

Stability and Change in Sports Fandom Over Time: A Longitudinal Study of U.S. Women's
Professional Soccer Fandom

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Abstract

Scholars have recognized that sports fandom is not static, but temporal and fluid. However, little longitudinal research has traced the development of fandom over time. This analysis makes a new contribution to the sociology of fandom and women's sport by drawing from interviews with 35 U.S. adults who attended the 2019 Women's World Cup and were re-interviewed after the 2023 Women's World Cup to consider how and why fandom of U.S. women's professional soccer develops over time. Findings show stability in high levels of identification but fluctuating practices. Themes of the *life course* and *opportunity structure* show the importance of individual and team/league changes to fans' ability to engage in a range of behavioral expressions associated with their fandom and also account for the small number of participants whose attachment to women's soccer waned. By offering new insights on the factors that shape (changing) fan attachments and practices, we advance knowledge about women's sport fans at a time when women's soccer is undergoing rapid change. Our findings can also inform future longitudinal work in other sport contexts.

Keywords: Fandom, Gender, Women's Football, Women's World Cup

Introduction

Most American adults describe themselves as at least somewhat attached to sport as fans and over 40% report high levels of identification, marking sports fandom as both a common and significant aspect of people's lives (Allison & Knoester, 2024). Yet while a substantial body of research has considered the social and psychological processes through which fandom is first inculcated, how individuals experience their fandom over time has received far less attention, despite some recognition that fandom may fluctuate in its strength, meaning, or enactment (Crawford, 2003; Hyatt & Foster, 2015; Mansfield, 2020). As Carter (2016) argues, "there are surprisingly few studies that examine how fan identities change over time" (p. 1667). A lack of attention to change is a notable omission given theorizations of sports fandom which emphasize human agency within complex social structures (see Allison & Pope, 2022; Dixon, 2011; Tang, Kucek, & Toepfer, 2022), as well as the ways that macro-level processes such as globalization,

mediatization, professionalization, commercialization, and securitization are re-organizing contemporary sports fandom (Williams, 2007).

These developments are notably evident in elite U.S. women's sport, where increasing attendance, viewership, media attention, and corporate investment reflect advancing commercialization and professionalization (Allison & Pope, 2022). For example, the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team's 2023 Women's World Cup match against Netherlands was watched by just under 8 million U.S. viewers, making this the most-watched U.S. group stage match ever across England and Spanish broadcasts (Carp and Dixon, 2023). The early stages of professionalization are accompanied by sometimes rapid organizational and economic changes, generating a unique opportunity to consider the (changing) experiences of fans (Culvin & Bowes, 2023). Yet while scholars have begun to consider the fans of women's sport, there remains a paucity of research on the consumers of women's sport, especially over time (Allison & Pope, 2022; Delia 2020; Delia et al., 2022). This is a striking omission given some research has shown inequalities in women's fan careers over the life course. For example, Pope (2017) found that women fans have been compelled to take 'fan breaks' after having children, despite men partners continuing to attend. By shedding light on the factors that shape fan attachments and practices, this research offers new knowledge about women's sport fans in context of the evolving cultural and economic status of U.S. women's sport and provides an initial set of findings to inform future longitudinal work in other sport contexts.

Our analysis draws on in-depth interviews with 35 U.S. adults who attended the 2019 Women's World Cup. Participants were interviewed in 2019 and again in 2023 following the conclusion of the 2023 Women's World Cup to understand their fandom over time. U.S. women's soccer is a compelling focal sport due to its large numbers of participants and fans, the high

profile of the U.S. Women's National Team (USWNT) following recent Women's World Cup victories and legal battle for equal pay, and the decade-old domestic National Women's Soccer League (NWSL), which has experienced recent upswings in attendance and television viewership (Allison, 2018). In relying on longitudinal interview methods, this study responds to calls for novel methodological approaches for understanding women's professional sport, as well as calls for longitudinal research on sport fandom (Delia et al., 2022; Hyatt & Foster, 2015; Mansfield, 2020; Thompson et al., 2023; Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996).

Background

Defining Fandom

Sport fan communities frequently define themselves by making forms of behavior, knowledge, identity, or expression most "authentic" and alternative modes of involvement lesser than. In men's sport, so-called "authentic" fandom often aligns with constructions of masculinity and social interactions marginalize women fans to uphold men's power and privilege (Kossakowski, Antonowicz, & Jakubowska, 2022; Osborne & Coombs, 2013; Pope, 2017). So, too, has some academic literature relied on typologies of fandom that elevate certain forms of involvement as most "authentic" or "engaged" (Crawford, 2003; Dixon, 2011; Giulianotti, 2002; Tarver, 2017). In contrast, this analysis does not define specific behaviors or levels of felt identification as marking women's soccer fandom. Instead, we build an inductive account of fandom over a four-year period beginning from fans' subjective descriptions and prioritizing what they found to be meaningful.

Broadly, we conceptualize "fandom" from Tarver (2019), who argues that sports fandom "is characterized by a combination of *care* (that is, emotional investment) and *practice* (that is, some form of active engagement with the sport one watches)" (p. 11). For fans, attachment to

sports teams provides a valued, meaningful source of social identity which is both confirmed and strengthened through the performative dimension (Carter, 2016; Osborne & Coombs, 2013). Yet while research has documented connections between attachments to sport and consumption behaviors, and in fact scholars and non-scholars alike presume that dimensions of affective investment and practice define “fandom” (Hyatt & Foster, 2015; Mansfield, 2020), this relationship is complex. While fans may desire to express their affective connections to a sports team through behaviors such as game viewership, social media following, or the purchase of merchandise, thus verifying their fan identities, whether or how fandom is practiced is also influenced by factors that either facilitate such practice or present barriers to it (Allison & Pope, 2022; Hyatt, 2007; Tarver, 2017). For example, and as we will detail below in the findings, fans’ proximity to stadiums enabled greater in-person game attendance, while distance made such attendance less likely (see Chahardovali, Watanbe, and Dastrup, 2023).

Literature and Theoretical Framework

Sports fandom is often an enduring part of individual lives, instilled during childhood by media, peer groups, and families of origin, carrying through to adulthood, and transmitted again to children as part of a “natural life cycle of sports fandom” (Tamir, 2022; see also Dixon, 2012). Some academic research has treated emotional and cognitive attachments to sport as fundamentally stable and static once established (Crawford, 2003; Dixon, 2011; Tamir, 2022). Yet recent theorizing has challenged this view, establishing fandom as “transitional, fluid and often temporal” (Crawford, 2003, p. 220; Carter 2016; Osborne & Coombs, 2013; Wann et al., 1996). Consider, for instance, the examples of so-called “fair weather” fans whose interest in teams varies based on competitive successes, those who lose interest in a sport when a team leaves a local market, or those whose fandom “travels” across teams or leagues alongside a star

player. Further, several progressive or stage models of sports fandom presume an over-time component, including Funk and James' "psychological continuum model" (2001) and Crawford's (2003) model of the sports fan "career." These models present fandom along a continuum of attachment, with Crawford (2003) recognizing that individuals may advance, remain in place, or decline in their levels of identification with sport.

Several studies have addressed changing fandom over time, though empirical investigation is limited. Hyatt and Foster (2015) develop a conceptual model of de-escalating fandom in professional men's ice hockey. They find that fandom declines due to lack of alignment between a fan's values and the values represented by the sport object or interruptions to individuals' ability to participate in practices that establish their identity as sports fans. Former National Hockey League fans cited their disillusionment with elements of the sport and new life experiences that presented barriers to fandom to account for their present disinterest and lack of involvement. Similarly, Carter (2016) theorizes his declining fandom of a National Basketball Association (NBA) team as a case of a "broken identity verification loop," arguing that when identity meanings are invested in an external object, changes to this object may alter sources of identity meaning. Specifically, frequent changes to the NBA team's location, name, and colors meant that the symbolic meanings that had animated Carter's fandom were no longer possible to maintain and verify behaviorally. Tamir's interview (2022) study of Israeli soccer fans across three age groups finds escalating fandom from childhood through young adulthood, a dip in middle age, and then an eventual return to fandom in later life. In accounting for these age-graded patterns, Tamir points to factors such as the demands of parenthood, the availability of leisure time, social support, and consumption opportunities. And Mansfield's (2020) interview study of sports fandom among new parents divided participants into categories of Maintainers

and Modifiers. Two thirds of participants described similar levels of fan identification pre- and post-parenthood, although children did sometimes give new meaning to experiences of fandom (see also Hyatt et al., 2018).

These studies of fandom in men's sport similarly call attention to and account for shifting fan attachments and/or practices, several with a focus on how individual life transitions prompt re-evaluations of or new barriers to fandom. Yet this existing research considers change in one direction only (e.g., desistance) or on a specific life experience affecting fandom, such as parenthood. In addition, as autoethnographic or cross-sectional interview studies, these analyses craft understandings of change from the retrospective accounts of participants, which are subject to recall error and selection bias. We engage with and extend this research by addressing a women's sport context and by relying on longitudinal research methods and an inductive approach that allow for either stability or change to fandom and capture all life transitions and team/league changes relevant to fandom among participants. The multi-level theoretical framework for our analysis integrates identity theory and life course theory with the concept of sporting opportunity structures to position sports fan identities through individual life trajectories within larger social structural contexts. Like Dixon (2011; 2012) and Tang, Kucek, and Toepfer (2022), we see sport fans as neither determined by social forces nor entirely outside of them and seek to integrate social structure and individual agency to understand fandom over time.

Identity theory is a social psychological theory which posits that individuals define themselves through socially defined positions that change over time and exist within hierarchies of salience and prominence; this theory has often been the basis for prior studies of fan identities (Allison & Knoester, 2021; Carter, 2016; Hyatt & Foster, 2015; Mansfield, 2020; Osborne & Coombs, 2013). Within this theory, identity is "multi-faceted" (Hyatt & Foster, 2015) and the

adoption of new social positions requires individuals to renegotiate whether and how they perform other existing identities. New parenthood, for instance, prompts a re-evaluation of the salience, meaning, and feasibility of sports fan identities (Mansfield, 2020). Further, identities are verified socially to oneself and to others through behaviors which conform to expectations (Carter, 2016).

The complex and shifting nature of social identities aligns well with a life course approach, which considers over-time trajectories through mutually influential domains of life, the importance of aging processes and socially constructed age-based norms, and the impact of “turning points” to future outcomes (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Harrington & Bielby, 2010). For instance, and akin to identity theory, socially defined and age-graded milestones such as graduating from college, marriage, or retirement are also, at the same time, new social roles which provide new social identities and affect the use of time and resources. Previous analyses of sports following have relied on life course theory to examine relationships between childhood and adult attachments to, and consumption of, sport. For instance, Allison and Knoester’s (2024) analysis of U.S. survey data found that having had athletic and sports fan parents enhanced adults’ own consumption of girls’ and women’s sport. Other literature has considered influences between sports fandom and other life domains, such as family, work, or education. Crawford (2003), for example, draws from the concept of “status passage” to consider that fandom is influenced by “the passage of an individual through various stages in a life course (such as shifting from being unmarried to married)” (p. 224). Other studies show that as people get older, some fans do not lose their “passion” but naturally move from the sectors for more ‘fanatical’ fans to sectors where activities are less vigorous (Doidge, Kossakowski, & Mintert, 2020; Kossakowski, 2021).

Finally, we center the concept of sporting opportunity structures to locate individuals within the context of professional women's sport and related entities, such as corporate sponsors and mass media. This context is important given the relatively early stage of professionalization of women's soccer in the U.S. and the changes to the sport this process generates (Culvin & Bowes, 2023; Wrack, 2022). We build from social structural analyses of women's sport, for instance which have considered patterns of consumption of women's sport relative to levels of media coverage (Allison & Knoester, 2024). From this perspective, the existing landscape of opportunity and resources fundamentally shapes whether and how individuals can form attachments to or engage with sports teams. For instance, a recent analysis of attendance at National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) games found declines in attendance with greater distance of stadiums from city centers, pointing to geographical proximity as a critical component of sporting opportunity structures with relevance to fan behaviors (Chahardovali, Watanabe, & Dastrup, 2023; see also Hyatt, 2007; Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996).

Taken together, these theories show that sport fandom is profoundly social, shaped by individuals' complex collection of social identities, existing organizational and institutional arrangements, and processes of aging and over-time life transition. Using this framework, we address the following research questions:

1. In terms of identification and behavior, how has U.S. women's soccer fandom developed between 2019 and 2023?
2. What factors account for stability or change in U.S. women's soccer fandom between 2019-2023?

Methods

Longitudinal qualitative methods are appropriate for answering questions about change over time, as they "enable the identification and meaning of temporal change across lives, and the exploration of how people interpret and respond to such change" (Hermanowicz, 2013, p.

190; see also Grossoehme & Lipstein, 2016; Harrington & Bielby, 2010; Saldaña, 2003). To answer our research questions, we rely on two waves of interviews conducted in 2019 and 2023 with 35 U.S. women's soccer fans. A 4-year interval was selected to coincide with the end of the 2023 Women's World Cup. Notably, this period saw changes to the Women's World Cup, the U.S. Women's National Team, and the National Women's Soccer League. This period included a pause in sport due to the COVID-19 pandemic, though the National Women's Soccer League returned to play in the form of the Challenge Cup in 2020 before the resumption of other sport competitions (Clarkson et al., 2022). Since 2019, the National Women's Soccer League has expanded from 9 to 12 teams, experienced growing attendance and sponsor investment, and signed its first collective bargaining agreement with players. However, allegations of player abuse, harassment, and mistreatment resulted in internal and external investigations and the firing or resignation of some league and team employees (Reavis, Springer, & Shields, 2022). Similarly, the 2023 Women's World Cup expanded from 24 to 32 teams, saw total prize money increase, including \$30,000 minimum payments to each player, and generated record ticket sales. At the same time, this tournament, too, was marked by several controversies, including the Spanish FA President's forcible kiss of Spanish star Jenni Hermoso following the team's victory (Carp & Dixon, 2023; Gastelum, 2023). And the U.S. Women's National Team signed a new collective bargaining agreement with the U.S. Soccer Federation in 2022 that equalized pay, but only following a protracted and public legal battle (Culvin et al., 2022). It is in this context of advancing professionalization and commercialization, yet persistent sexism, that this study of fandom over time unfolded.

In 2019, the first author interviewed 53 U.S. adults who attended one or more games of the 2019 Women's World Cup. These fans were recruited through social media posts, emails sent

to soccer journalists, and snowball sampling. Interviews took place via phone or video chat and lasted between 46 and 88 minutes. For additional methodological information about the 2019 study, see (Allison & Pope, 2022). 35 of these participants (or 66% of the 2019 sample) were interviewed again in the 3 months following the conclusion of the 2023 Women's World Cup. Participants were contacted via email for follow ups, which also took place via phone (N= 30) or video chat (N= 5) and, except for one married couple who preferred to interview jointly, were individual.

In 2019, interviews followed a guide including questions on childhood and adult experiences playing and following sports, pathway into women's soccer fandom, experiences at the Women's World Cup, and behaviors and experiences as fans, for instance in attending games, watching on television, talking with and interacting with others, and following via social media. The interview guide for follow up interviews was constructed to be as similar as possible to the 2019 guide, but was modified to eliminate questions about childhood, to refer to the 2023 tournament, and with added questions about possible changes to fandom over time. These included questions relevant to fan identification ("How important is being a women's soccer fan to you now?") and behaviors, probing for game attendance, television viewership, relationships with others, and following through media. Longitudinal qualitative interview studies do not require identical interview guides, as new conditions require new questions, although consistency around similar themes is desirable (Hermanowicz, 2013).

Follow up interviews ranged from 38 to 110 minutes, with an average duration of 60 minutes. Of the 35 participants, all were cisgender; 30 were women and 5 were men. 29, or 83 percent, were white, while others were Black (3), Latinx (1), or biracial (2). 22 participants (or 63 percent) identified as heterosexual, while others identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer,

and 1 participant preferred not to disclose their sexual identity. The modal age category was 30-39 (19 participants), while others were in their 20's (4), 40's (5), 50's (5), and 60's (2). All but one participant had earned at least a 4-year college degree.

Recruiting those who traveled abroad for the Women's World Cup in 2019 resulted in a sample of affluent, knowledgeable, and invested fans who followed both the U.S. Women's National Team and the domestic National Women's Soccer League. Some also followed local college women's teams closely. Consequently, this analysis addresses fan development among a privileged group with notably high levels of fandom in 2019. In addition, selection into follow up interviews is possible to the extent that those whose fandom declined through 2023 may have been less interested in participating. Nevertheless, these data are appropriate for developing an inductive account of the development of U.S. women's soccer fandom over 4 years. These data capture both subjective descriptions of changes to fandom over time and more objective comparisons of described identification and practices between 2019 and 2023 interviews.

Interviews were transcribed and MAXQDA2022 qualitative data analysis software was used for analysis. We conducted a "trajectory" analysis to compare individuals between interview waves, rather than a "recurrent cross-sectional analysis" of all participants at each wave (Grossoehme & Lipstein, 2016). Data from 2019 had initially been coded following Deterding and Waters' (2009) "flexible" approach to coding. The same first-round index codes related to women's soccer fan behaviors and identification were used in coding follow up interview transcripts to organize the data and pull out relevant material. Then, analytic codes were applied to smaller portions of data, starting with the first interview for each participant before moving to the follow up interview. Following recommended use of tables or matrices to trace change over time (Grossoehme & Lipstein, 2016; Saldaña, 2003), data analysis for each

participant was presented in a matrix, with codes presented across one axis and time along the other. Each matrix was accompanied by a participant memo that reflected on stability or change to fandom over time, with a particular emphasis on identification and behaviors. Memos were guided by several sensitizing questions suggested by Saldaña (2003), including “What increases (decreases) or emerges through time?”; “What contextual and intervening conditions appear to influence and affect participant changes through time?”; and “Which changes interrelate through time?” Finally, following the completion of all matrices, a cross-case memo integrated codes into themes, forming a broader theoretical account of fandom between 2019 and 2023 (Hermanowicz, 2013). Below, we describe overall *patterns of fan identification and practice* over this time period before turning to the two themes that account for these patterns: *my life has changed*, and *the opportunity structure has changed*.

Results

Patterns of Fan Identification Between 2019 and 2023: Care and Practice

Most participants (N= 22) described similar levels of emotional investment in professional women’s soccer between 2019 and 2023. In 2019, Sadie called herself a “huge fan,” and in 2023, said, “I still would definitely identify myself as a fan and would identify myself as more of a fan I think than most people are.” Multiple participants reported their fandom to be “the same” (Beth; Jeff; Saria; Rochelle; Viv) or “similar” (Cristin; Mallory; Nadine) or used the term “I still” (Callie; Kim; Linda; Viv) to describe equivalent levels of care between 2019 and 2023. In 2023, Andrea said of her fandom since 2019, “I don’t think it’s diminished at all. To tell you the truth, I’m just a soccer fan. Man, I’ll just watch it. I just love it. I love watching women play.” Andrea’s professed love for the sport in 2023 echoed her comments in 2019, when she said, “I really just feel in love with soccer.” Nine participants described enhanced feelings of

identification in 2023 compared to 2019. Abigail, for example, said that “I think my emotional investment has escalated in the past four years or so.” Naomi, too, reflected that, “I think I’m more invested in it now than I was.” However, the scope of this change was minor to moderate given that these were already highly identified fans in 2019. The small scale of change was indicated by words like “slightly” (Lily), “little bit” (Gina) or in qualified assertions of enhanced affective connection with phrases such as “if that’s possible” (Nikki) or “I don’t know” (Ana). For instance, when asked in 2023 how important her women’s soccer fandom was to her, Lily responded, “I probably would rate it slightly more important than in 2019.”

In contrast, four participants described decreased cognitive and affective attachments to professional women’s soccer since 2019, noting that their fandom had “tapered” (Kinsley). In 2019, Brandon had marked himself as an invested fan in saying of a sports bar where he went to watch men’s and women’s games, “you only had *true* fans there.” Yet as soon as his 2023 interview began, Brandon said, “Maybe to get into the meat of things here, my fandom, my attention that I give to women’s soccer overall is significantly lower than I did in 2019.” And Mandi, like others in this group, noted that while women’s soccer remained somewhat important to her, it was less important than 4 years ago. In 2023, she said of the sport, “It’s important but the prioritization and time has gone down. I want to say it’s important but not extremely important.”

We thus find an overall pattern of stability in high levels of identification with and attachment to women’s soccer as fans over this four-year period. Continued and similar investment was motivated by many of the same factors that led participants into women’s soccer fandom, including an appreciation for women’s athletic performance, a perceived inclusive and welcoming fan culture, and a desire to support the growth of women’s sport (Allison & Pope,

2022). However, findings show variable relationships between the dimensions of care and practice between 2019 and 2023. For the four participants whose connections to the sport had declined, they unanimously reported declines in the fan practices they had previously engaged in; they consumed women's soccer far less than in 2019, and their current consumption was both minimal and passive. When discussing her consumption of the NWSL in 2019, Gina reported that, "2014 was when I started to watch all the games. Like 2014, 2015." In 2023, in comparison, Gina estimated that she watched "on average one [game] a week, but it's pretty variable," notable evidence of lower consumption given the greater number of NWSL games to watch since 2019 with league expansion. The most common form of consumption described by these participants was the reading of information about women's soccer that popped up on news websites or social media accounts. Kinsley, for instance, said that she still "followed stories" about women's soccer, but regarding watching on TV, noted, "I'm just not putting in the effort to figure out where things are airing...But I just feel generally, really, not just soccer, it's really sports wise I just have not been watching it as much."

For all others, stable and high identification was associated with continued desires for and practices of consumption, but the type and frequency of these practices varied considerably compared to 2019. Among a group who had ubiquitously travelled to France for the 2019 Women's World Cup, for instance, only 7 had attended the 2023 Women's World Cup. The specific behaviors that fans talked about most commonly and in most detail were attending live games, watching games on TV, and following through media (including social media, mainstream media, and podcasts). For some, the practice of fandom looked remarkably similar in 2023 to 2019 in these metrics. Viv, for instance, described first becoming an NWSL season ticket holder in her 2019 interview. She said, "Then I moved back to DC. My parents live in this area

as well and I convinced them to start going to Washington Spirit games with me again. We end up getting season tickets because we decided we were going to go to pretty much all the games anyway.” In 2023, she was still a season ticket holder who had attended all of that season’s home games to date. As Viv explained, “I still live in DC, go to Washington Spirit games regularly, watch the national team play on TV or on the rare occasion they play here, I try to see them live.” A few fans also described new, added practices to their fan repertoires since 2019. Andrew, a self-professed, “bigger fan than I was four years ago,” travelled to the 2023 Women’s World Cup by himself and reported that since 2019, “I’ve been able to more regularly attend league [NWSL] matches.” Other fans, in contrast, described decreased investments of time, energy, or money over time, despite continued high levels of identification.

Typically, fans less clearly described a zero-sum addition or subtraction of fan practices over time than a degree of tradeoff, where certain forms of involvement had increased, while others had decreased. Elizabeth reported that her fandom was as important to her in 2023 as it was in 2019. In 2019, she described becoming a season ticket holder who attended nearly all home games with the NWSL’s Seattle Reign. She said, “I moved here in the summer of 2014, so I think I went to a couple games at the end of that season. And then the next year I went to maybe 5 or 6 games but didn’t have season tickets yet. And then 2016 through now I’ve had season tickets and gone to all but 1 or 2 games.” Though she still lived in Seattle in 2023 and retained her season ticket, Elizabeth had attended far fewer Reign home games, estimating that she had missed about 10 home games during the 2022 season. Instead, she had watched more of the season on TV; as Elizabeth noted in her 2023 interview, “I did a lot of watching sports on TV and chatting with people about it online.”

Two themes account for both the decline of fan care and practice among a minority of participants, as well as varying practices of fandom over time among those who remained highly identified or became even more so. While we present these themes separately to detail individual and opportunity structure influences on fandom, these influences were sometimes simultaneous in fans' experiences.

My Life Has Changed: Individual, Network and Life Course Influences on Fandom

We find that participants' lives changed between 2019 and 2023 in ways that influenced either their identification with women's soccer, their practices of fandom, or both. Specifically, participants had experienced changes in their *social relationships, parenthood, jobs, residence, age, or health*. These findings illustrate the importance of identity and life course theories, as they reflect the ways that social positions, aging processes, and age-graded life transitions influence fandom over time.

Relationships with friends or family members had sometimes shifted in ways relevant to fandom. In both 2019 and 2023, married couple Cameron and Callie opted to interview together from their home. In 2023, however, they noted their impending divorce. In reflecting on how this event had shaped their fan practice, Callie noted, "I think we haven't really watched the U.S. games together," and Cameron agreed, "I think that in some respect, we haven't watched as much. You know, we didn't watch the last couple of [USWNT] friendlies together." Since 2019, they had also purchased only 2 NWSL season tickets, and not 4, as Cameron's children no longer wanted to attend. Cameron described this disinterest as a function of their getting older, noting "Neither one of them care about going to the game with us. They're twenty-one and seventeen, as opposed to seventeen and thirteen. My daughter is just more and more removed from sports."

Other fans had entered new social networks since 2019 that had either elevated or discouraged fandom. Naomi, for instance, described watching more women's soccer on TV after becoming embedded in a group of other soccer-playing women. In 2023, she said, "I play more soccer now than I think I did before. My outdoor team, a bunch of them play on an indoor team so we play indoor soccer now, too. I think that has gotten me more into watching more of the NWSL soccer...Being on a soccer team helps make it feel more important or there's a group of us talking about it. So it's a group dynamic." In contrast, a new romantic relationship with a woman uninterested in soccer was one of the reasons that Brandon felt his fan identification and practice had declined since 2019. As he explained,

It's just life circumstances...My girlfriend is not a soccer fan. We don't watch any soccer together, so that's a detractor. I think that also, I spend way more time working than I used to...I guess overall it's like, when I think back to 2019, I think there was this perfect storm of, I was relatively newly single, so I had a lot of free time and that open space to explore new interests and get into new things, and join in on social events with people.

As previous research has found (Mansfield, 2020), familial responsibilities among the few participants who had become new parents since 2019 led to declining practices of consumption. For Mandi, becoming a mother to a now-2-year-old had made her fandom less important to her and prompted less consumption. Noting with disappointment that she and her wife had dropped their NWSL season tickets after their son was born, she explained, "We have since had to stop it [buying season tickets], mostly because it's been hard to make games with a toddler. Like a baby and now he's a toddler. That was such a bummer, because we had been waiting for so long for LA to get a team." Mallory, whose daughter was also 2, similarly acknowledged, "Yeah, we had a kid two years ago, so that definitely makes time to be a fan slightly more difficult...Also, having said that, like women's soccer specifically is something I want to expose her to. She basically thinks the TV only plays women's soccer. That's the only

thing that she has seen it used for.” From a life course perspective, Mandi and Mallory’s experiences illustrate the ways that age-grade life transitions like parenthood prompt a re-evaluation of existing identities and practices considering new time and resource constraints.

Yet while Mallory admitted that some practices of consumption had declined following her daughter’s birth, she also used ongoing consumption to begin introducing the sport to her child, illustrating how new parenthood may alter the meanings attached to existing fan identification. In fact, reflecting the same fandom “life cycle” documented by Tamir (2022), some fans had watched their children become interested in women’s soccer since 2019 and had eagerly cultivated this new interest. At 4 years of age, Nikki’s daughter had been too young in 2019 to play the sport or show much interest in or awareness of it. At 8 in 2023, however, she had begun playing and showing an interest in following professional women’s soccer. Nikki talked with excitement about this change, which had broadened her fan practices to include hosting sleepovers to watch Women’s World Cup games. As Nikki said about her daughter,

“Yeah, she’s pretty into it now. So she plays, I coach... She has a couple of friends that really like it as well. So she’s much more like she wants to watch the games. She wants to talk about the games now. She wants to go to the games... We had a couple of sleepovers during the [Women’s] World Cup and I would wake them up at three o’clock in the morning to watch the game. [She] would get up and watch and I mean she wanted to get up to watch all the games. So, she wasn’t just waking up for the US games, she was waking up for all kinds of games. It’s been pretty cool. I just want them to love it because I love it.

Other participants had experienced job change since 2019. Job change had particularly affected fans’ available time to consume women’s soccer given both the hours required and the relative degree of flexibility they offered. Since 2019, for instance, Breanne had moved within her company to a job that she could do from home. As she argued, this change had given her greater freedom to watch women’s soccer on TV. She said about this practice of fandom, “Well, it makes it easier since I’ve been working from home. So, if there’s games, like, during the day

or anything, I can just have it on my TV while I'm working in the living room." Conversely, Linda had found far less flexibility in a new job since 2019, and this led her to watch less of the 2023 Women's World Cup live on TV than she desired, as the games aired very early in the morning. Linda explained that, "I worked at a church before and I only worked thirty-two hours, but also it was just really flexible. Now my job, it's not that type of a situation. Then when the World Cup was on, I did not wake up early intentionally to watch games just because I was like, "I have to be at work at eight and ready to do my job.""

Other fans had moved since 2019, often for a new job, and their new geographic location had direct implications for their attendance at live games; moving located participants either closer to or farther from an NWSL market. When Francie had been searching for jobs on the East coast, she had prioritized the area of Washington, DC in part because it had an NWSL team. "I moved to DC partly, I mean, part of that inspiration was because they had an NWSL team, and I knew it would be fun for me to be able to enjoy that aspect," she said. "I wouldn't say it was a major factor in me deciding to live there, but it was definitely viewed as a positive in the plus/minus column." Kim, too, had moved for work after finishing graduate school, but out of an NWSL market and into the Southern U.S. Kim said, "I guess a big change was obviously when I was in school, I went to [NWSL] games a lot and had at least partial seasons tickets and stuff. So now, not being very close to an NWSL team has meant I've gone to way fewer live games." And two fans had moved from the U.S. to Australia since 2019, Quenna to work at a new branch of her company and Jen because her spouse, whom she had married before 2019, was Australian. Both Quenna and Jen described how living in Australia had enabled them to attend 2023 Women's World Cup games in the country; otherwise, as for others, the trip would have been prohibitively long and expensive.

The experience of getting older was also relevant to fan identification and practices among many. Since 2019, Jana had experienced the age-related transition of retirement, which had opened time for her to consume more women's soccer. She said of retiring, "But it did affect my time which, you know, was a little different. So now I'm just working part time at the local library and loving it, and more time to spend on women's soccer and other interests." And for Abigail, the transition out of college and into "adulthood" since 2019 prompted a new evaluation of her life, including her leisure interests. Abigail's intensified fandom since then was reflected in a recent women's soccer tattoo, which she sent a photo of over email. As Abigail explained, "I graduated college in 2016. I think just establishing a life for myself came along with developing, growing a lot in terms of my interests and the things that I was going to settle into in my adult life as the way that I was going to spend my time and the things I was going to care about. I think it was probably the age and the life transition phase I was in."

For Madison, in contrast to Abigail, getting older and re-thinking how she spent her time led her away from fandom of women's soccer and towards other interests. As Madison said about her low levels of interest in or following of women's soccer in 2023, "I was in a different stage of my life where I just want to do other things... While I'm in my early thirties, I've already lived a pretty full life and soccer's taken me so many different places, and I played at a pretty high level. How long am I going to be in it? I guess I just made a choice to live a little bit differently while I have my capacities." For several fans, aging mattered to fandom relative to the age of current professional players. Having played soccer fosters women's connections to the sport as fans, and close connections between players and fans may reflect the limited professionalization that has marked the sport in the U.S. until recently (Allison & Pope, 2022; Culvin & Bowes, 2023). Accordingly, getting older, while current players remained much

younger, could weaken the sport-fan bond. Sadie had previously played with women who had become professionals and argued that watching these players retire made her less interested in following younger players: “I still try and follow when all the roster news comes out and everything, even though I’m increasingly aware that people my age are retiring...I’m in this generational shift where all the women who I felt a sort of like contemporary kinship with are all kind of retiring and aging out.”

Finally, some participants had experienced health problems that made certain forms of consumption difficult, even when their emotional connections to the sport remained strong. For instance, multiple of the oldest (50+) participants had undergone cancer diagnosis and treatment since 2019, which was uniformly described as “debilitating” (Andrea). Elizabeth, whose declining in-person NWSL attendance was described above, explained this as a function of her cancer treatment, saying, “My chemo cycle is like I went in every other week. The first three or four days after, I was pretty wiped out and there were a couple of games where I just did not have the energy to drive down there...But I was off work pretty much the whole time and so we watched a lot of soccer on TV.” Similarly, Nadine said of her consumption of televised women’s soccer in 2023, “A lot less than I have in the past this year. I think it’s a time issue. Yeah, I had major abdominal surgery this year, so it took up a lot of energy just in recovery. So I think just in general I’ve watched a lot less.”

The Opportunity Structure Has Changed: Team and League Influences on Fandom

We also find that changes to the organizational and resource environment of women’s soccer between 2019 and 2023 influenced participants’ identification with women’s soccer, their practices of fandom, or both. Elements of the broader opportunity structure that shaped fandom included *growth* in the NWSL and media coverage, *stadium locations*, and *scandal*. Together,

these factors point to the importance of considering changing fandom not only in individual lives, but also relative to opportunity structures in sport.

Growth describes not only the number of teams in the National Women's Soccer League, but also media devoted to the NWSL, USWNT, and Women's World Cup, evidence of advancing professionalization and commercialization (Culvin & Bowes, 2023; Pope, Allison, & Petty, 2023). Participants ubiquitously acknowledged the growing size and cultural profile of the sport since 2019, or what Abigail called its "explosion into the mainstream." Continued fan identification was in part a function of feeling like "witnesses" to the history of this growth. For instance, Isobel opined, "Do you remember when we had like four people behind the goal? And like it's just insane watching it grow and that kind of stuff." First, new NWSL expansion teams since 2019 meant that several participants now lived in or closer to NWSL markets, which enabled their greater attendance at live matches and, in several cases, new emotional investments. For instance, two NWSL teams in California had begun play in 2022, bringing Californian Linda opportunities to attend games in person, as opposed to only watching or streaming elsewhere. Linda noted that, "It was super exciting to be like, "Oh, there's going to be a local team!" and the idea of getting season tickets was also super exciting." Since 2022, she had become a season ticket holder with Los Angeles' Angel City FC, feeling after a few home games that, "Oh yeah, this is my team." While Isobel did not live in an NWSL market in either 2019 or 2023, the expansion of the league to Louisville meant a shorter drive, and thus a greater number of games attended. "When Louisville became a team that one was actually an hour closer," she explained, "so I was able to go to more of those [games] than I was getting up to Chicago." And Callie described a feeling of fluctuating fandom that derived from seeing her local NWSL team leave in 2017 and then return in 2021. As she explained, "Did we have a

NWSL team in 2019? That's probably a difference from 2019. Although even then I was still following [the] NWSL. I would watch a lot of the games. I just wasn't as invested because we didn't have a team here, and obviously I'm more invested because I have season tickets to a team."

In discussing growth, fans also referred to media. Many remarked positively on NWSL or USWNT partnerships with mainstream media including CBS, ESPN, or Fox, seeing these as accessible outlets with strong production values and quality coverage. Breanne argued that the NWSL's most recent broadcast deal with CBS had sparked new fandom within her family, noting, "When they have the games on CBS, my Grandma watches them. She's not really a soccer fan!" "It is nice to see access improve...make the coverage more nuanced, things like that," Mallory said, "Because again, if it was still watching [the NWSL] on YouTube with shitty cameras and not having podcasts or reliable news sources, it would definitely be hard to still be engaged." Mallory discussed several podcasts she frequently listened to, reflecting a turn since 2019 away from X (Twitter) which, as Jeff opined, "kind of turned more into a shit show recently for reasons completely unrelated to the league." Instead, fans in 2023 reported podcasts and Instagram to be primary sources of information on women's soccer.

However, a few fans groused about changing broadcast partnerships, expressing a sense of frustration at the work required to find where games were airing and maintain multiple subscriptions. For instance, Beth said of the NWSL, "Right now it's hard to keep up with where they're streaming. Every year there's a brand new thing." Similarly, Sadie complained, "It's one of those sports that's a little bit frustrating to follow on TV because you never know who has the rights to a game and what subscription you have to have to watch it and blah, blah, blah." Reflecting the influence of media on the practice of fandom, George had even recently dropped

his subscription to Paramount+, which aired NWSL games, saying, “I feel like I’m making less time for watching the NWSL games because that’s [media] changed. They used to be on YouTube. At first, they were just really easy for me to find and watch, especially when there were fewer teams.”

In addition to the expansion of the NWSL since 2019 and shifting media landscape, multiple teams had changed where they played home games, most commonly moving into city centers from more suburban stadium locations. Varied stadium locations are common to the early years of a sport’s professionalization (Culvin & Bowes, 2023). Echoing the findings of Chahardovali, Watanbe, and Dastrup (2023) on stadium location and game attendance, fans who lived in or near NWSL markets argued that these moves had made in-person attendance easier for them, even if they did not live in city centers themselves. This was because city locations typically provided more options for public transportation, while more suburban locations required sometimes lengthy drives. Transportation challenges were frequently mentioned among participants, with travel to some games described as a “nightmare” (Andrew), “terrible” (Gina), or “horrible” (Beth). Seattle resident Tori, for instance, said that she had season tickets only for the Seattle men’s professional team and not the women’s, despite her greater fandom of women’s soccer, because the NWSL team had played in a stadium far outside of the city. However, with a more recent move into Seattle, her attendance at women’s games had increased. As Tori said:

“I actually have season tickets to the men’s team but not the women’s team. That’s too bad for me...My brother also lives in Seattle and at the time that we moved here, the MLS [Major League Soccer] team played in the main stadium which is like in downtown Seattle and very easy to get to...And the women’s team would play in a different city...I can take public transit and just hop right downtown to the men’s game, whereas I would have to drive an hour and a half plus to get to the women’s game...This year, they actually started playing now at the main stadium, so I have been trying to get to games.”

Kinsley similarly praised the NWSL's Gotham FC for having moved home games to Red Bull Arena in New Jersey, describing her greater game attendance and interest in the team's competitive record. As she said, "Getting into a legitimate stadium that had easy access to all the transportation, all that was great. I think I had gone only once when they were playing out at Rutgers. I mean, short of planes, trains and automobiles, it was a real hassle. This was a lot better."

Finally, post-2019 investigations into allegations of sexual assault, harassment, mistreatment, and abuse within women's soccer had affected both felt identification and practice for some since 2019, as they violated fan values of inclusivity and gender equality (Allison & Pope, 2022). Fans were unanimous that they found these events terrible and difficult to read about, describing them with words such as "sad" (Gina), "challenging" (Andrew), "painful" (Ana), and "horrible" (Jana). Some participants had become less enthusiastic in their fandom as a result, as Gina acknowledged in saying, "I will say it dampened a little bit of my fandom there because I felt it wasn't as fun." And Laura extended this declining sense of investment to the entire fan base of the NWSL team she followed, noting, "I think that has affected, I hope this is not an overstatement, but the morale of the whole stadium." The sense of lowered investment in their fandom with news of player mistreatment was particularly acute for fans of teams with coaches or managers who had been accused or found responsible. Rochelle spoke to this pattern in describing her identity as a resident of North Carolina and fan of the North Carolina NWSL team, whose coach had been fired and banned. She said, "I'm from North Carolina. I'm a North Carolina Courage fan. I think specifically all of the [coach] Paul Riley stuff coming out, that definitely was just--it impacted a lot of my fandom."

Because of NWSL scandal, some fans had stopped attending home games or dropped their season ticket(s). Jeff was one example of a fan who declined to renew his season tickets amid these events. He said, “And so last year, basically after the reports came out, I told them [the team], I was like, “Yeah, I don’t know that I feel comfortable giving you all money with the same people in charge...I am not going to buy season tickets.”” Other fans who were active in their team’s supporters’ groups had witnessed others drop tickets or stop participating with the group. Jana, whose retirement had given her the time to become more highly involved with a supporters group, said, “You know, we lost a lot of season ticket holder members. We lost a lot of the [supporters’ group] members. A lot of people refused to come back.” While Jana had considered leaving the supporters group and no longer attending home games, she had decided to remain to support the players. As she explained, “I wasn’t going to come back but then I just kept thinking about the players and kept thinking that’s not helping them at all not having anyone in the stands. So, I kept my tickets, but it was hard.”

Discussion

Professional women’s sports leagues like the NWSL are “gaining momentum, becoming more accepted as legitimate competitions and challenging sport’s gendered status quo” (Thompson et al., 2023, p. 48). The increasing popularity of women’s soccer, the successes of the American national team, and the emergence of women players as role models in mainstream media are factors that may enhance the significance of women’s soccer (Allison, Culvin, & Pope, 2024; Culvin & Bowes, 2023; Guest & Luitjen, 2018; Thompson et al., 2023; Wrack, 2022). However, the evolution of the sports landscape, particularly soccer clubs, and their potential to become enduring elements less susceptible to business and societal crises will be revealed over

time. In the context of research on sports fans' identities and life cycles, these constitute fundamental issues. Our investigations demonstrate that the structural aspects of soccer's functioning are as pivotal as the social and individual factors that facilitate fans' practices and care (to some extent). Four years after the previous research round in 2019, it is evident that the dimension of practice is more susceptible to structural factors, as well as social and individual factors in the lives of fans. In contrast, the situation differs with 'care', understood as emotional engagement and investment – this dimension was less fluid and malleable than practices.

This study draws on a dataset of qualitative interviews with adults in the United States who attended the 2019 Women's World Cup and were re-interviewed after the 2023 Women's World Cup to consider how and why fandom of U.S. women's professional soccer develops over time. To address the research questions posed, the analysis of empirical data employed theoretical frameworks, namely the 'life course' approach and identity theory. These frameworks pertain to individual experiences within a biographical trajectory, taking into account the changes in roles and social statuses associated with the passage of time and the occurrence of significant events. The applied theoretical frameworks help to explain the process of changes or continuity in fan engagement. Despite only four years having elapsed in the lives of the interviewed persons, the implementation of a 'life course' approach allows for describing and analyzing the trajectory of the lives of the studied fans. In these trajectories, significant roles are played by important life events, turning points, or transitions, as well as changes in roles and social/family status. It has been revealed that a four-year period is sufficient to observe the impact on the identity of fans resulting from events such as the birth of a child, a breakup with a partner, a change in residence associated with a new job, or a confrontation with cancer.

In the background of these events, transitions unfold as a lasting and universally objective process associated with ageing. Many of the stories recounted by the participants also illustrate how adaptation to new roles (such as a parent, an individual dealing with illness, etc.) requires individuals to undergo appropriate adjustments and re-formulate other roles they have previously performed. In this context, identity theory becomes exceptionally useful, allowing for the analysis of an individual's transition process from one role to another and the coping mechanisms associated with changes in social status.

The role of a sports fan is one that can influence the performance of other roles while also being subject to the influence of changing roles in an individual's life. Here, one can observe the relationship and interdependence of roles which constitute the individual identity. In the case of some fans, even the birth of children did not mean a relinquishment of the fan role; instead, respondents socialized their children into the fan role, shaping their fan identities from a very young age. In other cases, the role of a parent constrained the role of the fan. Transitions such as graduating from college, marriage, dealing with illness, and retirement all required a reevaluation of the significance of the fan role, creating a diverse kaleidoscope of factors defining the life cycle of sports fans. However, the fan role cannot be confined to individual life events alone, as being a fan has a strong social component. For many respondents, the fan role is primarily that of a community member within the fan community. The network of friendships and support becomes more important than sporting success.

The study of the practices and care of U.S. fans – even in the context of life trajectory – cannot be comprehensive without considering the structural conditions in which soccer functions in the United States. Therefore, in this context, we propose the concept of “sporting opportunity structures,” which allows for situating the life courses of individuals within the broader context

of professional women's sports. This makes it possible to discern the relation between individuals and the structural (historically developing) context in which these individuals live (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Harrington & Bielby, 2010). The narratives of the fans highlight the importance of issues such as access and quality of media coverage, business decisions concerning clubs, and scandals in the NWSL. In the American context, a significant variable is the relocation of clubs from one city to another, posing practical and logistic challenges. Some informants pointed out the inconvenience of travelling to distant locations. The relocation of a club represents a substantial identity challenge for fans (Carter, 2016). The concept of sporting opportunity structures is open to further conceptualization, particularly concerning diverse cultural and institutional contexts. The study of fans in the US indicates that supplementing the individual perspective with a structural, institutional perspective enhances the analysis of individual life trajectories. The analysis of transformations in life courses is thus more comprehensive.

Our findings reflect the context of early professionalization of women's soccer in the U.S., as in some other countries, for instance in fans' experiences of changing broadcast partnerships, changing stadium locations for NWSL home games, and altered relationships between themselves and players (Allison, Culvin, & Pope, 2024; Culvin & Bowen, 2023). Our findings may thus be applicable to other sports contexts, men's or women's, that are in the process of professionalizing and commercializing, notably in showing how rapid changes to sport teams and leagues impact fan attachments and behaviors. The relative (in)stability of sport objects is a critical factor for consideration in future studies of over-time fandom. As fully professional women's play becomes a more established part of the U.S. sports landscape, then, individual, network, and life course changes may take greater precedence in accounting for

changing fandom over time. It is here that we would assume some broad applicability of our framework to other sport contexts, as we see that changes within fans' lives such as job change, new parenthood, retirement, or ill health present barriers to continuing consumption practices, despite continued identification. At the same time, however, how fans negotiate their altered life circumstances with their fan attachments depends in part of the meanings that they give to the object of their fandom, and these meanings certainly vary by sport and the gender of players. As U.S. fans do give unique meanings to women's sport, compared to men's, it is possible that their processes of negotiation also vary by sport gender; for instance, the associations many fans perceive between their women's soccer fandom and the larger pursuit of gender equality in sport may motivate continued efforts to consume in the face of new barriers that would be less likely for a men's sport (Allison & Pope, 2022; Delia 2020). Perhaps operating against the broader applicability of our findings, however, is the overwhelming affluence of our participants; for instance, it is notable that we did not find disrupted fandom due to COVID-19-related job loss or hospitalization, experiences that our participants were largely protected from given their education, wealth, and professional-class jobs. Expanding fan samples to include greater racial and class diversity, then, is a crucial project in moving forward with longitudinal perspectives.

Our research has other evident limitations. Primarily, we investigated changes occurring in the lives of the informants over a 4-year period. Consequently, we could not estimate longer processes, as many life events and turning points in the lives of the fans are yet to unfold, impacting their fan identities to a greater or lesser extent. We could not observe and witness the subjects going through individual life stages. Such experiences were accessible only through their narratives. One recommendation could be, therefore, the repetition of studies to assess future developments. Despite the short time since the first round of interviews, we managed to

map significant and diverse changes in the status and roles, determining their fandom. Contrary to appearances, four years revealed a spectrum of variables shaping the life course of investigated fans. These variables were of an individual nature (e.g., cancer), relational (partnerships, the influence of friendships), but also structural – thus, we were able to map those variables that constitute the pillars of the ‘life course’ approach analysis. Four years proved to be a sufficiently short period to preclude the analysis of an entire life yet long enough to consider the ‘life course’ perspective as a significant contribution to fandom research.

It should be noted that the ‘life courses’ of the fans presented in the article pertain to individuals functioning within this particular institutionalized sports context, which may significantly differ from others, for example, in Europe. Conclusions drawn from the study of only one cultural context represent another limitation of this study. Considering the significant gap in research on longer ‘life course’ processes within fandom studies, we hope that our study will spark discussion in this area and encourage researchers from other countries to pose their original research questions.

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