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Gender, Sexual, and Sports Fan Identities

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Abstract

Using data from the National Sports and Society Survey ($N = 3,988$), this study analyzes associations between gender, sexual, and sports fan identities. The authors find that only 11 percent of U.S. adults do not identify as sports fans at all; also, nearly half of U.S. adults identify as quite passionate sports fans. Women and nonbinary adults are less likely to identify as strong sports fans compared with men. Compared to identifying as heterosexual, identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or another sexual identity is negatively associated with self-identified sports fandom. Yet, gender and sexuality interact such that identifying as gay (or lesbian) is negatively associated with men's self-identified sports fandom but not women's fandom. These findings persist even after consideration of adults' retrospective accounts of their sports-related identities while growing up and their recognition of sports-related mistreatment.

Gender, Sexual, and Sports Fan Identities

Self-reported sports fan identification among U.S. adults is high. In 2015, Gallup reported that 60% of American adults identified as sports fans, and a 2016 survey of U.S. adults found that 73% reported themselves to be fans or that they “closely followed a sport” (Jones, 2015; Thorson and Serazio, 2018). For many, sports fandom is a meaningful pastime that shapes self-identities and relationships with others (Crawford, 2004; Mewett and Toffoletti, 2011; Tarver, 2017). Yet, U.S. sports fan cultures have historically been disproportionately (hetero)masculine and male-dominated domains, particularly in men’s sport (Lee and Cunningham, 2016). Greater recognition of women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) athletes and fans, declining sexism and sexual stigma, and the rising profile of U.S. women’s sports are especially contributing to change, although it is often incomplete and nonlinear (Anderson, 2014; Hoerber and Kerwin, 2013; Markovits and Albertson, 2012; Pope, 2017).

Although substantial qualitative scholarship has examined how gender and sexuality shape sports fandom, with a focus on the experiences of women and LGBTQ fans, there is a lack of quantitative research on U.S. sports fan identification and its links to self-identified gender and sexuality statuses (Lagaert, van Houtte, and Roose 2019; Toffoletti, 2017). By describing and then rigorously analyzing large-scale social patterns of U.S. sports fan identifications and the factors that may influence them, quantitative research can offer important understandings of evolving fan identities and cultures in U.S. sport and their connections to gender and sexuality.

Our conceptual framework integrates insights from social identity theory, identity theory, gender and sexuality as social structures, and a life-course perspective in considering adults’ sports fan identities. We seek to first describe the frequency and extent to which adults identify

as sports fans and then use regression analyses to better understand how gender and sexuality may socially structure adults' self-identified sports fandom using recent survey data collected from a large sample of U.S. adults. Our main contributions are threefold. First, we provide new estimates of fan identifications (i.e., responses to "Are you a sports fan?") in the U.S. adult population with both unweighted and weighted data. Second, we consider how self-reported gender and sexual identities are related to the psychological centrality (i.e., 0 = *not at all*; 4 = *very much so*) of adults' sports fan identifications and offer estimates of fan identifications among those with rarely studied gender (e.g., nonbinary) and sexual (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other) identities. Finally, we examine the extent to which childhood sports identities (i.e., social-psychological commitments to sports) and perceptions of mistreatment in sports (i.e., personal mistreatment and mistreatment of LGBT athletes) may influence adults' sports fandom and partially explain gender and sexuality differences in adults' self-reported sports fan identities.

Background

Fandom is a primary means of involvement with sport and one that has grown more prominent and popular given tightening interconnections between sport and mass media as well as online and social media technologies that enable fans to quickly find others like them and communicate across time and space (Antunovic and Hardin, 2015). Although there is no single definition of sports fandom, it is often described as a multidimensional conceptualization of watching or following sport that encompasses identity, emotion, interaction, and behavior. We focus specifically on sports fan self-identifications that indicate a psychological connection to an athlete, team, league, or sport (Wann and James, 2019). The conceptualization and measurement of fan identification is also complex; oftentimes, fan identification is thought to range on a

continuum from low to high and comprise cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions (Lock and Heere, 2017; Wann and James, 2019). Psychological attachments to sport are important in their social and behavioral consequences, shaping how people spend their time and with whom, the extent to which they feel connected to others, and the fan behaviors they engage in (Jones, 2008; Lee and Cunningham, 2016; Pope, 2017; Sandvoss and Ball, 2018; Toffoletti, 2017).

Conceptual Framework

In fact, sports fan identification is a social psychological concept that, at its origin, was somewhat atheoretical (Lock and Heere, 2017). In the present study, we draw upon social identity theory and identity theory to conceptualize the emergence and centrality of self-reported sports fan identities. We also utilize sociological understandings of gender and sexuality as social structure to emphasize how these factors shape sports fan identities. Finally, consistent with the social contextual emphases of these perspectives, we recognize that adults' sports fan identities are often extensions of early childhood and other previous contextual experiences.

Contemporary analyses of fan identification, often using the term "team identification" to signal attachments to particular sport teams, have commonly been informed by a social identity perspective (Lock and Heere, 2017; Wann and James, 2019). Social identity theory is a social psychological theory that examines how group membership provides a shared system of social norms and values that shape self-identity and self-esteem and govern behavior. In social contexts where categorization is salient, group similarities and social identities are primed, constructed and maintained through in- and out-group comparisons and the favoring of one's in-group over out-group members. From the social identity perspective, the self is created through group affiliation and adherence to group norms, and group belonging is maintained through the construction of social and symbolic boundaries. This theory has proven useful to understanding

organized sport, in particular, where the competitive nature of the activity primes comparisons between “winners” and “losers,” “us” and “them” (Tarver, 2017). From social identity theory, we take the idea that group membership provides shared norms and values that define individuals’ self-identities and self-worth, attaching individuals to an “imagined community” (Anderson, 2006) through contrasting one’s in-group with out-groups.

In addition to a social identity perspective, identity theory offers valuable insights into how subjective sports fan identities develop and highlights the relative strengths within and between different identities (Lock and Heere, 2017; Stryker and Burke, 2000; Stryker and Serpe, 1994). Identity theory considers identities to emerge through symbolic interactions with others wherein individuals actively learn and negotiate meanings, symbols, and definitions in and through their social interactions—including their own self-meanings and self-definitions. Identities are thought to be linked recursively to behaviors and can be described according to their centrality (i.e., importance) and salience (i.e., relative importance, compared to other identities). Behavioral and relationship commitments shape, and extend from, identities. Building from this, sports fan identities emerge from individuals’ (symbolic) social interactions with other people and the subjective importance that they attribute to their perceived levels of sports fandom. In the present study, we focus on self-reported sports fan identities that characterize the psychological centrality of sports fandom. We also consider the extent to which the nature of one’s sport commitments, especially while growing up, may have shaped subjective sports fan identities in adulthood.

Further, we rely on social structural theories of gender and sexuality, as well as the concepts of hegemonic masculinity, heterosexism, and homophobia (Anderson, 2005; 2014; Connell, 2005; Cunningham, 2012; Elling and Janssens, 2009; Lavoie, 2016; Messner, 2002;

Risman, 2018; Sartore and Cunningham, 2009). Levels and expressions of sports fan identification vary by social demographic indicators such as age, race, nationality, sexuality, and gender (Heere and James, 2007; Ridinger and Funk, 2006; Toffoletti, 2017; Wann and James, 2019). Although gender and sexual identity categories are constructed and contested, we understand these identities as self-determinations developed within existing cultural and structural contexts and measure gender and sexual identities based on the constrained self-categorizations that are available in the data that we analyze.

Gender and sexuality are elements of social structure that operate at the mesolevel of cultural norms, ideologies, and social interactions, and the macrolevel of societal institutions, an integral component of policies and practices, rights, and resource distributions. Prominently, gender and sexuality are understood to be linked to sports fan identifications within these existing cultural and institutional relations of power (Caudwell, 2003; Connell, 2005; Cunningham, 2012; Lavoie, 2016; Risman, 2018; Toffoletti, 2017).

Fan identification requires distinguishing between what is “fan” and “not-fan,” and these boundary distinctions rest on subjective determinations of “true” fandom or “highly complex and subjective codes of ‘authenticity’” (Crawford, 2004). If authentic fan belonging is defined through traits and expressions associated with dominant members of social groups, then fan communities may be perceived and experienced as exclusive or hostile by non-dominants (Cleland, Pope, and Williams, 2020; Crawford and Gosling, 2004; Jones, 2008; Sandvoss and Ball, 2018; Sveinson and Hoerber, 2016). Similarly, the psychological centrality of a sports fan identity is shaped by social contexts and symbolic interactions (Lock and Heere, 2017; Stryker and Burke, 2000; Stryker and Serpe, 1994).

Sport in the United States is constructed as a predominantly masculine social institution that disproportionately values and (re)produces hegemonic masculinity, or idealized masculinity that upholds men's dominance over women (Connell, 2005). Hegemonic constructions of masculinity in sport presume heterosexuality, and persistent, though perhaps declining, homophobia reflects the assumption that heterosexuality is normal and natural in sport (Anderson, 2005; Caudwell, 2003; Symons, O'Sullivan, & Polman, 2017). Fans commonly draw on these meanings, defining fandom through expressions understood to symbolize heterosexual forms of masculinity (Connell, 2005; Esmonde, Cooky, and Andrews, 2015; Jones, 2008; Markovits and Albertson, 2012; Mewett and Toffoletti, 2011; Toffoletti, 2017). As a result, many sport fan cultures are characterized by sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia, notably including practices of exclusion, suspicion, mistreatment, and hostility directed at women and LGBTQ fans (Cleland, Pope, and Williams, 2020; Crawford and Gosling, 2004; Hoerber and Kerwin, 2013; Jones, 2008; Magrath, 2018; Sandvoss and Ball, 2018; Sveinson and Hoerber, 2016; Symons et al., 2017).

Furthermore, American sports fan identifications can only be understood within the macroinstitutional context of mass spectator sport in the contemporary U.S. Men's college and professional team sports, particularly the "institutional core" (Messner, 2002) of men's football, basketball, and baseball, receive enormous cultural status and material resources, including most of the mainstream mass media coverage that is devoted to sport (Anderson, 2005; Musto, Cooky, and Messner, 2017). These men's sports are the most available for fan attachments because they dominate the presentations of sports cultures in the United States (Anderson, 2005; Musto et al., 2017). Although other men's sports and women's college and professional sports do have engaged and sometimes large fanbases, particularly in online and social media spaces, U.S.

women's sports and men's noncentered sports remain marginalized compared with U.S. men's football, basketball, and baseball; in particular, they are less commonly televised and otherwise promoted (Allison, 2018; Antunovic and Hardin, 2015; Crawford and Gosling, 2004; Dolance, 2005; Messner, 2002). Thus, U.S. adults of all gender and sexual identities negotiate their attachments to sport within a context of cultural and institutional dominance by men's "Big Three" sports.

Finally, our conceptual framework draws from a general life course perspective in that it recognizes that U.S. adults' sports fan identifications, especially as they are linked to gender and sexuality for our purposes in this study, may be reflective of earlier life experiences in sport. Broadly, a life course perspective examines human development over time and often emphasizes that early experiences shape later ones as part of unfolding, context-dependent trajectories (Tamir, 2019). Attachments to sport are cultivated within families, peer groups, and institutions such as education, work, and media (Allison, 2018; Knoester and Fields, 2020; Knoester and Randolph, 2019). Socialization processes and exposures to sport begin in childhood and unfold over the life course as a "lifelong love affair" (Wann and James, 2019, p. 5). Parents are particularly important socialization agents for children, encouraging fan attachments but also communicating gender and sexual stereotypes (Boiché et al., 2014; Mewett and Toffoletti, 2011; Sandvoss and Ball, 2018; Pope, 2017; Tamir, 2019). Familiarity with dominant gender and sexual meanings and their connections to the form of institutional organization in sport is established in early childhood and disparate patterns of sports involvement by gender and sexuality are evident among U.S. adolescents (Lagaert, van Houtte, and Roose, 2019; Markovits and Albertson, 2012; Perales, Campbell, & O'Flaherty, 2019). Although limited research has addressed lifelong sports fan trajectories, particularly in the United States, children's ideas about

and experiences in sport likely have implications for their adult sports attachments (Caudwell, 2017; Mewett and Toffoletti, 2011).

Using this conceptual framework, our analysis considers how gender and sexuality are associated with sports fan identification using recent data from a large sample of U.S. adults. In using survey data to compare social patterns across categories of gender and sexuality, we do not imply essentialist definitions of either as fixed or biologically determined. As queer and feminist poststructuralist theories have elaborated, gender and sexuality are complex, fluid, and changing (Ravel and Rail, 2007). Rather, we see our use of categories as contingent and strategic to document relationships of difference and inequality. Furthermore, we consider childhood sports identities and experiences within sports cultures as social and life-course factors that may partially account for variations in sports fan identities by gender and/or sexuality.

Gender Identities and Sports Fandom

Frequently, it is assumed that there are traditionally gendered patterns of sports fandom (Allison, 2018; Musto et al., 2017). Indeed, survey research in sport marketing has found differences between U.S. men and women in outcomes such as fan motivation, attendance at live events, consumption of televised sport, time discussing sport with others, and knowledge of sport teams and leagues, with most studies considering men's sport (Bahk, 2000; Fink, Trail, and Anderson, 2002; James and Ridinger, 2002; Ridinger and Funk, 2006). In contrast, some qualitative inquiries have found little to no difference in knowledge or commitment between men and women sport fans (Crawford and Gosling, 2004; Pope, 2017; Toffoletti, 2017). Although these disparate findings may reflect divergent ways of conceptualizing and studying fandom, both quantitative and qualitative studies have typically considered those who already self-

identify as fans or who attend live events, leaving more open the question of the extent to which gender matters to sports fan identities among U.S. adults more generally.

In their explanations of commonly gendered patterns of fandom, sport scholars have pointed to early, persistent, and internalized gender socialization processes in U.S. sport contexts, where sport is constructed and celebrated as eminently masculine. These gendered associations are familiar by early childhood, evident in how children organize their unstructured play by gender, how they develop team names in organized sport, the messages they report receiving from family members, and how they understand the social standing of their peers (Boiché et al., 2014; Messner, 2002; Pascoe, 2011; Tamir, 2019). Among U.S. adults, the doing or following of sport is more closely related to men's social standing than to women's, and women face social exclusion or overt hostility within some men's sports fan cultures (Esmonde, Cooky, and Andrews, 2015; Hoerber and Kerwin, 2013; Wann and James, 2019). Collectively, these findings suggest that women may identify less strongly with sport than men, a partial result of lifelong gender socialization within the context of masculine-defined and male-dominated sport as well as accumulated experiences in men's sports cultures that are often characterized by sexism (Cleland, Pope, and Williams, 2020; Jones, 2008; Knoester and Randolph, 2019).

Yet, and as suggested by recent qualitative studies, gender differences in fandom may be minimal, declining, or even nonexistent (Pope, 2017; Sandvoss and Ball, 2018). Certainly, some women have always been "sportistas" (Markovits and Albertson, 2012) whose passion for and involvement in sport mirror or outstrip men's; indeed, sports fandom is an important and meaningful part of many women's lives (Hoerber and Kerwin, 2013; Sveinson and Hoerber, 2016; Toffoletti, 2017). The "feminization" of sports fandom (Pope, 2017) refers to recent growth in both women's involvement as fans and the recognition of this involvement on the part of sports

leagues, corporations, and media. “Feminization” also hints at evolving cultural meanings, as women’s participation may alter perceptions of sport as masculine and result in more inclusive climates in men’s sport. Additionally, U.S. women’s sports have notably welcoming fan cultures for women and women represent more than half of many U.S. women’s sport fanbases (Antunovic and Hardin, 2015; Dolance, 2005; Markovits and Albertson, 2012). Thus, there is reason to believe that men and women may be equally identified with sports fandom, especially given recent commercial growth in U.S. women’s professional sports (Allison, 2018). Although almost no research to date has included transgender or nonbinary sports fans (for an exception, see Caudwell, 2017), we consider the experiences of nonbinary identified adults as an exploratory component of our analyses, positing that these experiences will be more akin to women’s than to men’s, on average, given the traditional policing of heterosexual masculinity in U.S. men’s sports cultures (Anderson, 2014; Connell, 2005; Denison and Kitchen, 2015).

Feminist scholars have also advanced an important methodological critique of research on sports fandom. The criteria that define legitimate fandom in many U.S. sports cultures, including deep knowledge, statistical acumen, frequent television consumption, and attendance at live events, are “masculine credentialing standards” (Antunovic and Hardin, 2015: 674) that center around total commitment, competition, and dominance over others. Although some women sports fans adopt these masculine-defined characteristics, others understand and express fandom differently, for instance by prioritizing social relationships and feelings of empowerment (Antunovic and Hardin, 2015; Jones, 2008). Yet, so-called “feminine” versions of sports fandom may be derided as inauthentic, including by some women (Cleland, Pope, and Williams, 2020; Hoeber and Kerwin, 2013; Sandvoss and Ball, 2018; Toffoletti, 2017). If researchers rely on masculine-defined behaviors to measure fandom, then it is misleading to conclude, as a result,

that women are less interested in and involved in sport. Mindful of this potential bias, we focus the present study on predicting patterns associated with adults' self-reported social-psychological identifications with sport, rather than on predicting a specific behavior(s) that may reflect gendered constructions of (in)authentic fandom.

Sexual Identities and Sports Fandom

Sexual identities are also thought to be linked to sports fandom (Denison and Kitchen, 2015). While a robust qualitative literature has examined the experiences of lesbian and gay athletes and some research has considered gay and lesbian fans, there is a lack of quantitative estimates of relationships between sexual identities and sport fan identifications in the United States (Lagaert, van Houtte, and Roose, 2019; Toffoletti, 2017). Drawing from existing research across dimensions of playing and following, scholars have posited that individuals who identify as sexual minorities in the United States may avoid or withdraw from sport, or form their own sports leagues, due to the elevated risk of experiencing prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviors (Cunningham, 2012; Peralas et al., 2019; Symons et al., 2017). Rates of mistreatment in sport contexts on the basis of presumed or recognized sexual minority identities are not well known, particularly in the United States. Still, extant estimates suggest that the percentage of sexual minorities who report harassment, discrimination, or mistreatment in sport is in the range of 14-50% (Allison, 2018; Baiocco et al., 2018; Denison and Kitchen, 2015; Symons et al., 2017).

However, homophobia and discrimination in U.S. sport have declined. Anderson (2005; 2014) argued that fears of rejection or mistreatment do not always match the reality of experiences. The gay men athletes he studied were not met with violence or harassment when they came "out" to coaches, teammates, and fans. Instead, nearly all sexual identity disclosures

were met with acceptance and support. Cleland (2015) extends this argument to fans, finding that UK football followers posting on online message boards rejected homophobia. Similarly, research has found women's sports to be notably welcoming sites of lesbian community (Dolance, 2005; Ravel and Rail, 2007). Yet, silence around sexual minority identities continues to pervade some sports environments, including among fans, and some have characterized contemporary sport as nonhostile but not fully inclusive of sexual minorities (Lee and Cunningham, 2016; Sartore and Cunningham, 2009). For instance, Cavalier and Newhall (2018) found both positive and negative comments on U.S. Soccer's Facebook post celebrating U.S. federal marriage equality in 2015, evidence of divided support for sexual minority rights. Also, Kian et al.'s (2011) analyses of posts on a U.S. message board for gridiron football fans found that overtly sexist and homophobic messages were prevalent and unchallenged. Even in a climate of declining homophobia, enacted sexual stigma and prejudice, such as homophobic slurs or homosexually themed chanting, may result in sexual minorities' lowered involvement and identification with sport compared to heterosexuals' (Anderson, 2014; Denison and Kitchen, 2015; Gill et al., 2010; Magrath, 2018; Symons et al., 2017).

In addition, we consider research on sexuality and sport participation patterns among U.S. youth and young adults to inform our hypotheses. Young children may not have developed sexual identities, particularly sexual minority identities, although identity development is a social process that unfolds throughout the life course. Nonetheless, children are socialized within school and sport environments that are frequently heteronormative as well as gendered, and early experiences may shape how youth relate to sport as they understand their own sexualities over time (Anderson, 2014; Denison and Kitchen, 2015; Pascoe, 2011).

Disparities in sports participation by sexual identity are evident among U.S. adolescents by the high school years. Studies have found that sexual minority youth are less likely to play sports than their heterosexual counterparts and that this pattern is true among both women and men (Calzo et al., 2014; Peralas, Campbell, and O’Flaherty, 2019). For example, results from the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System survey of U.S. students in grades 9-12 showed that 54% of students had played on at least one sports team (counting any teams run by their school or community groups) over the previous year. The prevalence of having played was higher among heterosexual (57.9%) students, compared with gay, lesbian, and bisexual (38.5%) and not sure (43.7%) students (Kann et al., 2017). As patterns of participation are related to following sport (Markovits and Albertson, 2012; Wann and James, 2019), these studies suggest that if sexual minority adults become less attached to sport cultures than their heterosexual counterparts, this pattern may partly reflect differences in associations with sport that began in childhood or adolescence.

Intersections between Gender, Sexual, and Sports Fan Identities

Still, patterns of sports fan identification by sexual identity likely intersect with gender (Anderson, 2014; Gill et al., 2010). Due to the masculinity attributed to U.S. sport and the association of hegemonic masculinities with heterosexuality, sports participation generates heterosexual capital for men but “homosexualizes” women, resulting in a “lesbian stigma” for women athletes and women’s sports (Caudwell, 2003; Lenskyj, 2003). That is, women athletes are suspected of being lesbian simply because of their sports participation and regardless of their gendered performances. In contrast, men are assumed to be heterosexual until they show otherwise (Anderson, 2014; Anderson et al., 2016). While homophobia and heteronormativity operate within both U.S. men’s and women’s sport, though these have declined, the violation of

hegemonic gender norms is especially sanctioned among (young) men (Elling and Janssens, 2009; Pascoe, 2011). Men hold greater levels of sexual prejudice than women and bias against gay men coaches is higher than that against lesbian women coaches (Sartore and Cunningham, 2009). Also, Symons et al. (2017) found that Australian male athletes reported double the number of incidents of homophobia in sport as female athletes. These findings suggest that withdrawal from sport involvement and identifications may be heightened among sexual minority men. In contrast, the presumed lesbianism of U.S. women's sports has historically made them spaces for the formation of lesbian or queer communities (Dolance, 2005; Ravel and Rail, 2007). Sport has been a "refuge" (Elling and Janssens, 2009, p. 74) for some queer women, a space where heterosexuality is nonnormative (Lenskyj, 2003). As a result, sexual minority women in the United States may be especially likely to embrace sports fandom compared with sexual minority men.

As a counterpoint, if sexism and homophobia have declined substantially, then the (hetero)masculine character of sport may have eroded. Anderson (2005; 2014), for instance, has documented an "inclusive" masculinity among men in sport characterized by the acceptance of gay men and embrace of behaviors previously sanctioned as feminine, suggesting the partial delinking of sport from heterosexuality among men. Additionally, feminist scholars have used third wave and postfeminist lenses to consider the perceived compatibility between sportswomen's athleticism with femininity, evidence of the changing gendered typing of sport (Toffoletti, 2017). As a result of these cultural shifts, patterns of fan identification may not vary systematically in an interactive manner, on average, with gender and sexual identities. However, the weight of empirical evidence in U.S. contexts suggests that these transformations are limited, that progress towards greater inclusivity in sport has been uneven, and that the institution of sport

remains coded as both masculine and heterosexual-- though perhaps less strongly or uniformly than in the past (Allison, 2018; Antunovic and Hardin, 2015; Cavalier and Newhall, 2018; Esmonde, Cooky, and Andrews, 2015; Hoeber and Kerwin, 2013; Sartore and Cunningham, 2009; Sveinson and Hoeber, 2016). As a result, we expect that gender and sexual identities are likely to interact with one another in predicting adults' fan identities.

Hypotheses

Our conceptual framework and previous research lead to six hypotheses:

H₁: Sports fan identities among adults in the United States will reflect a common and substantial interest in sports.

H₂: Sports fan identities will be stronger among U.S. individuals who identify as male compared with those who identify as female or nonbinary.

H₃: Sports fan identities will be stronger among U.S. individuals who identify as heterosexual compared to those who identify as gay or lesbian, bisexual, or another sexual identity.

H₄: Childhood sports identities will be positively associated with U.S. adults' sports fan identities and will partially explain gender, sexual, and sports fan identity associations among adults.

H₅: The recognition of sports-related mistreatment will be negatively associated with U.S. adults' sports fan identities and will partially explain gender, sexual, and sports fan identity associations among adults.

H₆: Gender and sexual identities will interact in predicting U.S. adults' sports fandom such that male sexual minorities, compared with female sexual minorities, will be especially less likely to identify as strong sports fans compared with their heterosexual counterparts.

Data and Methods

Data for this study come from the National Sports and Society Survey (NSASS), a large national survey ($N = 3,993$) of U.S. adults that was expressly created for the purpose of studying sports and society issues. The NSASS focuses on obtaining information to allow for the study of connections between sports opportunities, commitments, interactions, and ideologies and their links to individual and societal measures of well-being (Knoester and Ridpath, 2020).

The sample for the NSASS was drawn from the American Population Panel (APP), an opt-in panel of 20,000+ survey volunteers that is managed by the Center for Human Resource Research (CHRR). To be eligible to take the NSASS, one needed to provide basic demographic information and sign up to be part of the APP, which then resulted in periodic invitations to take paid surveys. As the APP largely relies on respondents to have Internet access for sign-ups and survey administrations, its members are expected to continue to be less representative of those with lower incomes, lower levels of education, and rural residences, compared with the general population (Pew Research Center, 2020; Knoester & Cooksey, 2020).

Invitations to take the NSASS were offered to APP members from late 2018 through early 2019 if they reported that they were 21-65 years old. Respondents were paid \$35 for taking the online survey. On average, the NSASS took about 1 hour to complete. Respondents represent all 50 states and the District of Columbia but are disproportionately female, White, and residents of the Midwest. Thus, poststratification survey weights are applied to the NSASS data for descriptive estimates to better approximate more representative estimates of information from adults in the United States. Nonetheless, the large sample size and comprehensive coverage of the NSASS allow for robust and extensive subgroup analyses of many types (Knoester & Cooksey, 2020).

The sample for this particular study ($N = 3,988$) is based on the number of valid responses that were given about adults' own sports fandom. Three respondents refused to answer the question and two answered "Don't Know." We used multiple imputation techniques with chained equations to address the modest amounts of missing data that existed for our predictor variables, with 10 imputations. Nonetheless, the results are robust to the use of listwise deletion of missing data as well.

Independent and Dependent Variables

The primary independent and dependent variables for this study include indicators of adults' sports fan identifications, gender identities, and sexual identities. We also focus on the extent to which childhood sports identities and forms of sports-related mistreatment may shape the associations between our primary independent and dependent variables. First, the dependent variable for this study involves adults' self-reports of their sports fan identities. The variable is created from responses to the question: "Are you a sports fan?" Responses are ordinal (0 [*not at all*], 1 [*a little*], 2 [*somewhat*], 3 [*quite a bit*], 4 [*very much so*]).

The primary independent variables are reports of gender and sexual identities. Gender identities are coded according to responses to the question "What gender do you identify as?" Response options include male (used as the reference category), female, or nonbinary. Sexual identity variables are created based on responses to the question "Do you consider yourself to be..." with response options that include heterosexual (used as the reference category), gay or lesbian, bisexual, or another sexual identity.

We also include predictor variables that reflect childhood sports identities and reports of sports-related mistreatment into our analyses. One indicator of social-psychological commitments to sports during childhood is the frequency that respondents reported having

thought about sports, during a typical week, while growing up (coded in hours per week). A second indicator of social-psychological commitments to sports during childhood is the extent to which respondents reported identifying as an athlete while growing up. This variable is drawn from the question: “While growing up (between the ages of 6 and 18), did you think of yourself as an athlete?” Response options are ordinal (0 [*not at all*], 4 [*very much so*]). Reports of sports-related mistreatment include personal mistreatment experiences and perceptions of unwelcomeness towards LGBT athletes. Personal mistreatment (1 [*yes*]) indicates responses to the question “Have you ever been mistreated in your sports interactions (e.g., called names, been bullied, discriminated against, or abused)?” Perceptions of LGBT unwelcomeness consist of responses (1 [*strongly disagree*], 4 [*strongly agree*]) to the statement “LGBT (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) athletes are not welcomed in sports.”

Background Characteristics

Background characteristics are used as control variables in our analyses. These include age, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and family structure indicators. Education is coded with dummy variables for having a college education (used as the reference category), some college, or a high school or less education. Race/ethnicity includes dummy variables for (only) White (used as the reference category), (any) Black, (Nonblack) Latinx, and other race/ethnicity; these variables are coded in this way because of the disproportionately White sample and relatively small sizes of other racial/ethnic subgroups. There are also indicators of working in paid labor (1 [*yes*]) and household income (in \$10,000s, top-coded at 15). Family structure measures include reports of being married (1 [*yes*]) or cohabiting (1 [*yes*]), with being single used as the reference category. We also include a measure of the number of reported children who live with the respondent and are their own or their partner’s child(ren).

Analytic Strategy

The analytic strategy for this study initially consists of examining descriptive statistics about sports fandom. Then, we turn to predicting adults' sports fandom with ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses in nested models. First, we regress adults' sports fandom on gender identities, sexual identities, and background characteristics. Next, we add indicators of childhood sports identities into the model. Subsequently, we add sports-related mistreatment indicators into the model. Finally, we consider interaction effects between gender and sexuality in predicting adults' self-reported sports fan identities.

Results

The descriptive statistics for all variables used in the analysis are presented in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, consistent with our hypothesis about the great prevalence of sports fandom, NSASS respondents generally identify as sports fans. Specifically, only 11% of respondents report that they are not sports fans at all; nearly half identify as sports fans “a little” or “somewhat.” Finally, over 40% of respondents indicate that they are “quite a bit” or “very much so” sports fans. Because of the lack of representativeness of the NSASS sample, we applied poststratification weighting techniques to generate estimates from all U.S. adults aged 20-64 years based on the 2018 American Community Survey summary tables. These weighted estimates of sports fandom are shown in Figure 1. Overall, they suggest that U.S. adults are passionate sports fans—nearly 50% identify as sports fans “quite a bit” or “very much so.” Also, the weighted estimates indicate that NSASS respondents are a bit less likely to identify as passionate sports fans compared with the general population but about as likely as the general population to indicate that they are not sports fans at all. Nonetheless, descriptive statistics also indicate that although the NSASS data do not represent a random subset of all U.S. adults, there

are substantial numbers of respondents from rarely studied subgroups, such as subgroups that represent a variety of gender and sexual identities.

We now turn to predicting adults' sports fandom in our nested models. Initial results from our regression analyses are shown in Model 1 of Table 2. Consistent with our second hypothesis, we find that compared with men, women ($b = -.38, p < .001$) and those who identify as nonbinary ($b = -.73, p < .001$) are significantly less likely to identify as strong sports fans. That is, on average, men are more likely to report higher levels of self-identified sports fanaticism in response to the question: "Are you a sports fan?" Also, consistent with our third hypothesis, we find that compared to those who identify as heterosexual, identifying as lesbian or gay ($b = -.31, p < .001$), bisexual ($b = -.33, p < .001$), or another sexual identity ($b = -.67, p < .001$) is negatively associated with sports fandom.

Next, we add reports of childhood sports identities into the model. As shown in Model 2 of Table 2, in line with our hypotheses about childhood sports identities, we find that thinking more about sports while growing up ($b = .01, p < .001$) and having a stronger athletic identity while growing up ($b = .31, p < .001$) are positively associated with adults' sports fandom. Also, the addition of these factors into the model appears to account for declines in the coefficients for our indicators of gender and sexual identities, as expected. That is, there is some evidence that those who identify as men and as heterosexuals were more likely to be encouraged in establishing childhood sports identities, which then increased the likelihood that they would become stronger sports fans as adults.

In Model 3 of Table 2, we display the results for predicting adults' sports fandom after adding indicators of sports-related mistreatment into the model. Consistent with our hypothesis about sports-related mistreatment, we find that reporting personal mistreatment in sports ($b =$

-.19, $p < .001$) is negatively associated with adults' sports fandom. Also, believing that LGBT athletes are mistreated in sports ($b = -.06, p < .01$) is negatively associated with adults' sports fandom. However, in contrast to the apparent effects of childhood sports identities and our hypotheses about sports-related mistreatment also accounting for some of the associations between sports fandom and both gender and sexual identities, there is little evidence of changes in the associations between sports fandom and both gender and sexual identities after the addition of sports-related mistreatment into the predictive model.

Finally, we consider potential interaction effects between gender and sexual identities in predicting adults' sports fandom. As shown in Model 4 of Table 2, consistent with our hypothesis, there is evidence that identifying as female or male determines the implications of identifying as lesbian or gay for adults' sports fandom. That is, lesbian women are much more likely than gay men to identify as stronger sports fans, compared with their heterosexual counterparts. We display this interaction effect in predicting adults' sports fandom in Figure 2, with all other variables set to their mean values.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze relationships between gender, sexuality, and adults' sports fan identifications using data from a large, national sample of U.S. adults. The study of social-psychological attachments to sport has typically been the purview of sport marketing and management with studies commonly assessing how identifications with sport affect consumer behaviors (e.g., see Ridinger and Funk 2006). Located at an individual level of analysis, these studies tend to connect cognitive and affective processes with behavior. Sociological studies of fandom, in contrast, more often highlight patterns of social inequality using macrolevel lenses, considering how the cultures and structures of sport generate inclusions

and exclusions within communities of fans (Allison, 2018; Cleland, Pope, and Williams, 2020; Jones, 2008). One point of overlap between these perspectives is the mesolevel of social relationships, as social-psychological approaches show that identifications are influenced by family members and peers and sociological studies often emphasize social interactions and group cultures (Fink, Trail, and Anderson, 2002; Magrath, 2018; Tarver, 2017).

Our conceptual framework merges social psychological and sociological approaches by integrating social identity and identity theories with social structural theories of gender and sexuality (Elling and Janssens, 2009; Stryker and Burke, 2000; Stryker and Serpe, 1994; Risman, 2018). The value of this framework lies in its locating individuals' experiences and identities within both mesolevels and macrolevels of analysis by considering how U.S. historical contexts and contemporary cultural constructions and power relations shape individuals' sports fan identifications. We argue that individual, interactive, cultural, and institutional levels of analysis are interrelated and dynamic in shaping whether, to what extent, and how individuals are involved in sport (Cunningham, 2012; Messner, 2002; Sandvoss and Ball, 2018). Furthermore, we recognize a life course component that links early formative, and continuing, experiences to adults' self-identities. Although scholarship has examined childhood socialization into sports fandom (Mewett and Toffoletti, 2011; Tamir, 2019), it has rarely connected childhood and adult experiences. Given the prevalence and strength of U.S. adult sport fan identifications that we document and their links to earlier life experiences, we encourage future scholars to continue analyses of sports fandom that merge social psychological theories, sociological theories, and understandings of the personalized linkages of human experiences that emerge within individuals over time.

Our analyses began by assessing unweighted and then weighted estimates of U.S. adults' sports fan identities. Then, we predicted the centrality of adults' self-identified sports fandom in a series of nested OLS regression models. First, we analyzed the relationships between adults' sports fandom and their gender and sexual identities in our most basic model. Next, we added considerations of adults' reported social-psychological commitments to sports during childhood to this model. Then, we incorporated reports of sports-related mistreatment, over the life course, into the equation. Finally, we tested for interaction effects between adults' gender and sexual identities in predicting their self-identified sports fandom. Below, we review support for our hypotheses and contextualize our findings.

Our first hypothesis anticipated high levels of sports fan identifications among U.S. adults. Indeed, the descriptive results from this study evidenced a passion for sports consistent with previous research (Jones, 2015; Thorson and Serazio, 2018). Specifically, weighted estimates for all U.S. adults aged 20-64 years suggest that 89% of adults identify as sports fans at least "a little;" only 11% of adults are estimated to believe that they are not sports fans at all. Furthermore, nearly half of all adults seem to identify as sports fans "quite a bit" or "very much so." Unweighted results from the NSASS indicate similar reports of the self-identified centrality of adults' sports fandom, with only about a shift of only about 6% of the responses from high (i.e. quite a bit or very much so) levels of sports fandom to more modest (i.e., a little or somewhat) levels of sports fandom. Thus, in summary, our results further reinforce and extend evidence of the dominant cultural and personal impact of sports in U.S. adults' lives (Anderson, 2014; Musto et al., 2017).

The second hypothesis for this study involved the expectation that the centrality of self-identified sports fandom would be gendered. That is, men were expected to disproportionately

identify as stronger sports fans. Results from our regression analyses consistently supported this hypothesis, and these results are aligned with the presence of frequent cultural messages that assume and promote connections between sports fandom and masculinity (Esmonde, Cooky, and Andrews, 2015; Musto et al., 2017). These findings are notable not only in finding that women report lower levels of self-identified sports fandom than men but also in uniquely showing that adults who identify as nonbinary report lower levels of self-identified sports fandom compared with men, on average. Future work should continue to assess the implications of gender identities, that extend beyond binary understandings of gender, for sports involvement--including sports fandom.

Our third hypothesis focused on sexual identities and anticipated that stronger levels of self-identified sports fandom would be more likely among adults who identified as heterosexual. Indeed, sports have been largely constructed and defended as not only masculine but also as heterosexual spaces (Anderson, 2014). Yet, there is a lack of quantitative research on how sexual identities are linked to sports fandom (Lagaert, van Houtte, and Roose 2019; Toffoletti, 2017). Consistent with expectations, we found that compared with adults who identified as heterosexual, adults who identified as lesbian or gay, bisexual, or an other sexual identity were less likely to report stronger levels of sports fandom.

The fourth and fifth hypotheses for this study anticipated that social-psychological commitments to sports during childhood and realizations of sports-related mistreatment may have shaped the self-identified centralities of adults' sports fanaticism and partially explained apparent associations between adults' sports fandom and their gender and sexual identities. Heterosexist sports cultures have been thought to closet sexual minorities and discourage them from embracing sports involvement, including sports fandom (Allison, 2018; Anderson, 2014).

Related to this, sexual minorities seem to be at an elevated risk for sports-related mistreatment, and these experiences, or perceptions of their likelihood of occurring, may dampen sports fandom (Baiocco et al., 2018; Symons et al., 2017). Oftentimes, these process occur during adolescence, as sexual identities are still being established (Pascoe, 2011).

Consistent with these expectations, we found evidence that indicators of childhood sports identities and realizations of sports-related mistreatment were associated with adults' sports fan identifications in the expected directions. That is, not only were self-reported childhood sports identities positively related to adults' sports fan identities, but also-- as evidenced by declines in the independent variable coefficients across our nested models-- accounting for childhood sports identities appeared to explain some of the gendered disparities in adults' sports fandom. Similarly, childhood sports identities appeared to account for some of the sexual identity differences in adults' self-identified sports fandom. In contrast, although sports-related mistreatment was negatively associated with adults' sports fan identities, as expected, there was scant evidence that this mistreatment accounted for gender and sexual identity differences in adults' sports fan identifications.

Finally, we hypothesized that gender and sexual identities would interact with one another in predicting adults' self-identified sports fandom. That is, we anticipated that masculinist, heterosexist cultures in sports, particularly in those men's sports that are most frequently televised and celebrated in the United States, would be particularly unwelcoming for gay men. In fact, in comparison, there is evidence that sports have offered some refuge for lesbians and queer women despite their overall mistreatment as well (Allison, 2018; Dolance, 2005; Lenskyj, 2003). Consequently, we anticipated that identifying as being gay or lesbian would be associated with much lower levels of self-reported sports fan identifications among

men than among women. Indeed, as illustrated in Figure 2, this is what we found. Overall, lesbian and heterosexual women seem to self-identify similarly as sports fans; in contrast, gay men seem markedly less likely than heterosexual men to identify as strong sports fans, on average.

In summary, the research from this study improves understanding of the intersections between gender, sexuality, sports, and society. Using unique, large-scale survey data, we find evidence that sports fandom is a common and relatively central self-identity for U.S. adults. Yet, more psychologically central sports fan identities appear to be disproportionately embraced by men, by heterosexual adults, and especially by heterosexual men, on average. In recent decades, increased levels of sports involvement by women, the greater respect and resources accorded to U.S. women's sports, challenges to a binary gender system, declining homophobia, and a rise in inclusive masculinities, among other changes, have led scholars to ask whether cultural associations of sport with heterosexuality and masculinity have weakened (Allison, 2018; Anderson, 2005; 2014; Musto et al., 2017; Ridinger and Funk, 2006; Toffoletti, 2017). Despite substantial change and growing inclusivity in some contexts, however, in the realm of fandom, at least, the current study suggests only partial change and the persistence of links between sport and heterosexual masculinity. In line with existing qualitative research, our findings suggest that heterosexual men use sports fandom to establish themselves as men, performing masculinity for themselves but also for other men (Crawford, 2004; Markovits and Albertson, 2012; Tarver, 2017). However, lesbian women report similar levels of sports fandom as heterosexual women, suggesting that social support and encouragement for sports fandom as well as the cultural typing of fan identities is less influenced by sexuality for women than for men.

Nonetheless, there are some limitations to this research. Respondents were not randomly selected; they were survey volunteers. In addition, we studied patterns of fan identifications among U.S. adults exclusively. Furthermore, we relied on adults' self-identified sports fandom based on responses to a single question about being a sports fan. In addition, our indicators of childhood sports identities are imperfect at capturing the diversity of ways that children may relate to sport, and our indicators of mistreatment are not linked to adults' personal sports-related experiences based on their own gender and sexual identities per se. Finally, both childhood and personal sports-related mistreatment information was reported retroactively. Largely, future work on this topic could be enhanced through the use of a randomly selected sample, a prospective study design, and more comprehensive and varied measures of sports-related experiences, social-psychological commitments, and identities over the life course. This research may also be improved with more detailed information about the personal insights and experiences that lead adults to have different sports-related experiences and to arrive at different types of sports fan identifications.

Women are systematically marginalized or excluded within some fan cultures, particularly those in men's sports that receive the most cultural and media support, by the presentation of masculine-defined traits and abilities as the markers of "true" fandom (Esmonde, Cooky, and Andrews, 2015; Pope, 2017; Sveinson and Hoerber, 2016). By using masculine-defined measures, such as sports knowledge, in quantitative studies assessing fandom, scholars themselves have contributed to the marginalization of women fans. Qualitative studies show that women are not always less interested in or invested in sport but instead often express their interest differently and in ways that may not be captured in survey research (Antunovic and Hardin, 2013; Toffoletti, 2017). Our focus is on general, subjective perceptions of the

psychological centrality of one's sports fandom rather than indicators of attachments to specific sports, specific fan behaviors, or bodies of sports knowledge. While we do find gender and sexuality differences in the self-reported strengths of adults' fandom, it would be an inaccurate reading of our findings to reproduce highly stereotypical narratives of women's or LGBTQ-identified adults' lesser interest in sport, particularly if difference is naturalized as the inevitable, direct result of gender and sexual identities themselves. These differences are averages, are a function of social and cultural influences over the life course, and are subject to change and contestation.

Overall, this research provides quantitative evidence about the implications of gender and sexuality, and their intersections, for social identities related to sport. It analyzes these associations with an impressive amount of unique data. It taps the experiences of sparsely studied gender (e.g., nonbinary) and sexual (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other) identities. Finally, it considers the long-term effects of childhood (sports) experiences and (sports-related) mistreatment for adult social identities. The evidence suggest that sport continues to be a particularly meaningful setting for the construction, promotion, and performance of heterosexual men's identities over the life course—with patterns of adults' sports fandom as an extension and reflection of these processes (Connell, 2005; Musto et al., 2017). Yet, it is notable that sports fandom is widely embraced across gender and sexual identities. Future work should extend the present research by further considering the meanings, patterns, and effects of sports fandom.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for all Variables used in the Analyses

	<u>M/%</u>	<u>(SD)</u>
<i>Dependent Variable</i>		
Sports fandom	2.20	(1.28)
-Not at all	11%	
-A little	20%	
-Somewhat	28%	
-Quite a bit	20%	
-Very much so	21%	
<i>Gender Identity</i>		
Female	72%	-
Nonbinary	3%	-
(Male)	25%	-
<i>Sexual Identity</i>		
Lesbian or gay	9%	-
Bisexual	14%	-
Other sexual identity	4%	-
(Heterosexual)	73%	-
<i>Childhood Sports Identities</i>		
Frequency thought about sports	14.41	(18.63)
Athlete Identity	1.76	(1.45)
<i>Sports-related Mistreatment</i>		
Personal mistreatment	38%	-
Perceived LGBT unwelcome	1.89	(1.03)
<i>Background Characteristics</i>		
Age	41.05	(12.64)
High School or less education	13%	-
Some college education	40%	-
(College)	47%	-
Black	10%	-
Latinx	9%	-
Other race/ethnicity	8%	-
(White)	73%	-
Works in paid labor	66%	-
Household income	5.19	(4.01)
Married	38%	-
Cohabiting	16%	-
Single	46%	-
Number of children	0.57	(1.02)

Note: $N = 3,988$. Reference categories noted in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

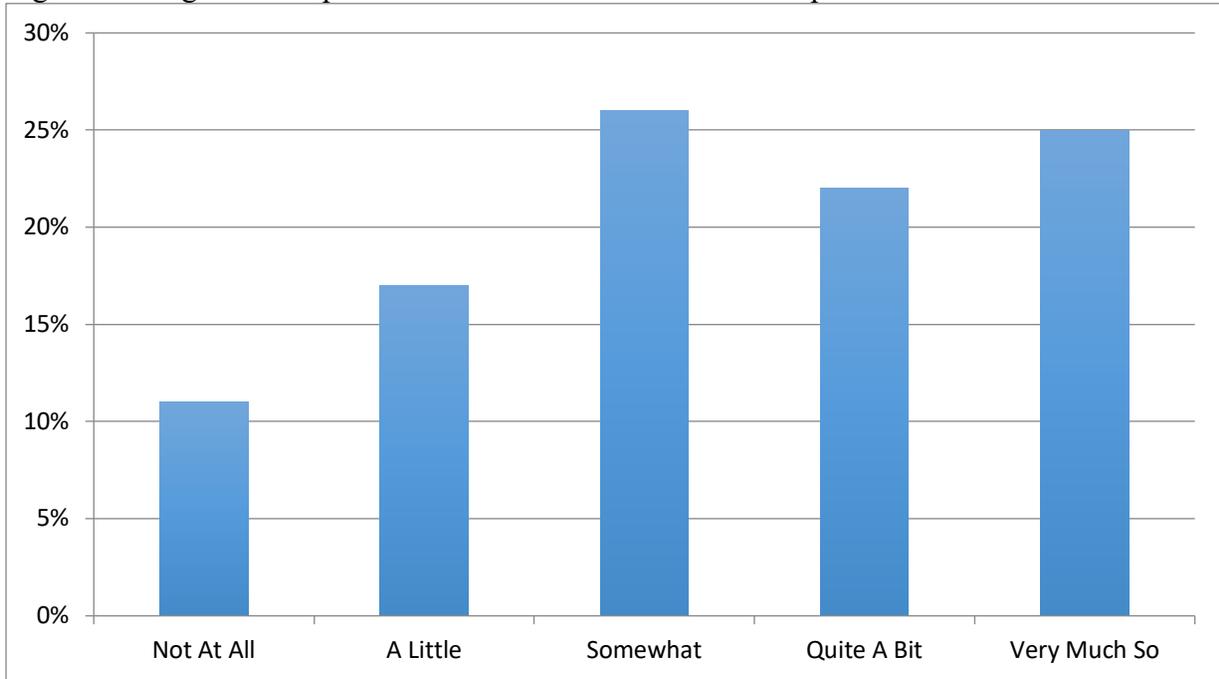
Table 2. Results from OLS Regression Models Predicting Adults' Sports Fandom

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
<i>Gender Identity</i>								
Female	-0.38	0.05***	-0.18	0.04***	-0.21	0.04***	-0.26	0.04***
Nonbinary	-0.73	0.14***	-0.47	0.12***	-0.46	0.12***	-0.48	0.12***
<i>Sexual Identity</i>								
Lesbian or gay	-0.31	0.07***	-0.26	0.06***	-0.21	0.06**	-0.39	0.08***
Bisexual	-0.33	0.06***	-0.24	0.05***	-0.20	0.05***	-0.20	0.05***
Other sexual identity	-0.67	0.11***	-0.49	0.09***	-0.44	0.09***	-0.45	0.09***
<i>Childhood Sports Identities</i>								
Frequency thought about sports			0.01	0.00***	0.01	0.00***	0.01	0.00***
Athlete Identity			0.31	0.01***	0.31	0.01***	0.30	0.01***
<i>Sports-related Mistreatment</i>								
Personal mistreatment					-0.19	0.04***	-0.19	0.04***
Perceived LGBT unwelcome					-0.06	0.02**	-0.06	0.02**
<i>Background Characteristics</i>								
Age	0.01	0.00***	0.01	0.00***	0.01	0.00***	0.01	0.00***
High School or less education	0.02	0.06	0.02	0.06	-0.02	0.06	-0.01	0.06
Some college education	-0.05	0.04	-0.05	0.04	-0.06	0.04	-0.06	0.04
Black	0.45	0.07***	0.25	0.06***	0.23	0.06***	0.24	0.06***
Latinx	0.37	0.07***	0.24	0.06***	0.25	0.06***	0.25	0.06***
Other race/ethnicity	0.10	0.07	0.05	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.06
Works in paid labor	0.06	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.05	0.04
Household income	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01
Married	0.02	0.05	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04
Cohabiting	0.04	0.06	-0.02	0.05	-0.02	0.05	-0.02	0.05
Number of children	0.13	0.02***	0.09	0.02***	0.08	0.02***	0.08	0.02***
Female x Lesbian or gay							0.41	0.12**
<i>R</i> ²	0.08		0.29		0.30		0.30	

N = 3,988

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Figure 1. Weighted Comparison Estimates for Self-identified Sports Fandom in the U.S.



Note: These NSASS estimates are weighted according to 2018 American Community Survey results for U.S. adults ages 20-64, based on age, gender, race, education, work status, marital status, income, and region.

Figure 2. Interaction Effect between Gender and Sexual Identities in Predicting Adults' Sports Fandom

