ensure a masculine bias is avoided in both design and response. Similarly, the concept of instrumental omnivorism among women sports fans, hypothesised here from our results, can be probed in future studies of women fans through fan motive scales, particularly those that account for gendered natures in free time, employment environments, and social networks. The patterns and trends of women’s sport and its fans are a critical, promising, and yet to be explored area of future research, and such research should take up this measurement challenge in the process.

To conclude, the primary contributions of this study arise from the ability of the study design to offer new insights into the nature of women’s sports fandom and their patterns of professional sports following, both contemporarily and in recent history. We do this through the understudied national context of Canada (Gemar, 2019b, 2020b), and through the currently absent methodology of large-scale quantitative analysis (Lagaert and Roose, 2018). In doing so, it is hoped that this article will initiate a new line of research, one which draws on quantitative studies of women sports fans across different contexts to complement the rich qualitative data that is emerging in this field. Our findings show that such an approach can produce a broader understanding of patterns and trends in women’s fandom.

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Table 1. Relative frequencies of socio-economic and demographic variables in sample.

Variable	n=1850
Personal Education	
Grad/Professional School	7.2%
Undergraduate degree	11.5%
Diploma CC/Technical college	22.8%
Some uni/community college(CC)	13.6%
High school diploma	36.5%
<High School	8.5%
Household Income(C\$/year)	
>\$100,000	16.4%
\$50,000-\$99,999	37.3%
<\$50,000	46.3%
Age Group	
25–39	28.0%
40–59	42.9%
60+	29.0%
Region	
Quebec	25.6%
Ontario	36.8%
Atlantic Region	7.7%
Prairie/Western Provinces	29.9%

Figure 1.

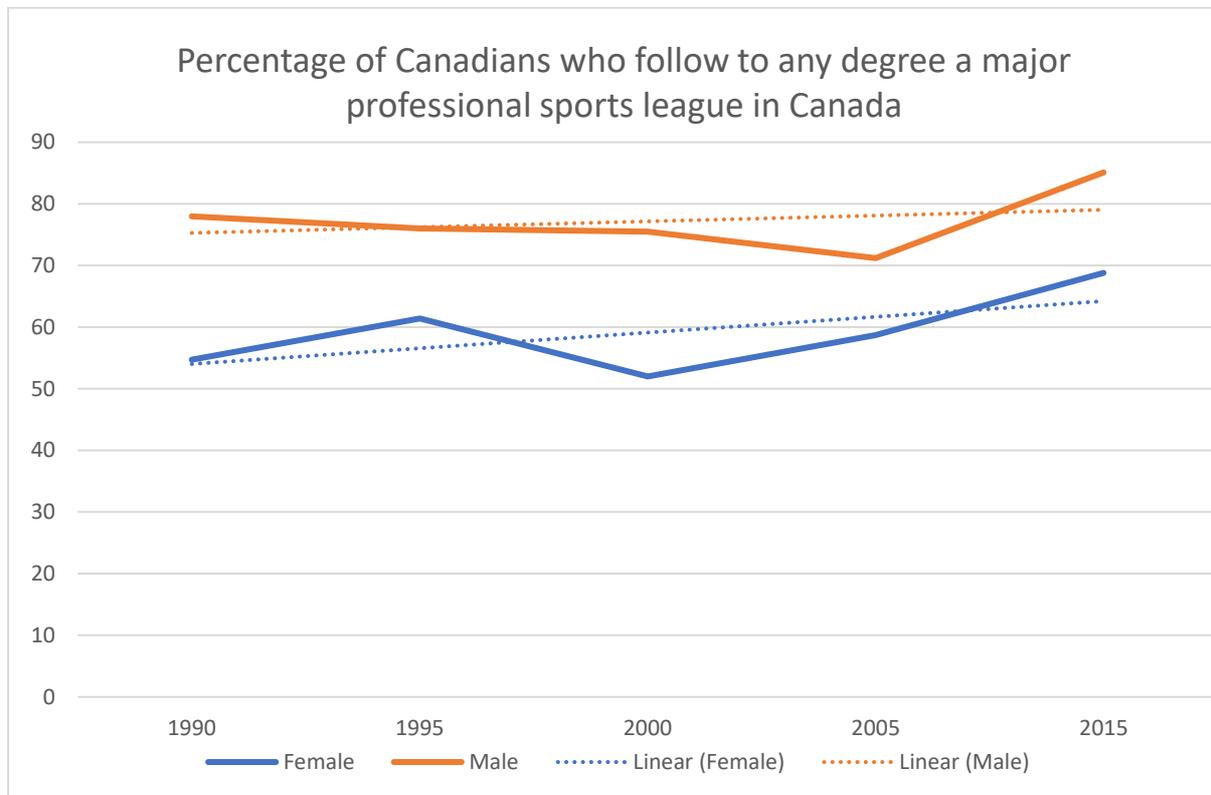


Table 2. Latent class analysis model summary results

	LL	BIC(LL)	L²	p-value
1-Class	-9754.5882	19644.5911	4513.3301	2.7e-226
2-Class	-8696.4612	17580.9983	2397.0760	2.9e-18
3-Class	-8555.9433	17352.6238	2116.0402	1.3e-6
4-Class	-8506.6661	17306.7308	2017.4859	0.00046
5-Class	-8464.0504	17274.1606	1932.2544	0.018
6-Class	-8436.0989	17270.9189	1876.3514	0.095

Table 3. Profile from latent class analysis of women sports following.

	Non-sports	NHL/CFL lukewarm	NHL/MLB lukewarm	Non-NBA omnivore	Moderately voracious omnivore	Highly voracious omnivore	Overall relative frequency
Cluster Size	0.3871	0.2113	0.1462	0.1126	0.0973	0.0455	
NFL							
Very closely	0.0000	0.0087	0.0000	0.1536	0.0600	0.3850	0.042
Fairly closely	0.0000	0.0521	0.0001	0.2436	0.1572	0.3040	0.068
Not very closely	0.0017	0.3214	0.0175	0.3991	0.4249	0.2480	0.169
Not closely at all	0.9983	0.6177	0.9824	0.2037	0.3579	0.0630	0.721
MLB							
Very closely	0.0000	0.0082	0.0340	0.1272	0.0925	0.4247	0.049
Fairly closely	0.0000	0.0485	0.1137	0.2275	0.1955	0.3123	0.086
Not very closely	0.0014	0.2390	0.3186	0.3405	0.3460	0.1922	0.178
Not closely at all	0.9986	0.7042	0.5337	0.3048	0.3660	0.0707	0.687
NBA							
Very closely	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0002	0.0738	0.3958	0.025
Fairly closely	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0086	0.2246	0.3397	0.038
Not very closely	0.0078	0.0008	0.0069	0.2861	0.5877	0.2508	0.105
Not closely at all	0.9922	0.9992	0.9931	0.7051	0.1140	0.0137	0.832
NHL							
Very closely	0.0065	0.1413	0.1392	0.4223	0.1754	0.5760	0.144
Fairly closely	0.0520	0.2861	0.2843	0.3562	0.3106	0.3111	0.207
Not very closely	0.2319	0.3228	0.3237	0.1675	0.3065	0.0936	0.258
Not closely at all	0.7096	0.2498	0.2528	0.0540	0.2075	0.0193	0.392

MLS							
Very closely	0.0000	0.0000	0.0043	0.0275	0.0289	0.1558	0.014
Fairly closely	0.0000	0.0006	0.0317	0.0995	0.1025	0.2482	0.037
Not very closely	0.0002	0.0291	0.1829	0.2818	0.2843	0.3097	0.106
Not closely at all	0.9998	0.9702	0.7811	0.5912	0.5843	0.2863	0.843
CFL							
Very closely	0.0000	0.0519	0.0000	0.2814	0.0196	0.3751	0.062
Fairly closely	0.0000	0.1784	0.0001	0.3384	0.1058	0.3437	0.102
Not very closely	0.0021	0.4669	0.0238	0.3099	0.4338	0.2397	0.191
Not closely at all	0.9979	0.3028	0.9761	0.0703	0.4407	0.0414	0.646

Figure 2.

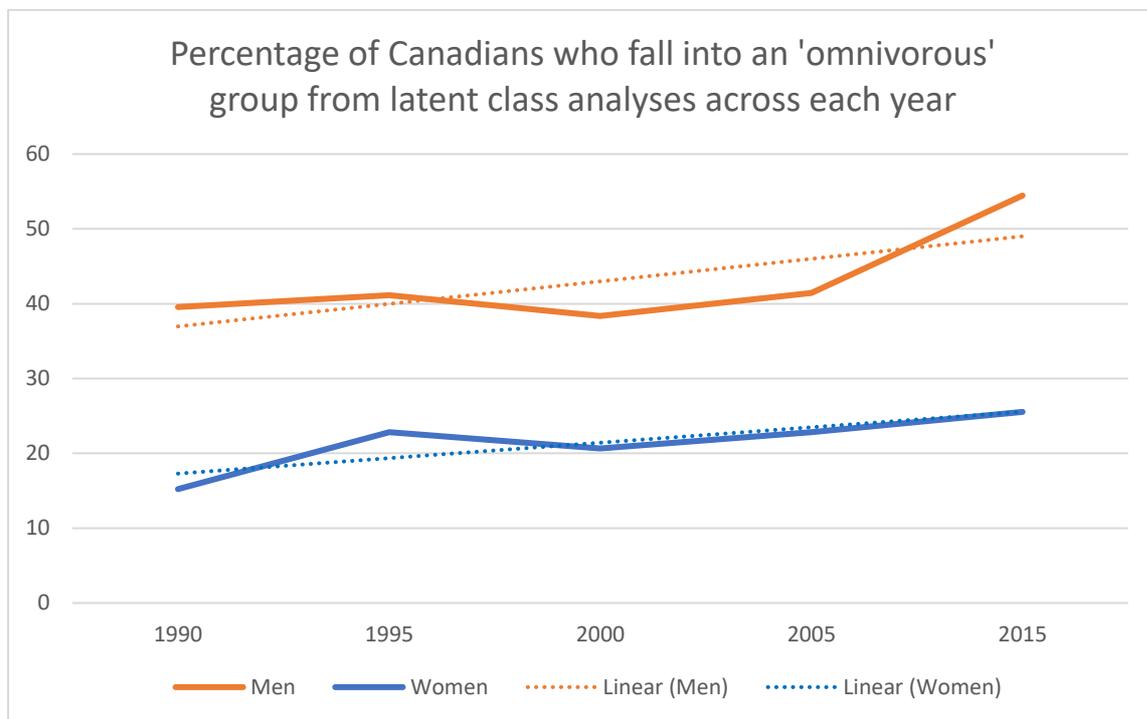


Table 4. Odds ratios from regression analysis of latent class groups.

	Non-sports[^]	NHL/CFL Lukewarm	NHL/MLB Lukewarm	Non-NBA Omnivore	Moderately Voracious Omnivore	Highly Voracious Omnivore
Personal Education						
Graduate/Prof School		2.278*	.382	.835	4.069*	2.142
Undergraduate		1.853	1.041	1.125	5.550**	2.183
Tech/Comm coll. Degree		2.072*	1.469	1.167	3.869*	1.455
Some uni/CC/Tech		1.352	.926	1.170	3.162*	1.096
High School degree		1.551	.942	.840	2.282	1.635
<High School		1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Before-tax Household Income (C\$/year)						
>\$100,000		1.254	1.311	1.904*	.859	.902
\$50–99,999		1.372	1.193	1.684*	1.098	1.841*
<\$50,000		1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Age Group						
25–39		.485***	.461**	.464**	1.522	.985
40–59		.952	.597*	.755	.960	.896
60+		1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Region						
Quebec		.340***	1.510	.319***	.939	.494
Ontario		.431***	2.622***	.560**	2.723***	2.557**
Atlantic		.396**	3.112**	.178**	3.837***	.580
Prairie/Western		1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Nagelkerke R ²	.167					

*p<.05;**p<.01;***p<.001;^reference

Appendix

Table A1. Results of linear regression analyses for trendlines found in Figures 1-2, based on 5 observations over 25 years from 1990 to 2015.

Model	Variable	R Square	B	β	t	p
Figure 1						
Overall		.186				
Following (Men)	(Constant)		74.703		19.478	.001
	Years		.227	.431	.827	.469
Overall		.513				
Following (Women)	(Constant)		53.878		14.178	.001
	Years		.484	.716	1.778	.174
Figure 2						
Omnivorous		.688				
Following (Men)	(Constant)		36.764		11.974	.001
	Years		.565	.829	2.570	.082
Omnivorous		.682				
Following (Women)	(Constant)		17.751		9.657	.002
	Years		.334	.826	2.579	.085