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A people's history of the Portland Thorns: Social psychological perspectives on fandom and the most popular women's team in the world

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Introduction

While participation in women's sports has been an important cultural site for progress related to gender equity, professional sports fandom is still identified as a primarily male endeavor.

Most professional women's sport teams struggle to attract spectators. For instance, the average Women's Bundesliga team in Germany only drew 1,076 fans during the 2015-2016 season, and in the WNBA, attendance fell to an average of 7,318 a game in 2015. Yet, the Portland Thorns of the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) are an exception, **averaging 16,670 fans per game during 2016**, making them the **most popular women's professional sport team in the world**. There is a large literature on sports fandom, but this is overwhelmingly focused on traditional spectator sports such as American basketball and European men's soccer (e.g., Giuliannati 2002; Wann, Melnick, Russell, and Pease 2001), and feminist scholars have highlighted that these hegemonic male and heteronormative fan cultures can limit and inhibit fandom (e.g., Esmonde, Cooky, and Andrews 2015; Sveinson and Hoerber 2015): these studies leave out what is going on sociologically and psychologically when both men and women support women's sports. The unusual fan support for the Thorns raises important **research questions** for women's sports advocates and for sport scholars:

How has the Thorns fandom outpaced all other women's professional sports teams?

What are the social and psychological dynamics of successful fan culture for historically marginalized sports?

"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." – fan of Thorns in an anonymous survey

Materials & Methods

Our study was a **mixed methods** case study involving:

- 217 surveys with a mix of standard research measures and open-ended questions
- ethnographic observations in the stadium
- 17 semi-structured interviews of 30 to 90 minutes with 19 self-identified Thorns fans

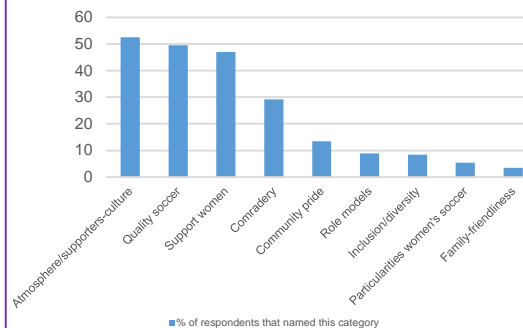
Our survey-sample overwhelmingly comprised highly invested fans. Many of the respondents were

- female (68%)
- LGBTQA (31.8%)
- highly educated (with 79.1% having at least a college degree)

While potentially unusual in regards to the demographics of spectator sports fans, this sample does have the advantage of representing people not usually identified with hegemonic spectator sport fandom.

"This city loves the sport and celebrates diversity and equality. The Thorns represent women empowerment across cultures and in our community. If we support Timbers, we should support Thorns equally." – fan of Thorns in anonymous survey

Figure 1: Thematic frequencies in response to open-ended survey question about 'what you personally most enjoy/appreciate about being a Thorns fan?'



Results & Discussion

The success of the Thorns is explained by:

- **Social history:** serious soccer fandom has a long tradition in Portland, starting with the **Timbers** in 1975; these players also became coaches – most famously Clive Charles at the University of Portland, making women's soccer popular.
- **Cultural geography:** the **supporters culture** from the Timbers and their ethos of **inclusion and diversity**, which makes a diverse fan base possible, carried over to the Thorns. This can be seen in the expression of personal values in the stadium around inclusion (e.g., rainbow flags) and **gender equity** (e.g., signs asking for equal pay for the women's players), and is rarely found in traditional masculine hegemonic sports culture,
- **Psychological pleasure:** Thorns' sports fandom is **values-based:** as seen in the table, **support for women** (mentioned in 47% of responses), **comradery** (29.2%), and **community pride** (13.4%) score very high. Yet the most important factor, even above the **quality of soccer** (49%), is the **atmosphere & supporters culture** (52.5%), which is very different from the family-friendly atmosphere seen by many other women's teams (Myrdahl, 2010). This shows that when women's sports are treated seriously and presented professionally fans will take an interest.

This study shows that it is possible to have successful new and creative forms of sports fandom that are distinct from the fandom seen in traditional masculine male sports; namely, fandom focused around personal values like diversity and inclusion, with a supporters culture created from the bottom-up.

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