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‘There Are Some Daft People Out There!’:

Exploring Female Sport and Media Fandoms

Abstract

Female sports fans have been largely marginalized in academic research, but this paper makes one contribution towards changing this relative invisibility. Drawing on a ‘grounded theory’ approach, 85 semi-structured interviews were conducted with female football (soccer) and rugby union fans in the English city of Leicester. This paper explores how these women position themselves in relation to stereotypes about female media/soap opera fans. Whilst some sports fans were keen to reaffirm hierarchies between sports and media fandoms, others emphasized the extant similarities between these different types of fandom, illustrating the heterogeneity of women’s sporting experiences and the range of their interpretations of fandom. My findings concur with Schimmel *et al.*’s¹ assertion that there is a need for greater ‘cross-fertilization’ between sports and media fandoms. This could help to prompt a move away from gendered hierarchies in research and move towards putting women’s experiences as sports fans on the research agenda.

Introduction

Female sports fans have been largely marginalized in academic research,² perhaps in part as a result of assumptions that women are predominantly media fans – fans of movies/movie stars, music, new reality television, and especially soap operas. Although sports fans are, generally speaking, not as ‘stigmatized’ as media fans,³ *female* sports fans are typically depicted as ‘inauthentic’ in their support and are assumed to have little sporting knowledge.⁴ Following Schimmel *et al.*’s⁵ observation of the disjuncture between media fan and sport fan scholarship, the focus of this exploratory paper is upon how female sports fans position themselves in relation to stereotypes about typically *female* genres of fandom – media/soap opera fans.

Drawing on Glaser and Strauss’s⁶ ‘grounded theory’ approach 85 semi-structured interviews were conducted with female fans of football and rugby union, using the English East Midlands city of Leicester as a case study site. I begin by introducing some of the existing literature on media and sports fandom. I discuss tensions between sports and media fandom scholarship, gendered divisions in research on fandom and women as inauthentic sports fans. My results focus upon two key themes that emerged from the research. Firstly, I consider responses from women who claimed that there were clear differences between sports and media fandoms, sustaining the

sports/popular culture distinction. Secondly, I analyse responses from supporters who drew similarities between these different fandoms, thus challenging the sports/popular culture hierarchy.

Sports and media fandom scholarship: some tensions

Schimmel *et al.*,⁷ propose that: 'sport fan studies and what we call pop culture studies have developed on different trajectories and (to some extent) in different areas of the Academy'. Some attempts have been made to bridge the conceptual divide between sports and other types of fandom. For example, there is a small body of comparative research on sport fans and popular culture or media fans,⁸ and some scholars have more recently drawn upon both sport and media scholarship in their research.⁹ However, broadly speaking the two literatures rarely overlap, with few studies examining the parallels between fans of different texts or genres.¹⁰ In response to this divide Schimmel *et al.*,¹¹ have proposed that the research areas of sport and media explore similar themes and that scholars would benefit from greater 'cross-fertilization' in their work.

This division between sports fan research and popular culture fan studies can perhaps be attributed to the historical and to some extent ongoing marginalization and trivialization of media fandoms. In her early, important work in this area Jensen¹² suggested that there are two fan types which appear in popular and scholarly accounts of fandom. These are the 'obsessed loner', who may enter into an intense fantasy relationship with a celebrity figure and may stalk and threaten to kill them, often appearing in news stories such as David Chapman's killing of ex-Beatle John Lennon, and the 'frenzied fan', who is vulnerable to irrational loyalties triggered by adherence to sports teams or celebrity figures. Another common image of the fan is that of 'loser' or 'lunatic', an image which is often used in suspense films, detective novels, and TV cop shows.¹³ These stereotypes can be seen in typical depictions of fans by the media: for example, after the Harry Potter fourth installment premier in North America in 2005, the *New York Post* published a two page spread with the headline: 'Potterheads: Wizards of Odd'.¹⁴

Academic research on fandom initially served to perpetuate this negative presentation of fans, illustrated by the focus of early research on whether fans could distinguish

between ‘reality’ and the fictional worlds constructed through the objects of their fandom.¹⁵ However, over the past few decades this academic dismissal of fandom has been overturned and fan studies is now quite entrenched in the academy.¹⁶ Sandvoss¹⁷ describes how early fan scholars endeavoured not only to theorize fandom but demonstrated a form of political representation: ‘a statement against the double standards of cultural judgement and the bourgeois fear of popular culture; a statement in favour of fan sensibilities which gave a voice to otherwise marginalized social groups’. But this need for a partisan representation of fandom has now disappeared as with the arrival of new technologies, fandom has become an ordinary aspect of everyday life.

Defining the term fandom has not been a straightforward task, perhaps in part as a consequence of this traditionally negative portrayal of fans, but also because of the ‘everydayness’ of the term.¹⁸ For Lewis¹⁹ everyone knows who fans are: they are simply the people who will be obsessed by particular stars, celebrities, films, TV programmes (often soaps), and/or sports teams. In sports fandom research in the USA, Wann *et al.*,²⁰ have identified eight most common sport fan motives as part of a Sport Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS). These are: ‘group affiliation’, ‘family’, ‘self-esteem’, ‘aesthetic’, ‘escape’, ‘entertainment’, ‘economic’ (whereby people are motivated by the potential gains of sports gambling), and ‘eustress’ (referring to the pleasure gained from excitement and arousal experienced during sports events). However, some criticisms have been levelled at the SFMS, for example, Trail and James²¹ suggest that it is unclear with many of these motives what exactly is being measured by the Wann *et al.*, schema, and so developed their own Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption (MSSC).

Giulianotti²² has usefully suggested a different approach to conceptualizing sports fandom. He advocates a taxonomy of spectator identities in sport, which relies on more ‘subjective’ systems of categorisation. Here football spectators are classified into four ideal-types and the main criterion for classifying spectators relates to the identification fans exhibit in relation to specific sports clubs. The four spectator categories are underpinned by two binary oppositions: hot-cool and traditional-consumer. The hot-cool vertical axis represents the different degrees to which the club is central to the individual’s project of self-formation. ‘Hot’ forms of loyalty

emphasize intense forms of identification and high levels of emotional investment with the club. In contrast those with a 'cool' identification will have lower levels of attachment and their identification may be primarily through interactions with the 'cool' media of television and the internet.

The traditional/consumer horizontal axis in Giulianotti's model measures the basis of the individual's investment in a club – whereas traditional spectators have a longer and more local identification with the club, consumer fans will have a more market-centred relationship, illustrated by the centrality of consuming club products. The four quadrants which emerge represent ideal types and each fandom category displays a distinctive kind of identification with a particular club: Traditional/Hot Spectators (Supporters), Traditional/Cool Spectators (Followers), Hot/Consumer Spectators (Fans), and Cool/Consumer Spectators (Flâneurs). A strong distinction between traditional fandom and acts of consumption around sport seems to underpin this model, but for critics such as Crawford²³ consumption is the central component when defining sports fandom today. He argues that 'being a fan is primarily a consumer act and hence fans can be seen first and foremost as consumers'. Consumption acts may include attending a live sports event, connecting with sport via the media, or purchasing consumer goods.

For Crawford it is fundamentally flawed to assume that electronic mediated audiences will be cooler or less dedicated in their support. He has criticized fan typologies based on supposedly 'authentic' fan practices,²⁴ whereby those fans who follow sport via the mass media and especially the internet are deemed to be less authentic than fans who go to matches in person and interact with others face-to-face. Gibbons and Dixon²⁵ also argue such typologies fail to recognise that those fans who attend matches 'live' and participate in 'traditional' and 'authentic' fandom practices are the same fans who follow their club via the media.

All this suggests that for sports and popular culture scholars there is no easily agreed upon set of actions or practices which define what it is to be a fan. However, I propose that Sandvoss's²⁶ broad definition of fandom is particularly useful here as this encapsulates both sports and media forms of fandom and also manages to bridge the dissonance constructed elsewhere between fandom and consumption:

I define fandom as the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text in the form of books, television shows, films or music, as well as popular texts in a broader sense such as sports teams and popular icons and stars ranging from athletes and musicians to actors.

Gendered divisions in research on fandom

The apparent disjuncture between sport and popular culture fandom is also connected to a gendered dichotomy in research on fandom in the Academy. Jenkins,²⁷ for example, discusses the assumed differences between the sexes within fandom thus:

If the comic fan and the psychotic fan are usually portrayed as masculine, although frequently as de-gendered, asexual, or impotent, the eroticized fan is almost always female.

Larsen and Zubernis²⁸ bemoan how the media continues to depict fans as strange and overinvested people who engage in bizarre practices. For example, television programmes such as the new reality television show *Geek Love* (which follows fans who date each other) promote the exploitation of marginalized fan groups for entertainment. Larsen and Zubernis also argue that those who receive the most ridicule are usually women. Jensen²⁹ has examined typical gendered distinctions in popular images of fandom. Here the typical masculine image of fandom 'is of drunken destructiveness, a rampage of uncontrollable masculine passion that is unleashed in response to a sports victory or defeat'. This stereotypical image would seem to apply mainly to male football fans in the United Kingdom, rather than all sports fans *per se*. But the feminine image of fandom is represented rather differently, as 'sobbing and screaming and fainting, and assumes that an uncontrollable erotic energy is sparked by the chance to see or touch a male idol'. Zubernis and Larsen³⁰ have similarly suggested that deviant or unchecked sexuality continues to come into discussions of female fans. A recent illustration of this can be seen in the media reporting of *Twilight* fangirls: Click³¹ describes how in the United States the 'media have belittled the reactions girls and women have had to the *Twilight* series...frequently using Victorian era gendered words like "fever," "madness," "hysteria," and "obsession" to describe Twilighters and Twi-hards'.

In short, arguably academic research on fandom has tended to reflect this division, meaning that gender-driven research and gender-informed commentary is based largely upon the male in sport and football fandom and, by contrast, upon the female in media and TV fandom.³² Women have traditionally been researched as fans or audiences of soap operas,³³ new reality TV,³⁴ music,³⁵ and movies or movie stars.³⁶ Many fans of TV soap operas are indeed female³⁷ and perhaps partly because of this for many years academics largely ignored the soap operas as a potential arena for serious study.³⁸ The trivialization of soaps deems the fans' cultural capital to be very low and so, 'the discourse of pleasure for women is overlaid with a discourse which deems soaps to be rubbish'.³⁹ Whereas soaps have typically been perceived as 'inferior quality, as fantasy and escapism for women', televised sport for men is often seen as 'a legitimate and even edifying experience'.⁴⁰ Zubernis and Larsen⁴¹ also propose that fan shame is played out differently depending on gender and type of fandom in academia. Here it is suggested that although there are overlaps and common motivations across fandoms and genders, a female academic researching a fandom that is predominantly female dominated (such as soap operas) will experience far more shame than a male researching sports fandom, which is male dominated and arguably the least shamed type of fandom.

Blackshaw and Crabbe⁴² have critiqued how following the conventional framework of the analysis of soaps as a female genre, this has resulted in some writers theorising sport as a male version of this leisure practice. Instead, these authors provocatively see sport – or at least mediated versions of it – *as* soap opera, without the need for such unhelpful gender qualification. The ubiquitous nature of elite football today, including the excessive media coverage of the English Premiership and its 'celebrity' players could be said to be a kind of 'performance', one with the appearance of unpredictability, but which is actually closely scripted and ready to consume via the media, especially the British tabloid press.

By constructing sport as soap opera Blackshaw and Crabbe suggest that global icon David Beckham could be said to have a media-orchestrated 'spin off' series with his wife – 'The Beckhams'. The same might also be said for the recent British media hype surrounding former London Wasps rugby union player Danni Cipriani's on-off relationship with model, actress and TV presenter Kelly Brook or England and

Chelsea footballer Ashley Cole's marriage and break up with the singer, model and TV presenter Cheryl Cole. The soap opera style of coverage for this real life 'story' is illustrated by tabloid headlines such as: 'Because He's Not Worth It – Cheryl Dumps Ashley Over Rat's Five 'Flings'', or 'Cheryl: I Won't Take A Penny...Sex Txts Were The Final Straw'⁴³.

There are some important implications of the sort of analyses explored here. Firstly, I would suggest that there is a need to collapse the authentic/consumer fan distinction. Secondly, this is associated with an urgent need to disassemble the traditional division between sports and soaps, and thus to move beyond the notion that these remain discrete and separate cultural arenas. Clearly, important synergies can be identified between fandom and consumption practices and between the recent media saturated coverage of elite global sport (especially English Premiership football and its 'celebrity' players and trophy wives), and more traditional soap opera narratives.

Women as inauthentic sports fans and gendered hierarchies

Almost two decades ago, O'Connor and Boyle⁴⁴ compared the (female) television genre of soap operas with (male) televised sport and called for more leisure research to examine the meaning of televised sport for female fans. But research on women – as either live sports attendees or television sports fans – remains limited. Sports fandom research has focused largely upon the experiences of men, and barely any studies have considered women's experiences.⁴⁵ The lack of research on female sports fans seems especially surprising in football, given the amount of material and research available on *male* supporters. In rugby union, however, there is a lack of research which examines supporters of either sex.

The tendency for academics to focus upon female fans almost exclusively as 'media' fans, but also to label these fans as 'irrational' has meant that in the few cases where females have been analysed as *sports* fans, these existing stereotypes have perhaps impacted upon the research. For example, King⁴⁶ in research on football fandom appears to present a hierarchy between male (the 'lads') and female ('new consumer') fans. This also appears to be representative of a fan typology whereby distinctions are drawn between traditional (authentic) and consumer (inauthentic) fans. King proposes that females will fall into one of three categories: women who have attended matches

for a long time and approve of changes in the game; those who were encouraged to attend as part of the new family audience; and the teenage girls whose primary motive to attend is because of the sexual attractiveness of star players. Crabbe *et al.*,⁴⁷ in their model of different styles of football fandom also limit women's experiences to a 'football widows' focus group in a further illustration of the exclusion of females as authentic fans.

Only a few studies can be located which examine female sports fans worldwide⁴⁸ and so there is a need to redress the under-representation of women in sports fandom research.⁴⁹ A common theme tied to the literature on female sports fans is the perception of women as inauthentic supporters. Crawford and Gosling⁵⁰ in their study of male and female fans of (men's) ice hockey in Britain reported that female fans felt that they were labelled by male supporters as not 'real' fans but simply 'puck bunnies' – fans who are present simply to 'lust' after the players. The attitude of many male interviewees towards younger female fans was that they are largely 'silly young girls' who demonstrate little knowledge or commitment to their team. In a similar vein, Crolley and Long⁵¹ bemoan how female football fans have complained 'that they are seen as fickle, as not true fans, people who are ignorant of footballing matters, or who only go to football because they 'fancy' the players'. Collins⁵² also suggests that issues of inauthenticity are also applicable to female rugby union supporters. Thus female sports fans of male team sports are required to 'prove' their status as authentic fans in a way that is simply not required for most male fans.⁵³

Methodology

The findings for this paper have been extracted from a wider, comparative interview study of female football and rugby union fans in the UK.⁵⁴ The research was based in a single location, the English East Midlands city of Leicester. This city is unusual in that it is one of the few cities in Britain in which a strong public interest in football is relatively balanced, locally, by public interest in other sports. It hosts elite level men's professional sports clubs in both football (Leicester City) and rugby union (Leicester Tigers), with both clubs routinely attracting home crowds of over 20,000. In comparison to other English football and rugby teams, both clubs recruit a relatively high number of female fans, although these figures are still fairly low overall, with

surveys revealing that around one quarter of fans are female at Leicester City and Leicester Tigers.⁵⁵

Respondents were selected from original local survey replies.⁵⁶ Female responses were separated out and potential interviewees were then divided into three age groups in order to try and reflect the experiences of different generations of female fans. Systematic sampling techniques (selecting every fifth questionnaire return) were used to select potential female respondents, and after sending out 135 letters to football fans and 130 letters to rugby supporters, the final sample consisted of 51 football fans and 34 rugby fans (n=85). Interviews usually took place at respondents' homes or workplaces and averaged around two hours in length. The interviews were semi-structured in nature to ensure that certain topics would be covered, whilst also allowing the interviewee more freedom in how they responded, and thus issues raised by the interviewee were not neglected.⁵⁷

I used 'grounded theory' as a theoretical tool for data collection and analysis, and as the position from which to interpret the empirical findings. An interview schedule was designed which was divided into eight different themes or issues, and data was then coded by drawing upon the 'constant comparative method'.⁵⁸ Data collection and analysis continued until I had reached a point of 'theoretical saturation', whereby the categories were well developed and further data gathering was adding nothing or little new to the conceptualization.⁵⁹ The original pseudonyms that were used to protect participant anonymity have been used in this paper – the football sample is coded as 'F' and the rugby fans 'R', followed by the case number allocated to each individual respondent. My findings focus upon the theme of sport and media fandoms and thus begin to move away from the tendency to study sports fandom in isolation from other types of fandom. I consider how women fans position themselves in relation to stereotypes about media and soap opera fans and explore some of the perceived differences and similarities between sport and media fans.

Findings

1) Differences between sport and media fandoms: sustaining the sports/popular culture distinction

Differences between sports and 'daft' soap fans

Perhaps one response to the demands for women to prove their status as ‘real’ sports fans⁶⁰ has been to distance themselves from typically female genres which have been regarded negatively in popular accounts, in order to try and gain credibility as sports fans. Half of all respondents (43/85) stated that there are clear differences between sports and other ‘types’ of fandom. Many were keen to emphasize that they were only a fan of the sport they followed or a sports fan more generally – in other words they did not follow popular culture forms of fandom and especially not soap operas.

There was an underlying feeling from many women that those who watched soaps were simply *different* to committed fans of sports. Sports fans were viewed as having a more outgoing and sociable personality; R33 defined herself as a ‘People person’, and F21, like other sports fans would be prepared to ‘Get out, you meet people, you talk to people about different things, you’re interacting’. Soap fans on the other hand were claimed to lead a more lonely existence as, ‘I think usually women do that [watch soaps] on their own’ (R28) and so ‘You’re not really interacting with people, are you?’ (R33). This perhaps echoes some of the traditional associations between soaps and housewives in earlier years, whereby the soap opera ‘was alleged to be able to provide some (surrogate) company for housewives living in isolation’.⁶¹ These views thus contradict studies which have shown how women can and do use TV soaps *collectively* to aid communication and social interaction, helping to bond viewers together.⁶² In contrast to active sports fans, soap fans were perceived to be of a lazy disposition; they were more likely to be found ‘slouched in front of the television’ (R24), hence: ‘If you’re a fan of a soap, all you do is sit and watch it’ (F32):

I think if you’re a sports fan, you’ve got to put yourself out if you want to go and watch them. Whereas if you’re a fan of soap operas, you’re just sitting there, you’re not doing anything particularly are you? [...]. And I think a lot of people out of idleness probably just prefer to sit and watch a programme. (R27, age 62, season ticket holder, retired - worked as a teacher)

Media fans have traditionally been stigmatized and marginalized in research because their pleasure is gained from ‘fictional narratives’ rather than ‘real’ events.⁶³ In a similar vein, some respondents suggested that sports fandom is of a higher importance because unlike soaps: ‘To watch football is more real and it matters *more* doesn’t it? There’s a result at the end of it’ (F22), or ‘It’s there in front of you. And it’s

happening, it's real' (F44). Soaps were thus derided as 'fantasy' (F44) or 'fiction' (F26), the outcome of which was irrelevant. Further criticisms were levelled at soap fans in terms of their intelligence – unlike sports fans who are knowledgeable on the (real) game, R17 suggested: 'I don't know that a fan of a soap would have any particular knowledge other than watching it week after week'.

These perceptions of soap fans as largely isolated, lonely and idle people, led to some respondents ridiculing followers of soaps, who were 'quite sad' (F29), 'daft' (F17), and 'Don't have anything else in their lives' (F21). Many female sports fans were keen to reaffirm the fandom hierarchies often drawn between the domesticized and passive 'loser' (typically female) fans of soaps,⁶⁴ and active and 'public' (usually male) sports fans. Soap fans were also mocked for their apparent inability to distinguish between 'fiction' and 'reality'⁶⁵:

I'm just thinking about the people that I know that watch a lot of soap opera.... They go home, they shut the door, they have their tea, they sit and watch television all night...Most people that I know that watch football also have a lot of other hobbies. They'll be heavily into something else or they'll do other things or they'll be into sport generally [...]. And I just think soap operas are just pointless, I really do. And it's not real is it? It's just nonsense, I mean they're trying to portray real life, but it's not real life. [But] there are some daft people out there; I mean you hear about it all the time, don't you? When Arthur died on *EastEnders* [British soap opera] people sent letters of condolence to Pauline and all that sort of thing...because there is an element of society that absolutely live and breathe it. Oh, God! (F17, age 35, occasional attendee, sales manager)

The benefits of sports fandom

Respondents further emphasized the differences between sports and popular culture fandoms by highlighting perceived benefits of sports fandom over other types of fandom. Whilst some women were also fans of other things, sports fandom was clearly demarcated as the most important form of fandom that they were involved in, and brought benefits in a way that other types of fandom simply could not. Sports fandom was found to play a key role in the 'social life' (F4, F12) of some respondents – unlike soaps respondents described how sports fandom is premised on interaction with other people and invokes the sociability of the crowd. For 31 out of 51 of the football respondents and 20 out of 34 rugby fans interviewed, the social interactions that they shared at sport events were an important aspect of the match day routine.

For example, many women arranged to meet up with friends before matches or else arrived at the ground early to meet up with people. Some female fans arranged to go for meals (more a feature of the rugby sample) either before or after matches to give more time for these social interactions. Traditionally both the sports ground and the match-day pub have been sites for communal masculine expression – spaces where women have been largely excluded⁶⁶ – but the pub was also found to be an important meeting space for many female respondents. Meeting in the restaurant, the home and/or the pub complemented the sociability of the sports stadium for many women, lending weight to previous studies which have claimed that social motives are important for female fans.⁶⁷

Mewett and Toffoletti⁶⁸ in their important work on female fans of Australian rules football have found that strong ties formed by the significant others in women's social networks are a central feature in their initial entry to fandom. They suggest that in addition to providing women with time for sociability with relatives and friends, sport can provide a space that separates them from the 'humdrum of day-to-day life'. For the majority of respondents in the present study sports fandom was said to provide an 'escape' (F30) or 'stress relief' (R1) from everyday life – from the 'daily grind' (R13) or 'routine life' (R31) – in a way that other types of fandom did not. Other studies have similarly shown that soaps can serve an escape function for soap opera fans.⁶⁹ Words and phrases such as 'adrenaline rush' (F1), 'release' (R6), 'escape' (F18) and 'letting off steam' (F40) were used frequently by respondents to describe the sports experience. This was a welcome opportunity for some women to 'escape' from mundane domesticity, from family life and their usual gender role responsibilities, as attending sport provided a break 'From family life yeah, and family pressures. It's good to get away and just be Marie, rather than Ella's Mum or whatever' (F18). In these terms, sport acted as a significant 'backstage'.⁷⁰ As well as a space where costumes and aspects of 'personal front' can be adjusted and scrutinized, Goffman's backstage serves as an area where the performer can relax, dropping their 'front' and stepping out of character. Thus, this was perhaps a space for female fans to explore an otherwise hidden part of their identity which is usually masked by constraining gender roles and expectations.

In existing research there has been a tendency to associate female fans with a recent ‘gentrification’ or ‘feminization’ of sporting cultures, suggesting that the presence of females is important in ‘softening’ the behaviour of (male) crowds.⁷¹ But these data suggest that for some women sports fandom may be used in a similar way to male fans – as a break from the strains of everyday work and a ‘therapeutic’ space (F12, R33) where they can exercise ‘anger management’ (F2, R1) via the opportunities provided for verbal release. Some football and rugby respondents suggested that because live sports fans had to ‘physically’ go to watch sport they were more ‘involved’ in this activity – in the words of F8 watching live matches provides a ‘little bubble’ as ‘You just think about football and talk about football for two hours’. Unlike media fandoms which could be consumed at home, being a live sports fan meant being exposed to the elements – ‘going out’ (F21, F29) being ‘outside’ (R6, R16) and ‘turning out in all weathers’ (R24), which made this activity more enjoyable and perhaps contributed to a sense of freedom from the shackles and constraints of everyday life in the home or workplace.

Skille⁷² posits that we are now witnessing a ‘masculinization’ of the female life course as a result of the growing numbers of women who are mirroring men’s lifetime employment, and consequently their leisure patterns. Perhaps the new world of work for women enables them to use sport as an escape from drudgery and a stress outlet in a way that has traditionally been reserved for male fans⁷³:

If I’ve had a really bad week at work I’m like I don’t care, I’m going football on Saturday. [Be]cause I feel like I’ve got quite a stressful job, so its quite a lot of pressure on you, and you have to keep professional. And of course, when you’re at football and something goes wrong you can just go “AHHHHHH” (*outburst*) Like I say, anger management, it all just comes out. (F2, age 23, season ticket holder, account manager)

It’s the greatest stress relief on the planet. Because you can have all the crap that students give you and bosses give you and colleagues give you and then you just go and it’s just anger management...I’ll be that tense and just, work’s too busy...you’re that wound up and then you completely switch off you don’t think about that and you just shout and have a go at whoever the opposition may be, whatever they may or may not have done. Then it’s like calm and the stress has gone. (R1, age 25, season ticket holder, university principal clerk)

It has been routinely contended that sports fans in Britain do not attend matches simply to spectate; they go to *participate*, believing that they may be able to influence the result by supporting their team, or by playing their part in creating an intimidating

atmosphere for the opposition.⁷⁴ Thus, sports fandom is different to other forms of fandom in the sense that other sorts of fans are not usually involved in influencing outcomes for the object of their fandom, and therefore are less likely to be able to enhance their 'self-esteem'⁷⁵ through the process of basking in reflected glory or 'BIRGing'.⁷⁶ Some women suggested that sports fandom was different as one could actively influence the result – shape the text – by being in the crowd and supporting their club. They were somehow more 'a part of something' (F4, R13), although arguably interactive reality TV now offers a similar opportunity for home viewers⁷⁷:

You can almost feel that you're influencing what's going on, you know; if you cheer, if you shout shoot, you might score a goal sort of thing. But you don't get that watching a soap opera, you can shout at the telly but that's not going to listen, it's not going to make any difference. So it's part of being at the live thing. (F20, age 48, season ticket holder, office clerk)

I get involved in soaps, but...you can't have any effect on the outcome, you know, it's a script, it's written [...]. Whereas going to a sporting event, you somehow feel in a way that you're making a small contribution... In rugby, every time there's a ruck or something like that, you're pushing them. (R15, age 55, season ticket holder, financial advisor)

This distinctive sporting narrative meant that there was simply more at stake in sport: the outcomes of sport were deliciously and painfully unpredictable, unscripted, and important in a way which emphasized the outcomes of media fandoms such as soaps were peripheral and marginal. Sports fandom was argued to involve a greater 'emotional' investment (F11, R20) – it was 'special' (F7, R6, R16, R20) – and 'more part of life' or 'impinges more on my everyday life' (F10, F26) than other types of fandom. Thus, there was a general feeling that whereas soaps could easily be 'missed' or 'turned off' (F14, R1), sports matches could never be skipped – for F32 this could lead to 'withdrawal symptoms'. These kinds of responses demonstrate the high levels of commitment from some female fans and so in some ways can be used to challenge some of the existing stereotypes or assumptions of women as inferior or inauthentic sports fans.⁷⁸

2) Similarities between sports and media fandoms: breaking down the sports/popular culture hierarchy

However, not all respondents emphasized the differences between sports and media fandoms, with just under one-quarter suggesting that connections could be made

between being a sports fan and/or fans with a different interest, such as movies, music or soaps. 15 out of 85 of the sports fans interviewed also self-defined themselves as fans of popular culture. R7 suggested that her conversations about sport were actually very similar to two women talking about soaps, and F30, though not a fan of soaps herself, appreciated people: 'Screaming at the television like I scream at the footballer on the pitch'.

Hence many women could see real correspondences between media and sports fandom. For those women who openly admitted to being a fan of other types of popular culture, this did not appear to be perceived as something which undermined their status as sports fans. Phrases such as commitment, passion, enjoyment, an interest or love for the object of one's fandom, and high anticipation and/or excitement generated by forthcoming events – see Wann *et al's*⁷⁹ 'eustress' – were used by respondents to describe what it meant to 'be a fan' of both sports and/or popular culture. In these sorts of responses, fandom was often defined in fairly generic terms: 'Being a fan of anything just means you're into something enough to either want to go and see something or pay to go and see something, or make time for a certain thing in your life' (F2):

I suppose a fan is just somebody who likes to go and watch something, so regardless of what it is...If you're a fan, it's like the anticipation of knowing that that event is coming up, thinking about what might happen, what the consequences of it might be. And then just taking part in it; whether you're sat on the sofa watching TV, waiting for something to unravel, or at the stadium itself. (R11, age 27, occasional attendee, part-time conveyancer)

There's not a lot of difference, it's an interest that you've got [...]. So a fan is a fan, irrespective of what it is [...]. The basic love and following of something I think, the baseline is there for anything and it's just which one to go off into. (F28, age 50, season ticket holder, book keeper)

Some women also discussed a gendered division in fandom between males as sports fans and females as media fans, as has been widely portrayed in academic accounts.⁸⁰ For a small number of respondents females were said to be 'naturally' more interested in soaps. For example, F16, a fan of both football and soaps, reasoned that: 'You might find the average female football fan is one that likes all the soaps as well'. Studies have shown that female athletes have been pressed to demonstrate their 'femininity' and confirm their heterosexuality, for example, through appropriate dress

and hair.⁸¹ Here being a female *fan* of a traditionally 'male' sport was perceived to raise questions around sexuality. R5 challenged the view that different types of female fandom normatively raise questions about conventional femininities, but was keen to assert her more 'feminine' interests and perhaps her non-lesbian status:

I guess in people's eyes there is probably this preconception that if you are a sporting fan, regardless of what sport that is, you spend your time in tracksuits and trainers and you're probably a lesbian (*laughs*). But if you actually watch soap operas, you like going out shopping and things, then you're that way inclined. But I think the two completely merge...I don't think the two are mutually exclusive....I mean I love, I absolutely love my rugby to bits, but I also love going out to the movies, I love music, I've never been a fan of soap operas but I love going out with my friends, I love dressing up, I love shopping. (R5, age 31, occasional attendee, administration assistant)

Numerous studies have shown how females struggle to balance their 'femininity' against participation in male-defined activities, and so 'doing' or 'performing' femininity is a highly complex process.⁸² Perhaps their involvement in traditionally 'male' sports has led to concerns for some women that they need to highlight their femininity or heterosexuality to avoid suspicion or confrontation from others. Many respondents emphasized that they also enjoyed more typically female defined activities including shopping, watching soaps, and dressing up. R4, for example, defined herself as a 'soap addict' and linked this interest to her self-expressed 'girly' identity, and F2 described how people are 'surprised' that she is a football fan: 'Because I'm a proper girly girl and I love my hair and I love my make up and I love shopping'. One of the attractions of soap operas for women has been said to be the centrality of female characters⁸³ and for F19 this relationship with female characters was crucial for a female audience:

F19: There's something about that [soaps] which attracts women that football maybe, maybe doesn't. Isn't there? I suppose with football it's that it's a male dominated sport, professional teams...To me it's a masculine. It's a man's sport and (*pauses*) its masculine (*laughs*).

Res: So would you describe yourself as a fan of anything else, say soap operas for example?

F19: Oh yeah (*louder*) *Desperate Housewives*, *Coronation Street* [TV programmes]. But I can relate to that better I suppose...It's about women, a more women thing.

Res: So what's the difference then, if you're a fan of these programmes perhaps over sport?

F19: Well I suppose *Desperate Housewives* I can relate to the characters in the programme; I can't relate to a footballer, I don't get that. It's a bloke. And you can relate to situations they're in [characters in a programme], and, it's funny, and it's about people's personalities, isn't it? Whereas I can't relate to blokes on a football pitch playing football.
(F19, age 45, occasional attendee, researcher)

Thus, women will supposedly be able to identify with the characters of a soap opera much more than they can with the 'masculine' world of sport and so for this respondent her involvement in soaps was much deeper than her involvement as a sports fan. I will now turn to the conclusion.

Conclusion

This paper makes one contribution towards bringing women's leisure experiences as sports spectators in largely 'male' sports to the fore. I examined how female sports fans position themselves in relation to stereotypes about media/soap fans, and suggested that some women fans perhaps distance themselves from female defined genres such as soaps in order to try and enhance their status as authentic sports fans. Many women were keen to emphasize the differences between sports and media forms of fandom, reaffirming the hierarchies that have traditionally been drawn in the Academy between these types of fandoms. However, for a smaller proportion of women there were clear similarities between media and sports fans, thus challenging these distinctions. These kinds of responses demonstrate the heterogeneity of women's sporting experiences and viewpoints and the range of their interpretations of fandom.

I would suggest that this paper has wider implications for research on sports and media fandoms. I propose that there is a need to disassemble the disjuncture or binary between sports and soaps in the Academy and to move beyond the notion of sport and soaps as separate cultural arenas. Sport (especially English Premiership football) needs to be acknowledged as a cultural product perhaps more in line with Blackshaw and Crabbe's⁸⁴ description as a kind of 'deviant' late-modern soap opera. The new media saturated coverage of sport and its celebrity players now plays a central role in the lives of both fans and non fans, hence scholars need to show more of an awareness

of the parallels and similarities which can be drawn between sports and media/soap fandoms, rather than sport remaining largely isolated from other types of fandoms.⁸⁵ In doing so, this may help us to move beyond the overly simplistic hierarchies whereby those fans who connect with their sport or club via the electronic media are labelled as less authentic in their support.⁸⁶

Finally, by breaking down the divide between sports and media fandoms I contend that this could also have important implications for research on gender. I have considered some of the complexities surrounding a gendered hierarchy in research between male (sports) and female (media) fans. One possible outcome of the general tendency to label women as media fans has been that the experiences of female sports fans have been largely invisibilized in research to date. If we recognise that important parallels can be drawn between soap operas and the recent media saturated coverage of sport, this may enable scholars to move away from gendered hierarchies which position males as authentic sports fans and females as typically inferior media fans. This could help to put women's experiences as authentic *sports* fans on the research agenda.

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Notes

¹ Schimmel *et al.*, 'Keep Your Fans to Yourself', 593.

² Mewett and Toffoletti, 'Finding Footy'.

³ Harrington & Bielby, *Soap Fans*.

⁴ Crawford & Gosling, 'The Myth of the Puck Bunny'.

⁵ Schimmel *et al.*, 'Keep Your Fans to Yourself'.

⁶ Glaser & Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*.

⁷ Schimmel *et al.*, 'Keep Your Fans to Yourself', 580.

⁸ See, for example, O'Connor and Boyle, 'Dallas with Balls'; Gantz and Wenner, 'Fanship and the Television Sports Viewing Experience'; Jones and Lawrence, 'Identity and Gender in Sport and Media Fandom'.

⁹ See, for example, Sandvoss, 'A Game of Two Halves'; Crawford, *Consuming Sport*.

¹⁰ Sandvoss, *Fans*.

¹¹ Schimmel *et al.*, 'Keep Your Fans to Yourself', 593.

¹² Jensen, 'Fandom as Pathology'.

¹³ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*.

¹⁴ Gray *et al.*, 'Introduction', 2.

¹⁵ Schimmel *et al.*, 'Keep Your Fans to Yourself'.

- ¹⁶ See Gray *et al.*, for a discussion of the development of fan scholarship over the past two decades.
- ¹⁷ Sandvoss, *Fans*, 3.
- ¹⁸ Hills, *Fan Cultures*.
- ¹⁹ Lewis, 'Introduction'.
- ²⁰ Wann *et al.*, *Sport Fans*, 31.
- ²¹ Trail and James, 'The Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption'.
- ²² Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans and Flâneurs'.
- ²³ Crawford, *Consuming Sport*, 4.
- ²⁴ See, for example, Redhead, Post-Fandom and the Millennial Blues; Wann *et al.*, *Sport Fans*; Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans and Flâneurs'.
- ²⁵ Gibbons and Dixon, 'Surfs Up!'.
- ²⁶ Sandvoss, *Fans*, 8.
- ²⁷ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 15.
- ²⁸ Larsen and Zubernis, *Fan Culture*.
- ²⁹ Jensen, 'Fandom as Pathology', 15.
- ³⁰ Zubernis and Larsen, 'Fan Studies at the Crossroads'.
- ³¹ Click, 'Rabid', 'Obsessed' and 'Frenzied'.
- ³² Jones & Lawrence, 'Identity and Gender in Sport and Media Fandom'.
- ³³ See, for example, Ang, *Watching Dallas*; Harrington and Bielby, *Soap Fans*; Bruin, 'Dutch Television Soap Opera'; Spence, *Watching Daytime Soap Operas*.
- ³⁴ Kilborn, *Television Soaps*; Skeggs and Wood, 'The Labour of Transformation and Circuits of Value 'Around' Reality Television'.
- ³⁵ See Ehrenreich *et al.*, 'Beatlemania' Girls Just Wanna Have Fun'; Hinerman, 'I'll Be Here With You'; Toth, 'J-Pop and Performances of Young Female Identity'.
- ³⁶ Taylor, *Scarlett's Women*; Barbas, *Movie Crazy*; Bell and Williams (eds) *British Women's Cinema*.
- ³⁷ Abercrombie, *Television and Society*.
- ³⁸ Geraghty, *Women and Soap Opera*; Spence, *Watching Daytime Soap Operas*.
- ³⁹ Brown, 'Conclusion', 204.
- ⁴⁰ O'Connor and Boyle, 'Dallas With Balls', 108.
- ⁴¹ Zubernis and Larsen, 'Fan Studies at the Crossroads'.
- ⁴² Blackshaw and Crabbe, 'New Perspectives on Sport and Deviance', 112.
- ⁴³ Hamilton *et al.*, 24th February 2010, *The Sun*; Smart & Wheeler, 26th May 2010, *The Sun*.
- ⁴⁴ O'Connor & Boyle, 'Dallas with Balls'.
- ⁴⁵ Mewett and Toffoletti, 'Finding Footy'.
- ⁴⁶ King, *The End of the Terraces*.
- ⁴⁷ Crabbe *et al.*, *Football: An All Consuming Passion*.
- ⁴⁸ See, for example, Crolley & Long, 'Sitting Pretty'; Jones, 'Female Fandom'; Toffoletti and Mewett *Sport and Its Female Fans*. Toffoletti and Mewett's edited collection published in 2012 is the first book length contribution to examining women sports fans.
- ⁴⁹ Mewett and Toffoletti, 'Finding Footy'.
- ⁵⁰ Crawford & Gosling, 'The Myth of the 'Puck Bunny'', 477, 486.
- ⁵¹ Crolley & Long, 'Sitting Pretty', 208.
- ⁵² Collins, *A Social History of English Rugby Union*, 93.
- ⁵³ Pope, S. *Female Fandom in an English 'Sports City'*.
- ⁵⁴ Pope, S. *Female Fandom in an English 'Sports City'*.

- ⁵⁵ Williams, *Premier Rugby National Fan Survey*; Williams, *A Survey of Leicester City FC Football Fans*.
- ⁵⁶ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ See Bryman, *Social Research Methods*.
- ⁵⁸ Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*; Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*.
- ⁵⁹ See Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*; Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*.
- ⁶⁰ Crawford and Gosling, 'The Myth of the 'Puck Bunny''; Crolley & Long, 'Sitting Pretty'.
- ⁶¹ Ang, *Watching Dallas*, 54; see also Geraghty, *Women and Soap Opera*.
- ⁶² See, for example, Fiske, *Television Culture*; Kilborn, *Staging the Real*.
- ⁶³ Harrington & Bielby, *Soap Fans*, 4; Schimmel *et al.*, 'Keep Your Fans to Yourself'.
- ⁶⁴ Harrington & Bielby, *Soap Fans*.
- ⁶⁵ Schimmel *et al.*, 'Keep Your Fans to Yourself', 582.
- ⁶⁶ Holt, *Sport and the British*.
- ⁶⁷ Wann *et al.*, *Sport Fans*; Mehus, 'Sociability and Excitement Motives of Spectators Attending Entertainment Sport Events'.
- ⁶⁸ Mewett & Toffoletti, 'The Strength of Strong Ties'; Mewett & Toffoletti, 'Finding Footy'.
- ⁶⁹ Harrington and Bielby, *Soap Fans*.
- ⁷⁰ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 115.
- ⁷¹ Crolley and Long, 'Sitting Pretty'.
- ⁷² Skille, 'Biggest but Smallest'.
- ⁷³ Holt, *Sport and the British*; Russell, *Football and the English*.
- ⁷⁴ Boyle and Haynes, *Power Play*.
- ⁷⁵ Wann *et al.*, *Sport Fans*.
- ⁷⁶ Cialdini *et al.*, *Basking in Reflected Glory*.
- ⁷⁷ Kilborn, *Staging the Real*.
- ⁷⁸ Crawford & Gosling, 'The Myth of the 'Puck Bunny''.
- ⁷⁹ Wann *et al.*, *Sport Fans*.
- ⁸⁰ Jones and Lawrence, 'Identity and Gender in Sport and Media Fandom'.
- ⁸¹ Wright and Clarke, 'Sport, the Media and the Construction of Compulsory Heterosexuality'; Cox and Thompson, 'Multiple Bodies'; Harris, 'The Image Problem in Women's Football'.
- ⁸² See Russell and Tyler, 'Thank Heaven for Little Girls'; Paechter and Clark, 'Who are Tomboys and How do We Recognise Them?'; Sisjord and Kristiansen, 'Elite Women Wrestlers' Muscles'.
- ⁸³ Geraghty, *Women and Soap Opera*.
- ⁸⁴ Blackshaw and Crabbe, 'New Perspectives on Sport and 'Deviance''.
- ⁸⁵ See Schimmel *et al.*, 'Keep Your Fans to Yourself'.
- ⁸⁶ See Crawford, *Consuming Sport*; Gibbons and Dixon, 'Surfs Up!'.

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