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Fan culture and motivation in the context of successful women's professional team sports: a mixed-methods case study of Portland Thorns fandom

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ABSTRACT

By the metric of average home attendance, the Portland Thorns of the National Women's Soccer League are the most popular women's professional sports team in the world. This paper investigates that distinct sports context through a mixed-methods case study of Thorns fandom, asking what fans themselves perceive to be salient elements of a successful fan culture for women's professional soccer and what motivates their fandom. Drawing on survey data that are contextualized by ethnographic observations and interviews, we offer an interpretive analysis of ways Thorns fandom hybridizes elements of traditional and alternative sports fandom. Our findings highlight the emphasis Thorns fans put on quality soccer in a professional atmosphere where fans themselves create the supporters culture, along with the symbolic importance to fans of identifying with values such as gender empowerment, diversity and inclusion. We discuss ways these themes might offer and inform alternative models of sports fandom.

Despite large global increases in sport participation by girls and women, and despite the growing popularity of global mega-events such as the FIFA Women's World Cup, women's professional soccer teams – and professional women's sport teams more broadly – have largely failed to draw significant fan followings. Most teams in the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL), for example, draw between 2000 and 4000 fans per game, while the average Women's Bundesliga team in Germany drew only 1076 fans during the 2015–2016 season (according to worldfootball.net). Recently, however, in the third major incarnation of a North American women's professional soccer league, the Portland Thorns of the NWSL have offered a distinct example of a professional women's team with a consistently large and growing fan following: the Thorns averaged 13,320 fans per home game in their inaugural 2013 season and averaged 16,945 fans per game during 2016. This recent average is higher than the top American men's professional soccer league (Major League Soccer or MLS) average for every season from 1997 to 2010, and more than twice that of other successful women's leagues such as the Women's National Basketball Association (the WNBA averaged

7655 fans per game in 2016). This unusual fan support for the Thorns thus offers a rich opportunity to consider the particular social, psychological, and cultural dimensions of new and alternative types of sports fandom.

While there are substantive scholarly perspectives on fan motivation towards men's elite sports (e.g. Wann et al. 2001), along with a robust debate about the relative lack of popular attention paid to women's professional sports (e.g. Cooky, Messner, and Hextrum 2013), there have been few academic analyses of instances where women's professional teams succeed in garnering mass fan support. In the case of the Portland Thorns, there have been several thoughtful journalistic considerations of why the team seems to be succeeding where others have failed (e.g. Dundas 2015; Murray 2016; Oxenham 2015). But these considerations consistently rely primarily on perspectives from team management and players rather than from the broader community and from fans themselves. In personal communications and research interviews with soccer journalists, several noted a preference for management perspectives due to easier access and a sense that the management has more authoritative understandings of issues such as ticket sales. Likewise, in the academic literature on fans of women's sport a significant portion of the published work on motivation and general interest comes from scholars of sport business and sport management (e.g. Funk, Ridinger, and Moorman 2003). While management perspectives do offer valuable insight into the business of professional sport, those perspectives also tend to frame sport fandom as a top-down phenomenon that positions the fans themselves as passive consumers. This may well be appropriate for much of men's professional sport in an era of highly commodified spectator experiences, but it risks marginalizing alternative perspectives on fandom. Thus, in this research, we use a grounded theory approach to offer bottom-up perspectives on fan motivation and fan culture through a mixed-methods case study of Portland Thorns fandom.

Scholarly perspectives on sport fandom and women's soccer

Most existing scholarly research on sport fan motivation attends to the sports that tend to draw the largest mass audiences: American college and professional football, basketball, and baseball along with European soccer. Research on the psychology of American sport fans, for example, has categorized fan motives ranging from emotional eustress to aesthetic appreciation (Wann 1995; Wann, Schrader, and Wilson 1999) while also emphasizing the potential of sports fandom to influence psychological well-being through opportunities for both temporary and enduring social connections (Wann 2006; Wann et al. 2011). Sociological research on European soccer fans, as another example, has emphasized the ways different types of fans – ranging along dimensions from more traditional community affiliations to more market-based consumer associations and from cool instrumental interests to more hot emotional connections – are attracted to perceptions of authentic tradition and community (Giulianotti 2002).

A related line of research considers the intersection of psychological and social motivations in relation to sport fan identity (e.g. Jacobson 2003; Miller and Benkwitz 2016). Porat (2010), for example, in research with Israeli soccer fans argues that there are three 'domains of experience' that constitute fandom as identity: emotional-affective, cognitive and symbolic. Emotional experiences comprise both the excitement of the game, along with the satisfactions of being part of a community of fans. Cognitive experiences comprise the more rational cost-benefit analyses of fandom. Symbolic experiences allow fans to subtly

enact and identify with more abstract communities – such as a Barcelona fan who identifies with Catalanism. Importantly, this and other social psychological research on sport fan identity emphasizes that motivations are shaped by ways individual fans negotiate the social and cultural context of their fandom.

Given the importance of social and cultural contexts in shaping fan motivation, it is noteworthy that most research on sport fan motivation has been limited in attending to non-traditional fan cultures (Schimmel, Lee Harrington, and Bielby 2007). In specific regard to women's sport fandom, there has been some sport management research considering individual differences in motivational factors for 'consumer support' of events such as the FIFA Women's World Cup and the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA; e.g. Funk, Mahony, and Ridinger 2002; Funk, Ridinger, and Moorman 2003). This research does suggest some potentially different motivations for women's sport fandom, including wanting to support women's opportunities in sport and appreciating athletes as role models, but it seems to have primarily been used in sports business research rather than towards broader cultural understandings. Critical and feminist research on sports fans has more often focused on the ways women who identify as fans of men's professional sport negotiate and resist cultures that symbolically objectify and trivialize women in sport (e.g. Esmonde, Cooky, and Andrews 2015; Sveinson and Hoeber 2015). While this research is helpful in highlighting the toxic version of masculinity embedded in much traditional sport fandom, there seems to be significantly less social and psychological research on fans of female sports.

The major exception in regard to research on fans of women's sport is on groups such as WNBA fans. This research has highlighted tensions between top-down 'heteronormative marketing' focused on framing the WNBA as 'family-friendly' and non-traditional fan-bases such as the lesbian community (Muller 2007; see also Dolance 2005). In confronting those tensions Muller argues that 'lesbian fans stake a claim to WNBA spaces through a "community" discourse as a way to contest heteronormative constructions and the restrictions that heterosexism presents in the spatial/-social lives of GLBT people' (21). Importantly, however, lesbian fans still have to negotiate conventional sports discourses driven primarily by WNBA management in ways that ultimately limit alternative fan culture (Myrdahl 2011).

Tensions and negotiations between alternative and conventional versions of fandom also characterize much of the history of professional soccer – for both men and women – in North America. The historical fact of America's soccer 'exceptionalism' (Markovits and Hellerman 2001) as a sport outside the hegemony of 'traditional' American sports such as football, baseball and basketball, combined with soccer's mass popularity and strong traditions in most other parts of the world, has positioned American soccer culture as a dynamic and hybridized space that is regularly negotiated and re-negotiated in the broader sport culture. This process of negotiation has been especially pronounced in women's soccer, which Markovits and Hellerman (2003) note to be a particularly American 'exceptionalism' due to its globally distinct popularity. Estimates suggest, for example, that over half the world's total of female youth soccer players are in the US (Morris 2015) and audiences for the US Women's National Team (both in person and on television) have often outnumbered audiences for the US Men's National Team.

Yet, despite its globally distinct positioning and relative popularity, the history of women's professional soccer in the US is largely one of failed efforts to position women's professional soccer as family friendly and gender normative consumer entertainment (Allison 2016; Myrdahl 2010). The recent success of the Portland Thorns, however, offers a further

exceptionalism and thus provides the opportunity to investigate fan culture and fan motivation in a context that may offer an alternative to conventional consumer sport fandom. Given that women's sport more broadly offers rich opportunities to consider alternative cultures for sport and leisure (Pavlidis 2012; Wearing 1998), and given the above discussed research suggesting fan individual motives and identification are shaped by particular sport cultures, it seems plausible to suggest that Thorns fandom will demonstrate both similarities and contrasts with scholarly accounts of more conventional sports fandom. This paper thus draws on a broader case study of Thorns fandom to explore two general research questions: what do fans themselves perceive to be the most salient elements of fan culture in the context of successful women's professional team sports, and how do those fans describe their personal motivations towards fandom? The intention here is to explore these questions in bottom-up ways that allow this distinct case of women's professional team sports fans to inform alternative ways of thinking about fandom.

Methods

The research in this paper draws from a broader mixed-methods case study involving ethnographic observations, semi-structured interviews and surveys oriented generally by a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The aim was to explore the distinct phenomenon of Thorns fandom in ways that allowed meanings to emerge through unstructured observations, semi-structured interviews and open-ended survey questions, while simultaneously allowing for comparisons with existing scholarly understandings of fan culture and motivation through the use of standardized inventories and an interpretive process of contrasting observations with prior research. We intentionally focused on fan and community perspectives (to the exclusion of management and player perspectives) in order to best allow for understandings of bottom-up processes in fandom. Our sampling was opportunistic, drawing on our own local connections in the Portland soccer community, introductions from within that community, introductions at local Thorns events, and contacts with the local 'Independent Supporters Trust.' While this paper focuses particularly on survey responses, we first briefly describe our ethnographic methods to contextualize the surveys and fan demographics.

Ethnographic observations and interviews

Though the first author has been attending professional soccer games in Portland for over decade (without any involvement in the organized supporters groups) more intentional observations for the present project occurred primarily during the 2015 and 2016 NWSL seasons. This included both authors keeping ethnographic field notes during home games at the team's stadium and during public gatherings to watch away games. Simultaneously, through a combination of personal connections and introductions via Thorns events, we undertook 17 semi-structured interviews with 19 self-identified Thorns fans (to accommodate the availability of interviewees, one interview was conducted with a group of three at the same time) ranging from 30 to 90 min in length. The interviews were oriented by a general interview guide with questions about interviewees' own fan experiences, about perspectives on their particular impressions of Thorns fan culture, and about their opinions related to the relative popularity of the Thorns – but the interviews were flexible in a way

that allowed us to explore emerging themes. While we did not ask for formal demographic information from each interviewee in an effort to be respectful of privacy, 11 identified as female, 5 identified as LGBTQ, 7 were parents, nearly all were white and educated at least to the college level, and 7 were involved with the organized fan culture. Our interviewees also included three bloggers and journalists who simultaneously identified (to varying degrees) as fans, and who were able to fill in pieces of the social history of soccer fandom in Portland. The interview data are used in this paper primarily to broadly inform our description and interpretation of the cultural context.

Surveys

The surveys used in this research combined basic demographic questions, structured items borrowed from other research on sport fandom, and open-ended questions asking respondents about their experience of Thorns fandom. The structured items used to allow comparisons with existing research included the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (Wann and Branscombe 1993), items assessing levels of fandom from James and Ridinger (2002), items assessing social connections among sports fans from Wann et al. (2011), and a forced ranking task using categories adapted from the Sport Interest Inventory (Funk, Ridinger, and Moorman 2004). The analysis in this paper, however, focuses primarily on open-ended items intended to evoke personal experiences of fandom by asking questions such as ‘How did you originally become a fan of the Thorns?’ and asking ‘what you personally most enjoy/appreciate about being a Thorns fan?’ The surveys were pilot tested for length and comprehension, and administered on-line through commercial survey software. We solicited survey responses through two primary sources: the Rose City Riveters supporters group distributed a link to the survey through their social media outlets, as did a large Portland youth soccer club we approached in hopes of soliciting responses from parents. We received 217 surveys with most responses completed, but differing item level response rates.

Responses to the survey indicate that the sample overwhelmingly comprises highly invested fans. For example, in borrowing and adapting items from James and Ridinger (2002; originally used with college basketball fans) and asking ‘How much do you consider yourself a fan of the Thorns’ on a nine-point scale from ‘Not a fan at all’ to ‘Extremely loyal fan’ the sample on average scored near the ceiling of the scale with a mean of 8.13 ($N = 216$, $SD = 1.41$). Further, based on an open-ended question asking survey respondents where they like to sit in the stadium, coding indicated that 59% of our survey respondents sit with or near the organized supporters section (which is spatially located in what local fans tend to call the ‘North End’ and will thus be labelled as a proper place throughout this paper) while 49% actively participate with the organized supporters group (the Rose City Riveters, described further below). Given that the North End only comprises about a quarter of the stadium’s seating capacity, it is clear that our sample disproportionately represents fans involved with organized fan culture.

Table 1 describes demographic characteristics of the Thorns fans in our survey sample. Though we do not have directly comparable data, it seems likely that the sample is significantly more female (at 68%), LGBTQA (at 31.8% – and at least one survey respondent did identify with each of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and asexual categories, though the majority identified as lesbian), and highly educated (with 79.1% having at least a college degree) than other samples of sports fans. While potentially unusual in regards to the

Table 1. Demographics of a survey sample of highly invested Thorns fans.

Characteristic	Total sample		Riveters		Non-riveters	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender						
Female	142	68.2	65	65	71	71
Male	63	30.2	33	33	29	29
Non-binary	3	1.4	2	2	0	0
Family status						
Single	66	32.2	31	31.6	33	33
Partnered	139	67.8	67	68.4	67	67
No children	122	58.7	64	65.3	50	50
Have children	86	41.3	34	34.7	50	50
Ethnicity						
White	179	88.7	92	92.9	87	86.1
Non-white	23	11.3	9	8.1	14	13.9
Sexual orientation						
Heterosexual	140	68.3	61	61.6	74	74.7
LGBTQA	65	31.7	38	38.4	25	25.3
Education						
Less than bachelors	43	20.6	25	25	17	16.8
Bachelors or equivalent	72	34.4	33	33	35	34.7
Graduate or professional	94	45.0	42	42	49	48.5
Age						
18–30	36	17.3	28	28	7	7
31–40	63	30.3	31	31	28	28
41–50	71	34.1	25	25	44	44
51–74	38	18.3	16	16	21	21
Soccer playing experience						
None	84	40.0	35	34.7	46	45.5
Recreational	77	36.7	38	37.6	35	34.7
Competitive	49	23.3	28	27.7	20	19.8

Notes: Row and column totals vary due to different item level response rates; participants were given the option of 'prefer not to answer' for most demographic items.

demographics of spectator sports fans, this sample does have the advantage of representing people not regularly included in fan research and of including people who were exceedingly fluent in explaining their fandom (due to the high levels of education).

Data analysis

The general identification of patterns and themes throughout the research process evolved through repeated readings of field notes, de-identified interview transcripts, and open-ended survey responses following common practices in qualitative research and grounded theory (Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Strauss and Corbin 1998) and based on the idea that qualitative analysis is ultimately an 'iterative set of processes' (Berkowitz 1997). Thus, our primary method for validation involved triangulation (Lincoln and Guba 1985), both between data sources and between researchers. As such, throughout both the data gathering and the analysis we compared data from ethnographic observations, interviews and surveys to look for consistencies (sometimes targeting observations and interview questions to follow-up on preliminary themes with the fans themselves), and we discussed findings between researchers towards a degree of reliability. The analysis below is based on observations and results we were able to triangulate. At the same time, given the emphasis here on Thorns fandom as a distinct case study, our general analysis was primarily focused on the strengths of

grounded theory, interpretive analysis and qualitative research as a way of generating new insights rather than ensuring generalizability (Pistrang and Barker 2012).

In more systematic analysis of open-ended survey items, we focused on responses to the question of ‘what you personally most enjoy/appreciate about being a Thorns fan?’ We chose this particular question (while also reviewing survey responses to a range of open-ended questions addressing topics such as how fans first started supporting the Thorns and how they themselves explain the team’s relative success) because the responses seemed most illustrative of types of fan motivations. Our process in this more systematic analysis involved an adapted version of thematic content analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to explore motivations for fandom that might emerge without pre-determined categories. This involved a step-by-step process of 2 researchers reviewing sub-samples of responses independently to identify themes, collaboratively developing a coding dictionary based on those themes, independently coding a further sub-sample of responses using the coding dictionary, and collaboratively revising the themes until reaching an agreement rate above 80% across 12 thematic categories (with each response usually including multiple themes).

The final thematic categories from our content analysis were analysed for prevalence by tallying based on frequency and are described further below. While Braun and Clarke (2006) note that prevalence can be determined in multiple ways through thematic content analysis, the allowance for considering prevalence can be a strength of thematic analysis in qualitative research (Joffe 2012). In this case prevalence was analysed using frequency counts, and then reported as percentages of the sample mentioning particular themes, for several reasons. First, the intention of the survey analysis was to provide what Braun and Clarke call a ‘realist’ account of motivations and experiences. As such, and befitting the broader mixed-methods orientation of this analysis, frequencies and percentages allow some bottom-up sense of the direct perspectives of the fans we surveyed in ways that convey representativeness. Second, because our surveys provided a relatively large sample size for qualitative analysis, frequency counts and percentages allow us to represent the breadth of fan perspectives in a way that can complement more interpretative analyses of individual examples. In following the broad principles of thematic content analysis, however, note that the thematic categories were initially derived by reviewing individual level responses and only later tallied for frequency.

As a separate analysis, to enable comparisons with existing understandings of fan motivation, we also describe below survey averages from the forced ranking task where Thorns fans were asked to put 10 common fan motivations (from an adapted version of the Sport Interest Inventory by Funk, Ridinger, and Moorman 2004) in ‘order of importance.’

Results

To provide context for our results and to begin to address our question about aspects of fan culture that are most salient to Thorns fans, we first draw on ethnographic research and interviews to offer a brief interpretive perspective on Thorns fan culture. We then shift to our survey responses to further describe salient elements of fan culture and to more directly address the question of fan motivations. After describing categories of motivation, we offer summaries of four themes that were particularly prominent in fan responses in relation to scholarly understandings of fandom: the importance of creating a high-quality professional environment for a women’s team; the symbolic value of supporting and empowering women

who often feel marginalized in sport culture; the ethos of inclusion that provides space for diverse fan types; and the sense of community associated with feelings of personal agency in local fandom. These categories and themes are less a comprehensive explanation for Thorns fandom, which originates in a wide variety of motives, and more an effort to identify aspects of fan culture that emerged as most salient to Thorns fans themselves.

Thorns fan culture

Though Portland Oregon is a modest size city (with the 23rd largest Metropolitan Statistical Area in the US) that has produced few elite soccer players, local teams self-identify Portland as ‘Soccer City USA’ due largely to its robust fan culture. This culture most visibly began with significant support for the original men’s Portland Timbers in the North American Soccer League between 1975 and 1982, and carried through to local colleges such as the University of Portland women’s team – who led the nation in college attendance from 2005 to 2014. Older fans we interviewed and surveyed noted several additional historical precursors to the Thorns success, including games hosted during the 1999 and 2003 FIFA Women’s World Cup and several efforts at professional women’s basketball. But the more directly connected foundation of Thorns fandom involved the evolution of a distinct soccer supporters’ culture in Portland that began with the reincarnation of the men’s Portland Timbers as a minor league professional team during 2001.

The fan culture that evolved around the 2000s era Portland Timbers, and which eventually segued with Thorns fandom, involved creative efforts by a group of highly involved fans who organized themselves in the stadium’s North End and adapted global soccer supporters’ culture with songs, chants and rituals. The group was diverse (as one long-time fan explained to us: ‘there were journalists and political organizers and artists and brewers and kind of shit-stir-er type people, you know even like hard cases, skinhead types, church ladies, people who had the ability to put on a shirt and tie and talk to the management’) and partially as a result intentionally emphasized inclusion. As the group evolved into a formal supporters group named the ‘Timbers Army’ it professed its emphasis on inclusion through slogans such as ‘if you want to be Timbers Army then you already are’ and that the group is ‘an army without generals.’ Values around inclusion and diversity have also been evident in the regular practice of including rainbow flags symbolizing gay pride as part of game day displays at Timbers games, a somewhat unusual practice for men’s professional sports venues that has become regular practice at Thorns games.

Though the Timbers Army was an entirely bottom-up initiative, in 2010 highly involved fans identified with the Timbers Army formed a registered non-profit organization named 107 Independent Supporters Trust (107IST after the section of the stadium where the Timbers Army began) to organize and coordinate Portland soccer fan culture. When the Timbers ownership group formed the Portland Thorns to be part of the inaugural 2013 NWSL season, 107IST immediately took on a bottom-up coordinating role for Thorns fandom in cooperation with the newly created Rose City Riveters (the Thorns fan analogue to the Timbers Army and an explicit reference to ‘Rosie the Riveter’ as an icon of gender empowerment).

Through the Thorns professional existence they have also shared a home stadium with the men’s Timbers, a downtown facility near a trendy part of Portland that was upgraded when the Timbers joined MLS in 2011 from an old baseball park into a horseshoe-shaped

stadium designed for soccer with approximately 20,000 seats. The Timbers have sold-out every home game of their six MLS seasons, making soccer fandom in Portland a popular civic endeavour. Further, the geography of the stadium is conducive to both an energetic atmosphere and a diversity of fan types. During Thorns games the North End of the stadium is home to the Rose City Riveters and other fans who are happy to engage (either actively or passively) with a more energetic fandom comprising songs, rituals and physical engagement. The east side of the stadium was a new addition in 2011 and includes amenities for fans who are able to spend more money on tickets and generally enjoy being able to focus on the game itself. The west side of the stadium tends to seat significantly more families and children in soccer uniforms of the type often targeted by previous incarnations of women's professional soccer. Due partially to the spatial layout of the stadium, allowing both reasonable intimate atmosphere and enough space for separation, the different types of fans coexist with a remarkable degree of congeniality. Interestingly, however, when we asked Thorns fans about things they might find off-putting about their experience one commonly cited complaint among the more involved fans was the 'little screaming girls' who distracted from the game and from adult fan culture. Some fans did comment on liking seeing young players enjoying the games, but there was a concurrent priority on maintaining an adult fan culture.

Overall, while the Thorns team and fans derive many benefits from sharing ownership and facilities with the men's Timbers, the other thing that Thorns fans consistently cite as off-putting about their experience is a sense of inequity for the women's team. The fans know that many of the players are paid poorly (citing the 2016 NWSL minimum salary of \$7200 per season) or not at all (since many of the reserve players in league rules are technically listed as 'amateurs'). Fans also note that the Thorns team web-site is subsidiary to the main Portland Timbers site, and see that the majority of the branding in the stadium is for the Timbers. Interestingly, in one journalistic article about the Thorns success (Dundas 2015) the team's primary owner takes credit for treating the teams relatively equally, noting: 'The [Thorns] club crest is up on the side of the stadium, the same size as the Timbers' crest. It's not a side project. It is as full-on as we can make it.' This is technically true in that there are a few spaces in the stadium where both the Timbers and Thorns crests are presented as co-equal, but it is also misleading. The vast majority of the stadium is branded for the Timbers, with the men's team logo subsuming all the field-level walls bordering the playing surface and all the exterior advertising boards. At the same time, unlike many American sports business enterprises, the recent management of the Timbers and the Thorns has allowed space for a distinctively local and bottom-up fan culture to continue its evolution. As such, the general consensus among highly involved Thorns fans regarding the role of the professional management of the team on fan culture and fan motivation was efficiently summarized by a survey respondent who explained: 'It's helpful that people who knew how to create a supporters group stepped up at the very beginning and, perhaps just as important, it was helpful to have a front office who stayed out of the way.'

Thorns fan motivations

Many prominent aspects in the social context of Thorns fan culture, including the importance of a quality atmosphere for professional soccer and the emphasis on fan-driven values such as diversity and inclusion, also emerged as themes in fan survey responses. Table 2 lists

Table 2. Thematic frequencies in response to an open-ended survey question about ‘what you personally most enjoy/appreciate about being a Thorns fan?’

Thematic category	% of responses
Atmosphere and supporters culture	52.5
Quality of the soccer, the players, and the team	49.5
Opportunity to support women	47
Community/Comradery	29.2
Admiration for the players beyond soccer skills	17.8
Expressing Portland pride	13.4
Players as role models	8.9
Inclusion/Diversity	8.4
Particularities of women's soccer	5.4
Family friendliness	3.5
Reasonable costs	3.5
Management/organization	2.5

Note: Based on a sample of 202 completed responses.

the thematic categories we derived from content analysis of what our survey respondents reported enjoying and appreciating about their Thorns fandom. It is important to note that most responses were coded as referencing more than one thematic category – the results here identify only the overall percentage of responses mentioning each theme. In sum, three categories were particularly prominent, each mentioned in approximately half of all responses: the atmosphere and supporters culture (mentioned in 52.5% of 202 responses); the quality of the soccer (49.5%); and the opportunity to support women (47%). Within the category of ‘atmosphere and supporters culture’ many responses, though not all, could be further grouped into more active involvement – enjoying being part of the singing, chanting and cheering as mentioned by 22.8% of responses – and more passive appreciation – enjoying the emotional charge and amenities of the stadium environment as mentioned by 36.6% of responses.

While the points of appreciation mentioned in relation to atmosphere and supporters’ culture could often fit in other professional sports contexts, many also explicitly referenced the particular context of Thorns fandom. As one fan explained in a survey response:

The Thorns specifically have an organization that takes the team and league seriously. Women’s professional sports are often marketed to young girls and women, which is great but only one piece of the potential audience. The Thorns have fans that are men, urban professionals, middle-aged couples, etc The fans are diverse, and they have a good time and take the game seriously. My favorite thing is to see men and boys wearing Thorns merchandise because it seems so rare to see women’s sports being supported in this way.

This response is noteworthy for describing an appreciation for both the top-down and the bottom-up atmosphere at Thorns games, emphasizing a mix of conventional professional sports management and the fan-driven alternative ethos of Thorns fandom. The response also emphasizes an appreciation for the diversity of fans, with particular attention to men as fans of women’s sport. Another version of the appreciation for diversity as part of the atmosphere and supporters culture around the Thorns was evident when a different fan explained:

I love the fan culture, the opportunity to see world class soccer for \$13, the inclusive and welcoming atmosphere in the north end. Even at Timbers games my boyfriend and I hear homophobic remarks, get called fags, etc. NOT at Thorns games.

While an explicit emphasis on inclusion and diversity only arose without prompting in 8.4% of these open-ended responses, it was a prominent implicit theme in many of our discussions with fans and is worth emphasizing because of its absence from more traditional scholarly categorizations of sports fandom.

Of the 47% of survey responses appreciating the opportunity to support women others also made explicit reference to a mix of personal and political motives:

I call Thorns games Yelling Church. I get to be loud and move around and send out positive affirmations of skilled fit women for two hours. Being a Thorns supporter is for me also a political/economic statement of gender equality...By supporting the NWSL (and the Thorns in particular since our association with Timbers fan culture, Providence Park's audiovisual production values for broadcasting games, and the high profile players on the team all make us a great exemplar of what could be happening all over the place) I am creating economic demand for pro womens sports.

While this fan's statement is a particularly direct articulation of an effort to economically support a type of value-based fandom, many fans described an interest in gender equity that dovetailed with personal values and symbolic identities. One respondent, for example, connected an interest in supporting opportunities for women with a broader sense of pride in civic identity and progressive values:

I love that our excellent support of women's soccer in Portland helps attract amazing international players and it's really cool when they end up loving Portland and wanting to stay here. It also feels good – as a person, but especially as a woman – to live in a city where so many men support women's soccer. It makes me feel like I live somewhere where women are respected in general.

This response was also one of 13.4% which explicitly referenced the thematic category 'expressing Portland pride' – responses which often mixed a familiar sentiment of sports teams symbolizing generic civic identity and the particular local values associated with Portland as a city.

The 49.5% of responses mentioning the quality of the soccer, the players and the team also indicated that Thorns fans find little contradiction between the symbolic value of wanting to support women and the entertainment value of good soccer. This absence of tension is noteworthy in the context of women's professional soccer given popular discourses around women's sport. There is often a perceived conflict between promoting women's sports simply for their athletic ability (when average sex differences in physical capabilities can put women at a competitive disadvantage), and promoting women's sports as a political cause that tacitly diminishes the seriousness of athletic achievement. Yet Thorns fans seem to resolve this potential tension by emphasizing good soccer and women's empowerment as nearly co-equal in prominence and somewhat orthogonal as dimensions of fandom. Further, 5.4% of responses were coded as explicitly appreciating the 'particularities of women's soccer' – emphasizing that women's professional soccer can be better to watch than men's professional soccer because it involves less crude physicality, a pace more conducive to strategy, and less 'flopping.' Further, some female fans expressed a sense that the Thorns allow for a more engaged form of soccer fandom. One fan, for example, described this appreciation with a derogatory reference to 'BroSo' – a term used to invoke a hegemonically masculine culture associated with men's soccer that contrasts with women's soccer (or 'WoSo'):

As a women who is absolutely soccer mad, I often feel myself getting sidelined in conversations with male fans of BroSo. Because the people on the pitch who we're supporting are women too, [Thorns] fans don't discount opinions based on gender in the sport in general.

The fourth most common thematic category, mentioned by 29.2% of Thorns fans, involved particularly enjoying and appreciating the sense of community and comradery around Thorns fandom. One fan, for example, connected feelings of community to being part of a symbolically important endeavour: 'I feel better when I have seen their games, when I have supported them, I guess. I am part of the Thorns, you know, Gestalt. I am another drop in the bucket, but it's a very important bucket.' This theme is also noteworthy given the psychological literature suggesting that a primary role of sport fandom can be to promote social-psychological health through community engagement (Wann et al. 2011). In some cases, fans were quite explicit and affecting in articulating how Thorns fandom offers psychological benefits:

The Thorns organization has changed my life. I used to suffer from depression and it would get especially bad during the summer. The Thorns gave me a home, and a type of genuine joy I've never experienced before. The players and the coaches are all incredible people and I'm incredibly excited for every single game or experience with the organization I get. I've also made some of my closest friends through the Thorns.

It is also worth noting here that we also coded a distinct category of 'admiring the players' for responses that emphasized valuing the players as people beyond their soccer skills to include their perceived character. This came up in 17.8% of responses, such as when one fan noted enjoyment deriving from 'being part of a group of supporters who enjoy their team. I have met some of the players and had talks with them. They are everyday people who are very appreciative of the opportunity they have and enjoy very much what they are doing.' This response is particularly noteworthy for framing the attraction of the players as their status as 'everyday people' rather than as sports celebrities or as 'role models.' About 8.9% of responses did note an appreciation for the Thorns as role models for girls, so that familiar trope of women's sports is part of how fans think of the team. But it seems to be a relatively small part of that thinking.

Likewise, only 3.5% of responses noted an appreciation for the Thorns being 'family-friendly,' another 3.5% noted an appreciation for the 'reasonable costs' (since Thorns tickets are significantly less expensive than Timbers tickets), and 2.5% noted an appreciation for the management and organization in the way they promote and organize events. At least in our sample, these more pragmatic business concerns were clearly not prominent in the minds of fans. It is also worth noting that at no point in the open-ended survey responses nor in the interviews did the physical attractiveness of the players come up as a reason for fandom. This is not to say fans do not attend at all to player appearance – when asked directly several fans acknowledged playful banter in the stands about the relative attractiveness of players. But it was clear in our data that that physical attractiveness was not a serious reason for Thorns fandom.

Finally, to triangulate our findings and to make more structured comparisons between categories of Thorns fandom and conventional categories in the scholarly literature on sports fans, we also compared responses on a forced ranking task where fans had to put in order of personal importance 10 'reasons that researchers commonly identify when explaining why people are sports fans' (see Table 3). The list of 10 reasons was adapted (for the sake of efficiency and to maintain relevance for our research themes) from the list of 18 'unique

Table 3. Forced rankings of reasons for fandom with 1 = most important and 10 = least important.

Response options	Mean	SD
Support women's opportunity in sports (i.e. I believe it is important to support women's sports in general)	3.2	2.2
Interest in soccer (i.e. I am a fan of soccer in general)	3.43	2.71
Community pride (i.e. I feel as though being a fan of the Thorns allows me to be proud of Portland)	4.68	2.55
Drama and Excitement (i.e. I enjoy the excitement of the games and the competitions)	4.72	2.45
Entertainment value (i.e. following the Thorns offers affordable entertainment)	5.71	2.43
Social opportunities (i.e. I enjoy opportunities to socialize and bond with friends and/or family)	6.08	2.72
Interest in particular player/s (i.e. I like to watch and support my favorite player/s)	6.11	2.42
Aesthetics (i.e. I valuing the gracefulness and natural beauty of the game)	6.21	2.58
Role models (i.e. I think the players are inspirational)	6.9	2.64
Vicarious achievement (i.e. when the Thorns win, I feel a sense of accomplishment/achievement)	7.96	2.26

Notes: $N = 208$. The exact question asked was: 'The following is an adapted list of reasons that researchers commonly identify when explaining why people are sports fans. How important are the following reasons for you in being a Thorns' fan? Please drag the answers in order of importance, with 1 being most important to you and 10 being least important to you.'

factors' identified by Funk, Ridinger, and Moorman (2003) for the Sport Interest Inventory with 'women's professional sport consumers.' Though these results are not directly comparable to other research on sports fandom due to the adapted nature of our survey task, they do give a general sense of relative priorities among Thorns fans.

Overall, in broad comparison with other fan samples, Thorns fans offer both contrasts and similarities. In their Likert-scale surveys of WNBA fans, for example, Funk, Ridinger and Moorman found an interest in players as 'role models' to be the highest average sport interest factor. In our forced ranking task, however, Thorns fans on average rated 'role models' as the second least important reason for their fandom. Interestingly, the reason Thorns fans identified as least important was 'vicarious achievement' – though many Thorns fans care deeply about the team's results, they do not seem to invest much of their own sense of self in actual game outcomes. On the other side of the importance spectrum, Thorns fans find supporting women's opportunities in sports to be a top priority (the WNBA fans in the Funk, Ridinger and Moorman sample rated that interest factor 4th out of 18), and also highly prioritize an interest in soccer. This supports the aforementioned argument that serious soccer fandom and support for women's sport as a cause co-exist quite comfortably for Thorns fans.

Discussion and key themes

In integrating the above survey themes with our other data gathering, with our understanding of the salient dimensions of the context of Thorns fandom, and with other scholarly research on women's professional sports, our most general finding is that Thorns fans are motivated by a dynamic hybrid of conventional and alternative models of fandom. This hybrid was encapsulated in one particularly poignant survey response to the question of what fans enjoy and appreciate about being a Thorns fan:

My daughter came out a few months before the 1st season. While our relationship was good there was stress. I bought season tickets for us both as something we could do together. My most enjoyable times have been in the front row behind the goal, chanting with my daughter-beer in hand.

This sentiment depends upon the existence of a viable supporters culture and professional environment: the team needs to be good enough to cheer and the setting has to make that

enjoyable. The sentiment is further rooted in traditional sports stories: a father bonding with his child through sports, the emotional release of singing for one's team, and beer as a social lubricant for feelings of comradery. But the response is also founded on dynamics that have historically been marginalized in popular spectator sports: soothing generational tensions around sexuality and gender. This combination of a quality setting for good soccer, opportunities to support and empower women, an emphasis on inclusion and diversity, and the feelings of communal emotional engagement offers a reasonable summary of key themes to emerge from this Thorns case study.

The first theme – the importance to fans of an engaging and professional atmosphere for quality soccer – may not sound revelatory, but it is relevant in the contexts of debates about ways unequal treatment by sports administrators and media organizations undermines the possibility of women's sports generating mass audiences (e.g. Cooky, Messner, and Hextrum 2013). In this vein, it is worth noting that much of the engaging atmosphere at Thorns games comes from the bottom-up supporters culture rather than the top-down sports business management. Thorns fans, in fact, were appreciative of the team ownership and management simply for treating them as adults and giving them agency in their own fandom. Thorns fans also emphasized repeatedly their primary interest in watching good soccer played in a professional setting.

While an interest in watching good soccer was often primary for fans, an interest in supporting and empowering women was an important second general theme to emerge from our research. Thorns fans most often expressed this motivation less in the sense of treating the team as a cause (as has often been the case in American women's professional soccer, Allison 2016) and more in the way Porat (2010) describes the symbolic importance of fandom as a way of identifying with abstract communities and enacting personal values. Thorns fans seemed to appreciate their fandom as a way of identifying with feminism in a manner similar to the ways some Barcelona fans identify with Catalanism and some Glasgow Celtic fans identify with Catholicism.

This symbolic dimension of Thorns fandom also often extended to the emphasis within local fan culture on diversity and inclusion. This third general theme to emerge from our research seemed particularly important to LGBTQ fans and allies, but it also included a more general emphasis on alternative versions of fandom that are not guided by normative gender expectations in sports culture. Some fans even recognized what sport scholars have also observed: the previous incarnations of women's professional soccer have often been organized in ways that promote the athletes as heteronormative role models for little girls and that more broadly serve to reproduce traditional gender roles (e.g. Allison 2016; Myrdahl 2010). Thorns fans, in contrast, took significant pride in Thorns fandom as a space in sports culture that emphasized inclusion of fans marginalized by traditional consumer sports entertainment.

These symbolic dimensions of fandom also contributed to a fourth general theme to emerge from our research: an appreciation for the sense of agency and community around Thorns fandom. In one way, these themes build on general psychological theories of fandom as motivating due to the sense (real or perceived) of salubrious social connections built through shared interests and attention to sports and teams (e.g. Wann et al. 2011). In another way, however, part of what Thorns fans conveyed was a feeling of agency in creating an organic fan culture that is distinct in its robust support for women's professional soccer. In fact, we were struck by how often Thorns fans used the exact words 'organic' and

‘natural.’ One survey response, for example, described becoming a Thorns fan by noting ‘Soccer fan, in general, Portland supporter overall. It is a natural fit to have both Timber & Thorn season tickets’ while another claimed ‘As a supporter of the Timbers, USWNT, Women’s sports, and anything Portland in general it was a natural fit.’ In a broader global sports culture where women’s professional team sports are often marginalized, however, the popularity of the Thorns might be construed as anything but ‘natural.’

Conclusion

As the best-attended women’s professional sports team in the world, the Portland Thorns offer a distinct case study through which to explore possible alternative models of fan culture and fan motivation. Based on mixed-methods data gathering, we argue that the Thorns case is characterized by a hybrid of traditional and alternative elements of fandom which builds off both the broader exceptionalism of women’s soccer in the US (Markovits and Hellerman 2003) and the particularities of local soccer fandom in Portland. Each of the four themes highlighted above offer examples of this hybrid character. Thorns fans, for example, put significant value on the simple entertainment value of good professional soccer but also emphasize an interest in the bottom-up supporters culture as essential to the quality of the atmosphere at Thorns games. Thorns fans also emphasize symbolic dimensions of fandom in ways familiar to other fan cultures (Porat 2010), but the two specific types of symbolic identification most prominent for Thorns fans have been historically marginalized in broader sports culture: female empowerment and LGBTQA inclusion. Finally, Thorns fans also appreciate the sense of community that is regularly promoted in many other sports contexts, while particularly valuing a type of agency in fandom that is rare in heavily managed and top-down professional sports environments.

Given the inherent limitations of our case study methodology, our goals here are less oriented to generalizability and more to propositions based on a general version of grounded theory. One such proposition is the broad idea that successful women’s professional soccer fan culture depends upon particularly local hybrids of traditional and alternative modes of fandom. These hybrids may be less evident in much of the existing research on sports fandom, which tends to rely on samples of fans who follow traditional spectator sports such as American basketball and European men’s soccer (e.g. Giulianotti 2002; Wann et al. 2001) and is often oriented by a sports marketing orientation (e.g. Funk and James 2001). Existing research also often seems to underemphasize or miss some of the factors most prominent to the experiences of Thorns fans, such as the importance of diversity and inclusion and the opportunity to express related symbolic values. As such, a second proposition from our research is that what Porat (2010) calls the symbolic experience of fandom may be particularly important in the context of sports, such as women’s professional soccer, outside the traditional professional sports landscape. Further, while feminist research in more traditional sports contexts regularly highlights ways that hegemonic male and heteronormative fan cultures can limit and inhibit fandom (e.g. Esmonde, Cooky, and Andrews 2015; Sveinson and Hoeber 2015) the Thorns case study offers a supplemental example of a context where women’s fandom benefits from the opportunity for fans to have agency in creating their own hybrid sports fandom. Thus, as a third proposition, our research suggests the importance of this sense of agency to fan motivation may be underemphasized in current scholarly understandings.

From a more applied perspective, an important question arising from our research is whether the particular model of Thorns fandom could be adopted elsewhere to create broader support for women's professional sports. This question came up in several of our interviews and in survey responses, and most Thorns fans thought the answer was no – the particular constellation of a professional environment (facilitated by shared ownership, organized fan groups and facilities between the Thorns and the Timbers men's team), relatively progressive political values, and a bottom-up soccer supporters culture seemed too distinct to be replicated elsewhere. At an abstract level, however, we would suggest there are several significant implications for advocates of women's sports and other non-traditional spectator sports. One is that when women's sports are treated seriously, presented professionally and given space to cultivate organic fan cultures then people will take an interest. A second, and related, implication is that non-traditional spectator sports may depend more upon bottom-up supporters culture than top-down sports business management. Women's professional soccer in particular has a history of creating marketing-driven, celebrity-based and family friendly business models that seem to have ultimately made the women's game read to potential fans as derivative and juvenile. In contrast, Thorns fans were extraordinarily grateful to the team ownership and management simply for treating them as adults and giving them agency in their own fandom.

Finally, it is worth noting that while we think the Thorns offer an important case study for advocates of women's soccer and scholars interested in fandom, the fan culture in Portland is not without problematic tensions. As just one major example, and like women's soccer in North America more generally, while Thorns fandom is often successful in negotiating the complicated dynamics of gender and sexuality in professional sports it seems less conscious of race and class. Thorns fans, along with Portland as a city, are relatively homogenous and share a somewhat anodyne version of progressive politics. In addition, Thorns fans, also like Portland as a city, can be prideful in ways that strikes some as sanctimonious. But in the context of North American women's soccer and other non-traditional sports cultures, it may also be the case that such pride is necessary for fan culture to evolve.

Disclosure statement

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