This research explores the factors in choices women make about watching sports. The assumption about coverage of women’s sports in post-Title IX decades has been that girls who have played will turn into women who watch, encouraging media producers to provide more women’s sports programming. Yet that audience has not materialized, and women’s sports have languished on the periphery of the sports media landscape. Using focus-group discussions with heterosexual, married women, we argue that sports media consumption is tied to gender roles and related domestic work. That association with emotion labor presents significant barriers to the cultivation of these women as fans of women’s sports.


When the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) launched in 1997, the league made a concerted effort to target women as an audience. Sheryl Swoopes, a well-known player, appeared on the cover of the now-defunct *Sports Illustrated for Women*, wearing her jersey and promoting the league. Sponsors created ad campaigns that connected with female WNBA fans such as the Sears “opening doors” spots, reminding women that Sears supported ways the WNBA was opening doors for millions of young girls to compete (McDonald, 2000). The underlying assumption, of course, was that “everyday” women and moms would be drawn to a league of female basketball players. That notion, however, has yet to come to fruition; attendance for the WNBA has been sluggish overall, and some teams have been forced to fold (WNBA teams, 2007; WNBA disbands, 2008).

In an interview, veteran sports announcer and women’s sports advocate Beth Mowins was asked about her hopes for the future of women’s sports. “A lot more women play now, have kids who play, but don’t watch women’s sports on TV. If more women would watch women’s sports on TV it would urge [TV] executives to put more on” (Mowins, n.d.). Mowins’ reply reflects the common assumption made.
popular in the mainstream press that women, and especially women who play or have previously played sports themselves, should—and will—watch and show an interest in women’s athletics; in other words, participation will drive spectatorship (Dahlberg, 2009; Tierney, 2005). One half of that equation has held up. Women’s participation in sports has increased exponentially over the past 35 years (Suggs, 2005). Despite those gains, however, women have not tuned in as women’s sports promoters and producers had expected. As one New York Times article announced, “The leagues are struggling because no mass sisterhood is watching the games on television” (Tierney, 2005, para. 4).

Millions of boys in the United States participate in sports, and a majority later become spectators of men’s sports. Millions of girls during the past 3 decades have also participated in sports, but have not become women’s sports spectators, leading to the logical question: Why? What is the motivation for women to watch sports at all, and how does this motivation translate (or not) to watching women’s sports for leisure in the home, given that the private sphere is a space where gender roles and identities are reproduced and maintained? This research explores the process and motivations of women for consuming mediated sports. Using qualitative focus groups with heterosexual, married women, we explore the factors in choices women make about watching sports, and we consider the implications for those choices on the future of women’s sports. We approach this research from a feminist cultural studies perspective, broadly meaning that we are concerned with how gendered subjectivities are created and contested through everyday cultural practices, such as watching mediated sports. Furthermore, we are interested in determining whose interests are served by those constructed subjectivities, as we seek to illuminate expressions of gendered power in everyday discourse (Birrell, 2000; van Zoonen, 1994).

**Literature review**

Since the 1972 passage of Title IX, a law that ensures equal funding and opportunity for girls and women in sports at federally funded educational institutions, female participation in athletics has risen at an astounding rate (Priest, 2003; Suggs, 2005). That growth in participation has led media producers and sports marketers to continue to speculate about women’s potential as an audience (Gaffney, 2002; Gibbons, 2003). Industry research suggests that speculation is well founded; the 2009 Superbowl telecast attracted almost 38 million women, the fifth straight increase in female viewership for that event (The Nielsen Company, 2009). Ratings that illustrate women’s increased interest in sports have caught the attention of industry insiders; as Howard Goldberg of the sports marketing research group Scarborough Research noted, “Female sports fans represent an untapped market that the sports industry should be targeting” (Mongrain, 2002). A research report authored by Scarborough found that women were increasingly following major men’s sports, with the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball and the NBA as the top sports most often followed by women (Mongrain, 2002). Still, although women collectively may be more sports-savvy and
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experienced than ever, they are not watching more of all sports, but rather selectively
tuning in to more major men’s games (Mongrain, 2002; Tierney, 2005).

Media coverage of women’s sports
As participation among girls and women in sports continues to climb, media
producers have looked to women’s athletics as a source of content (Big Ten
announces, 2007). Although the overall amount of coverage is small compared
to that received by comparable men’s sports, some women’s sports have received
mainstream coverage with various degrees of success. Since 2003, ESPN has aired all
63 games of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) women’s basketball
tournament; in addition, the 2004 championship game was the second-most viewed
basketball game—men or women, college or professional—in the network’s history
(Rodgers, 2004). Perhaps the most famous example of successful women’s sports
programming and attendance is the 1999 women’s World Cup, an example often
used to point to the potential success of mediated women’s sports.

However, the majority of women’s athletic events receive low ratings; they are
often positioned against far more popular men’s matches, such as a Sunday afternoon
in 2009 when the NCAA Division I women’s soccer championship was aired against a
heavily promoted NFL game. Although women’s sports advocates undoubtedly hope
otherwise, recent research suggests that even young sports fans who have grown up
with Title IX are unlikely to watch women’s contests (Hardin & Whiteside, 2009).

Women’s sports advocates have advanced two main arguments to explain the
relatively weak following of women’s sports. Firstly, scholars have largely argued that
the lack of exposure for women’s sports impedes its ability to gain a faithful audience;
farther, such “symbolic annihilation” suggests women’s lack of importance in the
wider sports landscape (Adams & Tuggle, 2004; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Hardin,
Lynn, Walsdorf, & Hardin, 2002; Hartley & Paris, 2001; Pedersen, 2003). Secondly,
others have pointed to the ways in which women’s sports are framed as an additional
mechanism for communicating to viewers that what they are watching is unimportant
or inferior. For instance, the persistent low production quality of women’s sports
is often given as one way in which female athletics are constructed as an inferior
product to that of men (Duncan, 2006; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Greer, Hardin,
& Homan, 2009; Higgs, Weiller, & Martin, 2003). Furthermore, journalists often
frame female athletes in ways that emphasize their femininity, as opposed to their
athleticism. Such tactics “trivialize a sportswoman’s accomplishments because her
appearance has nothing to do with her athletic performance” (Duncan, 2006, p. 243).
Other research suggests that such tactics are on their decline (MacKay & Dallaire,
2009) and less prominent in international events (Wensing & Bruce, 2003). Scholars
have argued that the lack of women in media gatekeeping positions contributes to the
maintenance of the low status afforded women’s sports (Cramer, 1994; Skwar, 1999).
Hiring more women, however, is incomplete as doing so will not necessarily change
the culture of the sports media workplace, which naturalizes male-defined norms
about sports that position women as outsiders (Hardin & Shain, 2005, 2006; Miller &

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In a survey Hardin (2005) found that about a quarter of sports editors saw women as naturally less athletic than men; such ideology allows those in power to justify the low level of newspaper sports coverage afforded girls’ and women’s sports.

Sports, gender, and consumption

Scholars have long argued that sports are a place where gender roles are created, affirmed, and contested based on social context. Despite the availability of more messages and images of female athletes than ever before, sports are still considered “masculine,” even by youths in a post-Title IX generation (Hardin & Greer, 2009). Thus, playing and watching sports can be a way for men to learn about what it means to be masculine as defined by dominant cultural norms (Messner, 2002; Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000; Whannel, 2002). Such an approach explains the high cultural value placed on sports such as basketball and football that embody typical masculine attributes. Conversely, sports such as gymnastics or figure skating, which embody traditional feminine attributes like grace and aesthetics, have relatively little value to male sports fans (Sargent, Ziullmann, & Weaver, 1998). These sports—when televised (usually in conjunction with the Olympics) are generally more popular with women (Bryant & Raney, 2000; Sargent et al., 1998).

Because masculinity is often defined as the opposite of femininity, sports scholars suggest that for men, watching women play sports may threaten their identification with masculinity, explaining cultural resistance to women’s sports and athletes (Lenskyj, 2003; Griffin, 1998). Women’s increased participation in sports further troubles the link between masculinity and sports; as Miller (2001) writes, “The capacity of sports to ideologize masculine superiority has been destabilized as women have struggled to gain greater access and commercially minded sports governors have sought women out as consumers” (p. 23). The association of masculinity and sports has proved to be a difficult tension for female athletes, as they struggle to negotiate an internalized feminine identity with the practice of engaging in an activity culturally coded as masculine. For example, one focus-group study showed how college female athletes saw the notion of a female athlete as a deviant “Other,” and fundamentally different than “normal,” non-athletic girls; the athletes ultimately struggled to portray a feminine identity while at the same time participating in activities they saw as fundamentally masculine (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2002).

According to research, as men continue to follow men’s sports and resist watching women’s sports, women may follow the men in their lives (Farrell, 2006; Trail, Fink, & Anderson, 2003). Through qualitative interviews with women who regularly attended men’s collegiate basketball games, Farrell (2006) found that women expressed interest in sports that mirrored the interests of the men in their lives. Farrell suggests that because of this male influence, women may develop a “male gaze” in consuming sports and come to value features of sports that exhibit traditionally masculine characteristics. A study by Lemish (1998) suggests that this “male gaze” is developed over time, as the girls she interviewed generally resisted watching violent sporting contests, unlike their male classmates.
Gender roles and the household

The ability to watch sports is of course dependent on the amount of leisure time available to any one individual, something that scholars argue is largely mediated by gender identities and performance (Erickson, 2005). Much large-scale sociological work on the topic has suggested that leisure time is dependent on the amount of time individuals spend on work and home responsibilities—two pursuits often divided along gender lines (Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003). Although the overall amount of time men spend on work in the home has increased over time, women in heterosexual marriages are still responsible for the majority of domestic responsibilities (Coltrane, 2000; Hook, 2006; Bittman & Wajcman, 2000). As Erickson (2005) notes, “Husbands and wives perform family work in ways that facilitate culturally appropriate constructions of gender” (p. 348). Similar research shows that lesbian couples, however, tend to divide household chores much more equitably (Shechory & Ziv, 2007). Domestic responsibilities for all couples become even more time intensive with the onset of children, and research suggests that when heterosexual couples enter parenthood, women spend an increased amount of time tending to all domestic labor duties compared to men, even if the couple had a fairly equitable division of tasks before becoming parents (Sanchez & Thomson, 1997). This again contrasts with similar research on the transition to parenthood among lesbian couples. A recent study found that, although the biological mother in lesbian couples takes on more childcare responsibilities, the overall division of domestic labor remains equitable when same-sex female couples have children (Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2007).

West and Zimmerman (1987) suggest that gendered roles in the home are more than just scripts for individuals to follow; rather, when a woman engages in household labor while her husband does not, “what is produced and reproduced is not merely the activity and artifact of domestic life, but the material embodiment of wifely and husbandly roles, and derivatively, of womanly and manly conduct” (p. 144). Important to their analysis is that gender identity is an achievement realized not only through human action, but through social interaction. That social interaction, say West and Zimerman, is key to legitimizing and normalizing existing social arrangements.

Gender and leisure

Because of the household demands on their time, it logically follows, then, that women in heterosexual relationships have less time to spend on leisurely pursuits (Lee & Bhargava, 2004). The differences extend beyond simply time differentials, however; women also perceive and experience leisure differently. Because they are often required to plan and organize leisure time, leisure time can become less leisure and more work (Deem, 1987; Shaw & Dawson, 2001). In their interviews with married heterosexual women, Shaw and Dawson (2001) also noted that the women in their study shouldered a concern for the enjoyment of everyone involved, engaging in what Erickson (2005) calls emotion work, or activities involved with the “enhancement of other’s emotional well-being” (Erickson, 2005, p. 338).
Research also suggests that women’s leisure time is spotted with constant interruptions and often associated with domestic care work (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000; Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003). Mattingly and Bianchi (2003) also note that women report feeling less satisfaction from their leisure time compared to men, leading them to speculate that married women may (a) worry about undone work during their free time, (b) undertake leisure activities for the point of contributing to the family’s well-being and not for their own enjoyment, or (c) feel guilt at taking time for themselves (Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003). In other words, “domestic leisure for them is contradictory” while it is not for men (O’Connor & Boyle, 1993, p. 112).

Leisure time with the television: Men and women

Research indicates that men and women use media, especially television, differently in their leisure time (Lemish, 1998; Morley, 1986; Spigel, 1994; Walker, 1996). Some of the most robust, influential work involving gender, leisure time, and media use has been done by feminist researchers (Brooker & Jermyn, 2003). For instance, Radway’s landmark study on the reading of romance novels by women recognized the relationship between women’s media choices and traditional roles in the home. Radway suggested that they used the novels to “to do something different from their daily routine” (2003, p. 220) and to get a reprieve from the draining tasks of household maintenance and family caretaking. Radway concluded that part of the reason women chose to read romance novels was that it was an activity they did not have to share with other family members; they could mentally and emotionally escape while in the same room with a spouse or children, for instance.

Morley’s (1986) seminal research on gendered ways of viewing television is also useful in exploring the relationship between women and mediated sport. Morley studied the insinuation of TV with household routines and hierarchies, extending our understanding that TV consumption is a social practice embedded in domestic culture and goes far beyond autonomous choices made by individuals based on content (Saenz, 1994). In a series of interviews with heterosexual, married couples, Morley observed that women and men watched television differently; while men preferred to view attentively, women believed that they could not afford such indulgence while other family members might need attention. Morley was careful to distinguish that his observations were not of the characteristics of men and women but were, instead, of the way masculine and feminine roles in the home played out with television. Later studies expanded Morley’s ideas, including one that compared heterosexual and gay couples (Walker, 1996). Walker, whose research focused on the use of TV remote control by straight and gay couples, found that “joint television watching in heterosexual couples is hardly an egalitarian experience . . . women and men are creating and affirming themselves and each other as separate and unequal” (p. 820). Her study included interviews with several lesbian couples who expressed “unique patterns” in how they shared the remote control: “Rather than reproducing structural hierarchies, they create a bond of equality and provide a different course for the resolution of inherent conflict within couples” (p. 821).
Radway (2003) and Morley (1986) focus on the structural and social roles of media consumption in gendered lives. Fiske’s (1989) observations about the relationship between audience and content may also be relevant in understanding the relationship between women and mediated sports. In short, Fiske suggests that media texts succeed because they contain popular meanings; popular meanings are constructed out of the relevance between the text and everyday life (Fiske, 1989). A popular text (perhaps in the form of a television program) “does not faze the reader with its sense of shocking difference both from other texts and from the everyday” (Fiske, 1989, p. 104). Individuals are invited to bring their experiences and resources to a text, thus allowing the text to speak to their individual lives (Gibson, 2000).

Method

The assumption about coverage of women’s sports in post-Title IX decades has been that girls who have played will turn into women who watch, providing the justification for women’s sports advocates to encourage media producers to provide more women’s sports programming. Yet such assumptions have not materialized. Furthermore, academic research on audiences and mediated sports has not explored why participation has not yielded more spectators among women. This research qualitatively explores the relationship between a group of married, heterosexual women and mediated sports. In harmony with the goals of qualitative inquiry, we do not seek to generalize or to predict future consumption but rather to better understand how these women situate mediated sport into their lives and present a possible new perspective to explain a persistent problem facing women’s sports advocates. Through those discussions, we offer an explanation about the gendered meaning embedded in the practice of consuming mediated sports, and address some of the barriers preventing a woman-powered sports audience from emerging.

We used focus-group interviews to explore these ideas, a method that relies on a moderator to facilitate interaction with the group on a topic of interest (Morgan, 1997). The method has gained popularity in cultural audience studies, and is particularly useful for exploring the social context of media consumption, a key component to this study, because it allows for depth discussion on issues important to the researcher (Deacon, Pickering, Golding, & Murdock, 2007). Focus groups, like other qualitative methods, allowed us to position women’s experiences as the starting point for this research, a critical component in feminist cultural studies, and important to this study as we sought to assess and explain women’s sports viewing habits (Maynard & Purvis, 1994; Stanley & Wise, 1993).

Participants

For the interviews, we recruited 19 women at a nonacademic, job-related conference for their husbands in a neighboring U.S. state using what Deacon et al. (2007) call
a theoretical sampling approach, or a strategy that “seeks out respondents who are most likely to aid theoretical development” (p. 54). We were looking for a deeper understanding of a specific social process, and thus sought out women who would provide the rich explanatory “data,” or discussions, that would help us more thoroughly assess the larger social questions posed in this study (Deacon et al., 2007; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Thus, we looked for women who had grown up under Title IX protections, as these women are far more likely to have participated in competitive sports than older women (over 55 years old), who were finished with high school by the time the law took effect. We also looked for women who were likely to be middle-class, married mothers with children at home, who represent a viewing group sought after by sports programmers. Finally, we sought women outside our general sphere—a university community with high-level interest in the intercollegiate athletic teams.

The women were between 26 and 43 years old and identified themselves as having an interest, to some degree, in sports. Fifteen were married with children at home and two others were married without children. Some were employed, and others were not. Most of the participants were White, but one identified as African American and one as Latina. Because we promised the participants confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout in place of real names.

Focus groups
We conducted three groups; group size varied from five to eight members, and the sessions all lasted approximately 90 minutes. Both researchers attended each session, with one facilitating the group and the other taking notes. Following each session, we discussed our immediate impressions in what Potter (1996) calls an initial step of data analysis. We began the groups with a “discussion starter” and asked each participant to introduce herself and provide a brief description of her interest in sports (Morgan, 1997, p. 49). Although some participants had competitive athletic experience and many had children who were competitive, the women expressed varying levels of interest—from very great to very little—in mediated sports.

Once the initial round of introductions was complete, we sought to ask questions that would lend themselves to group conversation, rather than two-way communication between the moderator and participant (Krueger, 2009). Examples of the nondirective questions included “What sports do you follow?” and “How do you keep tabs on your favorite teams?” Follow-up questions, which varied depending on response, aimed to further explore why they made the sports media choices they did (Potter, 1996).

Analysis
In analyzing the transcripts, we followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) model of a theoretical thematic analysis. This analytical approach is driven by the theory from the outset and thus should be used when trying to interrogate a specific theoretical
concept. In the case here, the analysis was driven by a cultural audience analysis, in which viewing mediated sports is part of the production and maintenance of gendered subjectivities. Braun and Clarke argue that this differs from a purely inductive thematic analysis approach where the research question evolves through the coding process, much like a grounded theory approach. A theoretical thematic analysis is particularly useful in this project because it is close in style to critical/cultural analysis where the method is driven by the author’s application of critical/cultural theory. Staying open to the directions the analysis may go, however, is part of recognizing the fluidity of the research problem and staying open to alternative possibilities (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002). Unlike a critical theory argument, however, a theoretical thematic analysis is useful when qualitative data is collected in the form of dialogue. It can help manage and organize the pages upon pages of transcripts and provide an approach for analyzing the dialogue.

Once we familiarized ourselves with the data through reviewing our notes and reading the transcripts, we generated a set of initial codes, as outlined by Baptiste (2001). Codes are a descriptive tag given to sets of text within a transcript (Braun & Clarke, 2006). From there we began an analysis of our codes using our theoretical framework as the instrument for interpretation; this analysis ultimately produced our themes. According to Baptiste, strong themes are more than just what he calls a glossary or list of descriptives. Rather, they provide a depth of understanding that builds on the theoretical underpinnings of the research. The key for a robust theme, then, is to provide a deeper and broader understanding of the experience being investigated. We discussed and revised our interpretations until we both came to a mutual agreement.

Establishing trustworthiness
In a qualitative project, trustworthiness has been described as “the ways we work to meet the criteria of validity, credibility, and believability of our research” (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001, p. 324). We adopted several feminist-based strategies to establish trustworthiness in the data collection mode, including a conscious attempt to reduce the power differential between ourselves and the participants (Harrison et al., 2001). Wilkinson (1998) argues that qualitative research has been dominated by individualistic research methods, and the opportunity for group communication where participants can see their comments validated by others can provide an empowering experience. We sought to facilitate that experience by reminding participants that we valued their opinions and perspectives and that there were no wrong answers. In the interpretation phase of the analysis, we adopted the value of reflexivity, or the tendency of researchers “to reflect upon, examine critically, and explore analytically the nature of the research process” (Fonow & Cook, 1991, p. 2). This was particularly evident during the phase in which we conceptualized the themes; during this period we actively sought to consider alternative possibilities and in doing so, developed the themes beyond how we each independently conceptualized them originally.
Findings

Overall, we heard participants describe their sport-related media habits as dictated by their social standing as a mother and/or wife. Much of what they consumed on their own happened by chance when they had a free moment to sit down in front of the television, and their viewing habits were discontinuous, largely because of household responsibilities that required them to multitask. Furthermore, the motivations of these women centered on a desire to connect with their husbands, and by extension, their families; thus, consuming sports media was a means to an end for many participants. In addition, the women in our focus groups, some of whom were former athletes or were still involved in recreational sports, expressed little interest in watching, listening, or reading about women’s sports.

Women as sporadic media consumers

The women were generally sporadic in their pursuit of sports entertainment although some described themselves as avid fans of certain sports teams or athletes. Their television viewing habits were not dictated by a specific sports or team schedule, but by their free moments. Furthermore, rather than watching a game from start to finish, they experienced sports media through a series of constant interruptions.

Solo sports media consumption is mainly serendipitous

Participants described typical household arrangements in which they were responsible for most of the domestic labor responsibilities. Most indicated that their time in the home was not necessarily leisure time, but “working” time in the form of a constant cycle of cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, taking care of children, and other household tasks. Many described the way in which they watched sports media as largely by chance; in other words, watching or reading about sports came when they had a free moment. Thus, their consumption habits were not dictated by TV or team and league schedules—but rather their personal ones.

Participants said when they had free moments they might pause to sit down in front of the TV and “flip” through the channels. If an event caught their attention, they would watch for a while. Ultimately, the women were less worried about following a specific sports-related schedule and were more focused on enjoying a few minutes of reprieve from their workloads. Said Jane, a 33-year-old married mother:

You have to hit me to watch it. Whether it’s male or female because—like a lot of people—I have a child and the house, and I just don’t have time. But if it’s something that catches my interest, I’ll sit and watch it for a little while, and then I’ll get back to doing what I was doing.

Others described discovering sports of interest in a spare minute with the TV. One woman said she watched the World Cup for the first time after she sat down and came across a match—although she also expressed second thoughts about the time she had spent:
I was flipping stations, and it came up, and I said, ‘Oh.’ Came in and said, ‘I’ll see what’s going on,’ and the next thing I know, we’re three games later, and I’m still sitting there. I’m like, OK, what’s wrong here?

In general, the women said they consumed sports via television, but some indicated they might read a sports story in the newspaper. However, reading the sports page of the newspaper was a low priority, although some described similar chance occasions in which they would appear to be “sucked in.” Most said they rarely read the sports page; one participant summed up the sentiment of most participants when she said, “If something catches my eye, I’ll read it.”

**Sports TV consumption is discontinuous**

The participants almost unanimously agreed that watching whole games or events was nearly impossible. Most said they often performed tasks such as tending to the kitchen, putting away laundry, or checking on the children while an event was on. “I really do a lot when the TV is on,” one participant said. Another woman said she put a TV in the kitchen so she could “cook and watch.” Many participants’ husbands regularly watched National Association for Stock Car Racing (NASCAR) races by sitting in front of the television for the entire race—while their wives moved in and out of the television room. Said Darlene, a 27-year-old married mother:

I’m up and down when I do it. I would like to make the time, but I think women prioritize. And I’m stereotyping: We prioritize more. We know what needs to get done, and they may not. ‘Oh, well, I can clean the rain gutters next weekend,’ or, ‘I can . . .’—that kind of stuff. They can put things off and not worry about it. And for me, it’s eating at me. There’s stuff that you could be doing.

Others reiterated Darlene’s description about household work. Sports are not a high priority because “I’d rather get my laundry folded or something,” said one woman as others around the table nodded.

One group described the problems with devoting an extended amount of time to watching sports:

Darlene: My husband watches more than I do. But I have five kids so I’m chasing them. The boys are starting to get into it so they’ll sit and watch a game with their dad—or at least part of it. As long as he can keep them entertained.

Interviewer: Alright.

Mary (39, married mother): I won’t sit and watch the whole thing either. I don’t have time. I have too many other things to do so, it’s like, it’s on, and I’m up and down.

**Compressed sporting narrative**

Because of their busy home schedules and easily disrupted viewing patterns, most participants expressed preferences for sports productions that do not require an extended time commitment.
Nearly all indicated a preference for the Olympics. Although most said they were drawn to the nationalistic narratives in Olympics coverage, many also said they preferred the condensed style of coverage, something they described as easy to follow. After citing her attraction to the Olympics for patriotic reasons, Misti added, “It’s quick-paced, too. Short time period, and you’ve got the whole thing. You don’t have to sit there and watch it for months and months.” For these women, the Olympics were conducive to their schedules. Melissa, a 35-year-old married mother, added:

I think it’s because it’s such a concentrated amount of time. It covers a short span of time and so that’s all that is on TV, that’s all that you hear on the radio, and it’s not just the day of; you hear about it the day after. You hear what happened the day before. It’s just a constant stream of information coming at you concerning it, and every time you turn the TV on, it’s ‘Oh, well, look at this.’ I’ll sit and watch this for a few minutes, and then you go do something else.

Although many women said they consumed sports media only by chance, some made the effort to seek out sports information. Nearly all participants used the Internet, with most describing it as easy and time efficient. Said one participant, “I don’t have 15 or 20 minutes to just sit there looking at the paper. I can look at it online real quick and then move on to something else.”

Using sports as a way to connect with men

Despite coming across events or sports-related programs they found interesting, most participants described ways they used sports media not for enjoyment in and of itself but as a means to connect with men and, by extension, their families. Although many said they enjoyed certain sports, they often described their fanship, team association, and viewing habits as centering on their husbands.

Ultimately, their sports preferences were largely dictated by the men in their lives. Pam, 43, said, “You all know how much our husbands work. Sundays are normally about the only day they have off so you kind of want to do something, you know, to spend a little time together.” Participants said they developed an interest in certain sports, most often football and NASCAR, through their husbands and saw this bond as beneficial. As one woman put it, “I’m a Steelers fan by marriage.”

Most of the members of one particular group recognized the lack of agency they had in deciding what was on the household television. Said Sue, a 29-year-old mother, “It’s usually a mutual agreement, but he pretty much picks it.” Later, the group debated:

Jeanette: I think if the tables were turned and we were avid, you know, cheerleader watchers or figure skating—would they make the time to sit down and watch that with us? I really don’t think so.

Karen: I don’t think... . I mean, I like sports as much as he does, but I also love the ballet and let me tell you, we never went to the ballet. We’re going in December, but—
Participant: How long have you been married?

Karen: We’ve been married—we’ve been together 15 years...like I said, we’re going in December, and like I said, I like the ballet as much as I like the foot—but we’ve been to football games, you know, left and right and...yeah.

Although most women in our sessions described their husbands as avid football fans, one participant, Mia, however, differed: “I’m the one that will sit there and watch it. And he’ll go do—cut the lawn or whatever.” She mimicked the response she gives her family during games: “‘Do what? No, I’m sorry. Can’t help you right now. The game is on.’” Mia, a married Latina, appeared to watch football purely for her own enjoyment.

Participants also described ways in which they sought out sports information in order to converse with their husbands or other men, such as colleagues or family members. “I like to throw facts in my husband’s face,” said one woman. Others, including a couple of women who worked together, followed:

Interviewer: So why are you seeking out sports information? I know, Misti, you said you like to throw facts at your husband.

Kaci (32, married mother): To gain knowledge.

Interviewer: Is that for your own benefit? Is it to converse with others?

Melissa: Definitely to converse with others.

Kaci: We are the only...about 30 people [are] in our organization and we’re the only females to 28 other guys. And all they talk about is sports so we’ve got to...we have to be able to talk at the same level of what they’re talking about.

Women as ambivalent about women’s sports

Participants generally saw little value in following women’s sports and were especially uninterested in watching or following women in sports such as basketball, which showcase athletic displays that challenge traditional gender roles. Rather, they expressed a passing interest in sports such as gymnastics, tennis, cheerleading, and figure skating. Even then, however, most did not say they sought information about these sports. When they described experiences with women’s sports, most gave examples of watching them only by chance. Said Jeanette on women’s cheerleading, “I wouldn’t record it on my DVR or anything, but, like, if I’m flipping through the channel, it sucks you in.”

Some women described themselves as former athletes; their previous involvement in organized sports, however, did not necessarily translate into an interest in watching them. After noting that she was a former softball player, Jeanette said, “Like men’s baseball, I think it’s boring. I think it’s very boring unless it’s the World Series or something.” Erin, 33, also a former athlete, followed up on her group’s general distaste for women’s basketball:
I just—I don’t know. I don’t really find interest in watching women’s sports on TV. I used to play sports myself. I love participating in them, but watching them? I’d rather watch football.

One participant, however, was an outspoken fan of women’s sports. Nan, an African American, 42-year-old mother of grown children (not living at home) was an avid sports fan, especially of women’s athletics. During the session she talked about professional women’s football and said she was interested in obtaining tickets. She was also the only participant to express an interest in the WNBA. In the opening round of introductions, she described her position on the subject of college women’s basketball:

What I don’t like is the lack of coverage that we get with women’s sports. Like during basketball season, you get all the male games and you may get one or two female games during the week so...and all you get is the scores on ESPN. That upsets me because we’re good. I think we can handle some of the guys on the court, you know. What’s up with that?

**Valuing equity**

Even though most did not prefer to watch or consume women’s sports, some, like Nan, suggested that women’s sports should get more coverage. Nan’s group, for instance, talked about the relationship between coverage and interest. After a short discussion, Nan summarized:

I think one of the problems is we don’t have the exposure. So you don’t watch it because it’s never on. I think if it was on more then we would get into it more. The same way with men’s sports.

Another group lamented the situation of Danica Patrick, an Indy-Car driver who has gained fame for both her winning record and her attractiveness:

Melissa: [T]hey want to take pictures of her and put her in magazines like *Maxim* and *Hot Stuff*. She’s a race car driver, so yes, she’s got more than a body to her, but focus on—

Misti (35, married): Because she had to sell her soul to get her fifteen minutes.

Melissa: And it’s a shame that that’s the only way she can do it. ‘Well, if you do our *Playboy* issue, we’ll put you on the cover and actually pay attention to how well you do in the sport that you’ve chosen.’

Many told us they had daughters and, although they themselves were not interested in watching women’s sports, wanted the option to be available for their children. Despite valuing equity, however, most women preferred mainstream sports they could watch with their husbands, most often NFL and NASCAR events. None described watching women’s sports with their husbands or family members.
Discussion and conclusions

Our goal in these interviews was to learn more about how women might integrate mediated sports into their lives and how, in the process, they view women’s sports. We also sought to better understand how gender roles are produced through everyday social interaction. We aimed not to generalize, but instead, through conversations with a small group of married, heterosexual women, to understand the dynamics in their decision-making about consuming sports and offer a theory as to why interest in watching women’s sports has not materialized among them. What we found was that sports fandom for these women was not associated with leisure as much as it was with the maintenance of relationships, notably with the key men in their lives. Furthermore, we heard descriptions of behavior that reinforce women’s roles as domestic caretakers, “separate and unequal” in relationship to sports-related media choices in the home (Walker, 1996, p. 820). We also observed the relating of sports media consumption to domestic work—hardly a recipe for the cultivation of women as sports fans. The association of sports consumption with labor presents significant barriers to the cultivation of these women as fans of women’s sports.

The work of watching

For most of the women we interviewed, watching sports was a way to spend time with their husbands and families. We did not get the sense, however, that they had developed a male gaze in evaluating sports, as Farrell (2006) suggests. Rather, they watched traditional, mainstream sports because they offered the women a way to connect with the men in their lives; it was not the content driving their consumption, but the opportunity for relationship maintenance and quality time. Presumably, if their husbands were watching women’s sports, the women would be as well.

Although prior work rightly notes that sports like figure skating and cheerleading are popular among women because such images do not challenge their own gender identity, the findings here add another dimension to the reason behind those sports’ popularity among women: their easy-to-watch format. As previous research has suggested, our participants described the process of watching sports as a series of intermittent episodes. When they expressed a preference for sports, many seemed most interested in events that they could easily watch and appreciate while handling the interruptions that come with overseeing a household. It is no surprise, then, that they cited the Olympics, figure skating, cheerleading competitions and even the end of NASCAR races as some of their favorite events to follow; competition for most events they mentioned takes place in a relatively short series of self-contained athletic displays, requiring less time sitting in front of the TV.

Another dimension of time—the when—is also a factor in the way participants integrate sports into their lives. The most popular mediated sports events take place on weekends—the only time when the women we interviewed said they had quality time with their husbands. It may also be the only time for women who are employed to perform the lion’s share of household chores. As their husbands pursue leisure time in front of the television, the female partners are along for the ride, so to speak,
with little-to-no control. By default, then, they become fans of men’s sports in a “catch-as-catch-can” fashion.

This element disadvantages mediated women’s sports, which are often aired on weekends—pitted against high-profile men’s events. When they are, is the expectation by producers that women will either wrest the remote from the hand of a male partner or be willing to sacrifice time with him? For the women we interviewed, both scenarios are highly unlikely. A more likely scenario is a willingness by women to watch time-compressed sporting events such as the Olympics during more convenient times for leisure, such as in the evenings after domestic obligations are done. It is no wonder to us that participants spoke so favorably about the Olympics, which often feature events late in nontraditional time periods—such as during the day or on weeknights.

Certainly, DVR technology and online programming make watching sports at a particular time less obligatory. Women can, if they desire, watch a women’s sporting event late at night or during other times of day when they have time free of obligation. We believe Radway’s understanding of women’s media use as escape from domestic work, however, is relevant. For participants, sports programming was not associated with escape, but instead with family obligations and relationship-building—emotion work. How much can watching any sports, then, be considered leisure time for women in households where traditional gender roles are the norm? Even when women do have the option to control the remote without worry about family obligations, can we expect them to choose a form of programming that at other times would be associated with work?

**Women’s sports and women’s lives**

Participants did not completely reject mediated women’s sports; they expressed a preference for sports that may fit the structural constraints in their schedules. The sports also had another commonality: They were sports such as gymnastics, figure skating, and cheerleading, which require participants to exhibit stereotypically feminine traits such as grace and beauty.

Here, we find Fiske’s (1989) suggestion about the necessary relevance of media texts to everyday life useful in understanding why we heard this preference. Although Title IX has opened doors for sport participation—and the women we interviewed have been beneficiaries—the difference between the images in a WNBA game or a Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) tournament and the everyday lives of these women are a significant barrier in making these media texts popular. We speculate that the women we interviewed could not see themselves—or their ideal (gendered) selves—in the airing of such a competitive women’s event. Images of professional female athletes playing basketball, football, or soccer do not mesh with participants’ domestic reality or socially cultivated aspirations; in fact, the “shocking difference” (Fiske, 1989, p. 104) between the images of powerful female athletes—rejecting traditional gender roles—and the lives of the women we interviewed creates a very large gap.
Building an audience for women’s sports
This research illustrates the fallacy in assumptions that girls who have grown up in an environment tolerant of their sports participation will or should become women’s sports fans. The women in this study saw the value in equity and supported the notion that women’s sports should receive more and better coverage, but their comments did not suggest that such changes would translate into the devotion of their own time toward consuming mediated women’s sports. This conclusion thus presents women’s sports advocates with a more complex challenge to creating a fan base. On one hand, the content of women’s mediated sports—the images of strong women engaged in an activity culturally marked as masculine—needs to align better with the everyday lives and cultural sense of self of women. But presenting more content such as figure skating or cheerleading, or advocating women to imagine alternative notions of gender that might better align with, say, watching women’s basketball, is only part of the equation. The challenge to building a women’s sports fan base is also mediated by the form of domestic life. As the women in this study showed, watching sports was not a leisure activity, but rather associated with emotion labor. On the latter part of this two-pronged challenge, media producers and women’s sports advocates interested in building audiences in the short-term need to acknowledge and address the structural impediments facing women with the potential for interest in watching women play. For instance, airing professional women’s sports on weekends is a barrier for many women who perform traditional gender roles associated with childcare.

We are not saying that women’s sports are doomed to stagnate. Demographics shifts in the U.S. population suggest that the number of women and men living alone is increasing and that married men are accepting a larger share of domestic responsibilities. It is perhaps these types of lifestyle shifts—as much as the increasing participation of girls in sport—that will allow the increasing use of mediated sports by women for leisure time and the increasing challenge to traditional gender roles in their everyday lives. These developments may, over time, deliver audiences to sustain professional women’s sports. It is also interesting to note that one woman who did describe herself as an avid women’s sports fan was a woman whose children were adults and had left home. Women in this demographic may also provide audience power to women’s sports.

Further research
This study explored the sports consumption habits and experiences of women in traditional, heterosexual marriages; in those relationships, everyday behavior, such as taking care of the home reproduces hierarchical gendered subjectivities (Erickson, 2005). A major impediment to enjoying women’s sports was the “shocking difference” between the mediated images and the women’s everyday sense of self. There is no simple prescription for bridging this gap, although comments from the women supporting equity in coverage are encouraging and may provide one possible avenue for change. If their consciousness is raised toward this issue, perhaps the literature on coviewing might offer a possibility for change. Research has shown that by
watching television with their children, parents may foster a more media-critical attitude (Van Evra, 2004) and protect youths from internalizing problematic media messages, such as body anxiety among young girls (Schooler, Kim, & Sorsoli, 2006). Future research should investigate whether such a solution is viable, and whether parents see this as a useful goal worthy of their time. In contrast, for women who have rejected mainstream notions of femininity and its inherent heteronormative standards, watching other women contest similar boundaries may in fact affirm their everyday lives and thus provide a pleasurable experience. Dolance (2005) argues that lesbian women attending WNBA games “read” the games differently than heterosexual women because of their past experiences; a similar approach should be employed for exploring how and why lesbian women consume sports media.

Dolance’s (2005) assertion that lesbian women “read” WNBA games differently applies to the broader notion that individuals in subjugated positions experience and interpret the world differently than do those in positions of privilege (Tong, 1998). Certainly the results of this project speak to that idea; Nan and Mia, an African American and Latina wife and mother, respectively, differed from the rest of the group in their preferences. Nan brought up watching women’s football on her own and noted the enjoyment she felt from watching women athletes. Mia, however, was an avid follower of the NFL’s Dallas Cowboys, but watched without her husband, whom she described as uninterested in sports. Nan and Mia may have different cultural values than the White women in the groups or be adhering to different feminine norms. Further research should investigate the intersectionality of race and class along with the performance of gender in understanding the meaning of watching sports.

Our findings suggest that for heterosexual married women, even if they had an interest in watching women’s sports, household and familial responsibilities would be a major impediment. Single women do not face such structural constraints and although they presumably care for their own homes entirely by themselves, can do so on their own schedules. Future work should investigate how this relative freedom translates into sports media consumption habits.

Another area that should be explored is the motivations of men who watch women’s sports. As Messner (2002) and others have suggested, sports function as a sort of pedagogical tool for men to learn how to be “real men.” In an age where competing masculinities are continually emerging, watching women’s sports may become less of a challenge to an individual’s masculine identity, thus expanding the potential for the popularity of women’s sports. Certainly some men already do watch and follow women’s sports and may do so with the women in their lives. What will be important for scholars to address in this area is the reproduction (or not) of gendered hierarchies through watching women’s sports. As we noted earlier, the women in this study seemed to watch whatever the men in their lives were interested in viewing. If men started watching women’s sports and women followed, existing power relations would still remain in place, illustrating the need for larger questions of agency and the reproduction of power inequities to be considered in future audience research.
References


本研究探讨影响女性观看体育节目的选择因素。在后第九修正案时代，女性运动报道的假设认为曾是运动员的女性会观看体育节目，为此也鼓励媒体人提供更多的女性体育节目。然而这些观众的数量未如预期所料，女性运动也已沦为运动版图中的边缘节目。本文通过与异性恋女性和已婚妇女的小组访谈，认为体育节目的媒体消费与性别角色和相关的家庭工作有关。与情感相关的工作成为培育这些女性成为女性体育节目粉丝的巨大障碍。
Des femmes qui (ne) regardent (pas) des femmes : le temps libre, la télévision et les implications pour la couverture télévisée des femmes dans le sport

Cette étude explore les facteurs influençant les choix que font les femmes quant au fait de regarder des sports. L’idée sous-tendant la couverture des sports féminins dans les décennies suivant l’adoption en 1972 de la loi Title IX aux États-Unis, garantissant l’égalité aux filles et aux femmes dans le sport, était que les filles qui ont joué à des sports deviendraient des femmes qui en regardent, ce qui encouragerait alors les producteurs de médias à offrir plus d’émissions couvrant les femmes dans le sport. Or, cet auditoire ne s’est pas concrétisé et les sports féminins ont traîné à la périphérie du paysage médiatique sportif. À partir de groupes de discussion avec des femmes hétérosexuelles et mariées, nous soutenons que la consommation de médias sportifs est liée aux rôles sexuels et au travail domestique qui y est associé. Cette association au travail émotionnel présente des obstacles importants à la fidélisation de ces femmes à titre de partisanes de sports féminins.
본 연구는 여성들이 스포츠를 관람하는 선택요소에 관한 것이다. Title-IX 시대 이후 여성의
스포츠 보도에 관한 가정은 운동을 한 여성들은 스포츠를 관람하고 미디어 프로듀서들에게 보다
많은 여성 스포츠를 제공하도록 격려할 것이란 것이었다. 그러나 수용자들은 물질화되지
않았으며, 여성스포츠들은 스포츠 미디어 상황에서 주변위치로 처하게 되었다. 남성과 결혼한
여성들을 대상으로 한 포커스그룹 대화를 통해, 본 논문은 스포츠 미디어 소비는 젠더역할과
연계되어 있다는 것을 논의했다. 감정작업에 대한 연계는 여성들을 여성 스포츠의 팬으로서
배양하는데 있어 주요한 장애라는 것을 보여준다.
Las Mujeres (No) Miran a las Mujeres: El Tiempo Libre, la Televisión y las Implicaciones de la Cobertura Televisiva de los Deportes Femeninos

Resumen
Esta investigación explora los factores en las selecciones que las mujeres hacen sobre qué deportes observar. La suposición sobre la cobertura de los deportes de mujeres, décadas después del Título IX, ha sido que las niñas que han jugado se convertirán en las mujeres que observarán y estimularán a los productores de los medios para que provean de más programación de deportes de mujeres. Aún esa audiencia no se ha materializado, y los deportes de mujeres han languidecido hacia la periferia del panorama de los medios deportivos. Usando discusiones de entrevistas de grupo con mujeres heterosexuales, casadas, argumentamos que el consumo de los medios deportivos está atado a los roles de género y relacionado con el trabajo doméstico. Esta asociación con la emoción presenta barreras significativas para la cultivación de estas mujeres como fans de los deportes de mujeres.