"The Guys Love It When Chicks Ask For Help": An Exploration of Female Rugby League Fans

Abstract:

This article explores the relationship between gender, space and performances of fandom by female match-going fans of the Australian rugby league team the St George Illawarra Dragons. Drawing on a case study that utilised participant observation, semi-structured interviews and a focus group, this article develops a fan typology that details four different types of female fans of rugby league. The findings suggest some female fans were under levels of stricter gatekeeping by male fans depending on their spatial location inside of the stadium. Their inclusion into match-day culture was, therefore, shown to have limits. On the one hand, female match-going fans have agency and choice in the construction and interchange of a fan identity, but on the other, that same identity attests to oppression. We conclude that traditional match-day engagement with rugby league requires conformity to a predominantly masculine ideal.

Key Words: Gender, Rugby League, Fandom, Stadiums, Sport.

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Introduction

> I think the majority of people would see an authentic footy fan as being a loud, crazy, beer drinking male 'yobbo'. Someone who is probably racist and yeah sexist. It's a blokey tradition, and that's the tradition.
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> **(Interview: Stacey)**

The culture of men's professional rugby league, the National Rugby League (hereafter League) in Australia remains acutely bound in masculine spectacles. By way of example, now retired South Sydney Rabbitohs player Sam Burgess played through the 2014 League Grand Final with a fractured cheekbone (sustained in the first minute of the match). The acceptance of violence, pain, and injury remain visibly bounded in the masculine hegemony (Hutchins and Mikosza 1998 see also Collins [2006]). For this reason, the sporting culture of League is determined as characteristically male, reproducing gendered discourses in an organised and

institutionalised manner (Mean 2001). League has been described as the flag-carrier of manliness which makes this sport code 'almost inescapable throughout eastern Australia', with its popularity amongst match-going fans awarding it a great deal of social and cultural power (Hutchins 1997 in Hutchins and Milkosza, 1998, 247). Power in this sense is derived from upholding and normalising unequal gender power relations and male privilege within the sporting context (Toffoletti 2017). Connell (2005) argues that professional sport is a key example of an institutionalised organisation that legitimises the dominance of men and uses the theory of hegemonic masculinity to explain masculinity and the subjugation of women and many men. Connell (2005, 77) defines hegemonic masculinity as the 'configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees…the dominant positions of men and the subordination of women'. Such 'gender practices' typically reinforce the established social order through the excise of institutional power but, significantly, can also result from a 'voluntary compliance with the exercise of power' (Hargreaves 1986, 7).

Nevertheless, sports stadiums have been identified as sites for resisting, negotiating, and overcoming institutionalised power (Richards & Parry, 2019) and so an examination of the presence of female League fans provides a fruitful avenue to understand the complex, gendered nature of social spaces and, therefore, society more generally. In this paper we give primacy to the female voice to further understanding of how female fans disrupt the hegemonic masculine code that pervades sport fandom. In doing so we further challenge the assumption that female fan culture is homogenous by investigating differences in behaviour between fans and develop a typology of female fans of rugby league.

Female Fandom: A Growing Field

Female engagement within male dominated sports is a growing area of exploration in academic circles. For example, Jones (2008), Pope (2012a, 2017b) and Richards and Parry (2019) have explored women's relationship to association football culture in the United Kingdom. Crawford and Gosling (2004) discussed gendered stereotyping and the experiences of female ice hockey fans in the United Kingdom, whilst Dunn (2014) published a book that investigated female fans relationships with family, sport clubs and authorities. Previous research on female fan engagement has contributed greatly to our understanding of the gendered landscape of females who support traditionally male dominated sports (Ben-Porat 2009 see also Mewett and Toffoletti [2011]; Sveinson and Hoeber [2015]; Osborne and Coombs, [2013]; Pope [2012a, 2010]; Richards and Parry [2019]).

Various female fan typologies have been developed to understand motivations behind and reason for fandom. For example, Pope's (2017) research on female football and rugby union fans is primarily framed according to Giulianotti's (2002) 'hot' and 'cool' football fandom axis, offering a discussion of gender performance by her participants. To account for the diversity of supporter styles and motives revealed in her research, she developed a schematic frame to examine how femininity was typically constructed or performed by women through their attachments to male sports as fans (Pope 2017). By performing either a 'masculine' femininity or 'feminine' femininity, she argues female sports fans performed a gender that demonstrated, in their minds, their desired level of commitment to their sports team (Pope, 2017). Similar findings are found in the work of Borer (2009), who explored how female fans of the Boston Red Sox baseball team (the Red Sox) in America used symbols and merchandise to negotiate their gender within the setting of male sports. Borer's study is of particular interest as it provides three 'identity-types' that such fans may adopt. These are; the *tomboy fan* who adopts masculine attributes and attire at games, *the accessory fan* who has little interest in the game but seeks to display their sexual availability, and the *pink and proud*

fan who refuses to diminish their femininity while also following the team. Significantly, Borer (2009, 2) claims that these fan types 'are all situated within the hegemonic masculine symbolic code that defines the boundaries of authentic sports fandom'.

Within the Australian sporting context, Mewett and Toffoletti (2011) described how although Australian rules football (AFL) continues to be a male domain in that it is mostly played and administrated by men, with a pervading ethos of hegemonic masculinity, it also has a strong female supporter base. Their female fan typology outlined how females become fans, where males often play a pivotal role in the socialisation of female fans at the time of their interest in sport being triggered (Mewett and Tofoletti 2011). Both authors considered how displays of masculine character within the sporting context can empower female fans by creating a space to resist the gender norms of a patriarchal society (Sveinson, et al. 2019 Wheaton 2002). However, these gender performances, although reflexive, are never 'free' of the gendered expectations placed upon females by male members of the sporting community.

Building on these typologies, this paper explores female fans of Australian rugby league. We argue that match-going League fans have not received scholarly attention. Therefore, this article seeks to bridge the gap between League and other sporting codes by building on the above academic interest in female fandom and developing a typology of female League fans. League culture has typically reduced female involvement to supporting and nurturing roles, such as that of cheerleaders, mothers, and girlfriends (Hutchins and Milkosza 1998; Alon, 2012). This marginalizing is typical of female fans within the sporting context, where they are often perceived as being inauthentic fans because they do not always embody the same characteristics as male fans (Sveinson and Hoeber 2015). Throughout this paper we explore multiple female fan subcultures within distinctive spaces inside of the stadium. Hutchins and Milkosza (1998) argue that masculine dominance within the sporting code remains contingent on its gendered social structure, which subordinates and excludes the

opinion, involvement and experiences of females. Whilst there have been significant institutionalised changes to gendered landscape of League in Australia over the past two decades (including the creation of the National Women's rugby league competition), if this has translated to the match-day fan experience of being in the crowd is less known.

Performer and Audience of the Same Show: *Performances of Fandom*

Football subcultures and expressions of group and individual fan identity forms part of a negotiated realm of authenticity, performativity and reflexivity (Stone 2007). The factors that contribute to individual and group identity formation in sport, and the relationship between the self and others in supporting these identities, is grounded in how fans understand their social position within a sports crowd. Unlike watching a sports game on television, attending a match at a sports stadium fosters a broader engagement with the stadium as a space, as well as other fans as a community (Richards and Parry 2019). It is within the space of a stadium that a sense of community is created, which relies on individual fans understanding how their own performance of fandom is situated with fellow followers of their sports team.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor remains a popular theoretical framework used by scholars in developing sports fan typologies (see Crawford and Gosling [2004], Osborne and Coombs [2003], Pope, [2012]). For Goffman, performances or presentations of self then involve an individual having management over their self-impressions to others. Generally, it is in one's interest to perform in such a way as to promote a favourable impression, for this will be assessed by others and impact on how they are treated within a group setting (Goffman 1959). Based on this understanding, being a match-day fan relies on understanding the culture associated with being a fan of the sport, which becomes socialised and learnt through interactions with other fans over time (Donnelly and Young 1988). Like Pope (2017), Osborne and Coombs (2013) utilised this approach by conceptualising fandom as performative

arguing that researchers can better capture the complexities of fan experiences and behaviour. Their concept of Performative Sport Fandom claims that individuals become fans through the socially constructed performance of fandom and draws on identity theory and Butler's work on performative gender theory (see below), which both stress that roles and performances are relational. Osborne and Coombs (2013) state that their conceptualisation of fandom captures the flexibility and fluidity of the multiple roles that fans assume and how these performances constantly shift and reshape over time and across situations and in relation to different people. However, as this paper will demonstrate, rewarded performances of matchday fandom remain largely dependent on the spatial location inside of the sports stadium and the cultural norms associated with those particular sites. Where fans choose to watch the match will ultimately guide expectations of behaviour for the group in a particular setting.

The factors that contribute to individual and group identity formation in these locations are grounded in expectations about gender and how fans perform fandom in specific ways. Goffman asserts that when an actor takes on a role in a group setting, a particular social front has already been established (1959). However, we must be cautious in oversimplifying the processes involved in reproducing gendered expectations of behaviour whilst watching live sport. Messner (2002), for example, noted the value of using the dramaturgical perspective, but elevates this discussion by conceptualising gender in the sports context as 'not something that one has' but rather as 'situationally constructed'.

Butler (1990) discusses gender performativity as being a corporal style, or an 'act', which is both intentional and performative. In other words, gender performativity requires a performance of behaviour that is repeated, and it is only through this repetition and acceptance by the audience that it gains legitimacy within a group or community (Butler 1990). She describes how the mundane bodily gestures and movements we enact everyday create an 'illusion of abiding by the gendered self' that remains contingent on expectations anchored in

157 particular settings and environments (Butler 1988, 519). As noted above, such performances
158 also take place within gender practices that are based on the historical dominance of men's
159 power and control, as explained through the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005).
160 Significantly, by adopting behaviours and performances that are accepted by male fans, female
161 fans are argued to be 'actively involved in the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity'
162 (Hoeber and Kerwin 2013).

163 Goffman and Butler are used throughout this paper to guide an explanation of the
164 relationship between, and the meanings behind, the performances of fandom by female match-
165 going League fans. Butler's exploration of gender as performative allows us to appreciate how
166 an individual's gender identity is constituted within the sport stadium, where gender norms are
167 materialised through action. The stadium as a space to anchor these performances resonates
168 with Goffman's (1959, 22) concept of 'setting', in which physical objects such as 'furniture,
169 decor, physical layout, and other background items supply the scenery and stage props (such
170 as banners, flags, colours and merchandise) for the spate of human action played out before,
171 within, or upon it'. It is, therefore, important to consider how objects place and anchor female
172 sports fans inside of the stadium and how these objects, the space of the stadium and expected
173 behaviour are continually negotiated by fans (Richards and Parry 2019).

174 The setting of the stadium is not just physical, but also ideological, lived, and subjective
175 (Lefebvre 1991). Spaces, generally, are replete with discourses of gender, race, class, sexuality
176 and nationhood. The spaces that match-going fans engage in, therefore, are connected to
177 specific norms and practices, where characteristics of local cultural, gender, other social
178 constructs become materialised (Frank and Steets 2010). This study explores how the spatial
179 configurations of female fans on match-day inside of the stadium either reinforces or challenges
180 the masculine performances, rituals, and practices of fandom and aims to understand their
181 acceptance into League fan culture. In addition, it challenges the assumption that female fan

culture is homogenous by investigating differences in behaviour between fans, as evidenced through where in the stadium they choose to watch League from. In doing so, we develop a typology of female fans of rugby league.

Method

An exploratory case study method was employed that drew on a triangulation of research methods, including participant observations, semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Case study research involves the investigation of one or more contemporary phenomenon/na within their 'real-life' context and relies on multiple sources of evidence (Yin 2009). The exploratory approach was considered necessary because, as mentioned earlier, research on female League fans remains in its infancy (Stebbins 2001). St George Illawarra Dragons (The Dragons), a joint venture League team (formed from the merger of two clubs) located both in the south of Sydney and the Illawarra region was chosen as the case study. The team and its following have created a sport culture built on the club's successes at their shared sporting stadiums of Jubilee Stadium in Kogarah (Sydney) and Wollongong Stadium (Illawarra region). The site or topography of the stadium will be of particular interest as this paper considers how a fan's match-day experience does not exist within a social or physical vacuum. The social interactions that occur within various sections of the stadium will be shown to be anchored in cultural (often masculine) traditions.

Drawing on a combination of qualitative research methods, the case study approach enabled participants to recount and discuss their match day experiences in numerous ways, both verbally in interviews and physically through observations on match day. Data collection included observation at six home games, taking place within the General Admission (GA) sections of both stadiums. The League season is played over twenty rounds in total, with the Dragons hosting approximately 8 'home' games at either Wollongong Stadium or Jubilee

Stadium. The areas observed by the researcher included the 'hills', exterior smoking areas, bar and food lines and the always *extensively* long female toilet line. Within the Australian rugby league context, hills refer to a grass-covered hill where fans can either sit or stand to watch the League match. The hills were chosen because they remove many of the constrictions of allocated grandstand seating, which can frame a fan's interaction and behaviour in accordance to the norms of corporate culture. The researcher spent approximately 25 minutes in each of these sections every game to allow for variety in the data collection process. A sample of approximately fifty female fans per section allowed for interpretation of the language, body movements and interactions of female fans within and across each of these settings (Liamputtong 2009).

In addition to observations, seven semi-structured interviews and a focus group of seven female match-going fans were conducted. Participants were recruited via unofficial Dragons supporter social media sites through purposive sampling. The in-depth interviewing method remains closely associated with feminist research, what Graham (1983, 136) refers to as a 'female style of knowing' and Smith (1988, 105) calls the 'standpoint of women'. Given the gendered focus of the research, this approach was useful in exploring how participants understood their position and involvement with League fan culture. The interview schedule was semi-structured in its design with different questions addressed and probed in greater detail depending on the participant (Bryman 2008). The interviews were one to two hours in length (depending on the participant) and provided an enriched personal discussion of participants' engagement with League, with the aim to explore the insider perspective of the participants' match-day experiences. The demographic of the participants were all female fans of the Dragons, which included three aged between 18-25, two aged between 25-35 and two aged 35-50.

Given League and sports fandom generally has a natural discourse of 'banter' (Murray, et. al. 2016) a focus group was also conducted with fans to allow for a free-flow of conversation and reflection on the participants' match-day experiences as female fans. These fans were recruited through passive snowball sampling, with the previous interview participants suggesting other fans that would likely be interested in taking part in the study. Following the framework for a successful focus group outlined by Walter (2006), this study drew together participants who all share a common interest in supporting the Dragons. The focus group and the discussion questions where informed by the interview data with the aim to gain greater insights into the collective nature of sports fandom. Seven female fans volunteered to be a part of this focus group and by conducting proceedings at Dragons' social club a familiar relaxed atmosphere was created. The two-hour focus group interaction provided this research with a variety of different insights and encouraged participants to share in a group discussion of their personal experiences with football culture (Bryman, 2008, 437).

Prior to the focus group beginning, a distribution of 'trigger material' was given to each participant to generate discussion points. This included newspaper articles, advertising campaigns and samples of rugby league magazines. This material aimed to engage participants with female representation within League in a broader context and asked them to relate such examples to their experiences. This was an effective research strategy as discussion remained aligned with the research aims and purposes, whilst encouraging participants to 'ramble' and shed light on what the they deemed relevant and important (Bryman 2008). Further, it generated useful data by examining each participant's responses to not only the trigger material, but also each other's views. To ensure that participant confidentiality has been maintained, and that the identity of participants is protected, pseudonyms have been employed throughout.

Therefore, this research utilised a triangulation of qualitative methods to gain comprehensive insights into the experiences and meanings fans ascribe to their match-day experience (Flick 2004). Triangulation also provided the research participants with a variety of ways and modes to relay and communicate their rich narratives and understandings of match-day routines and activities. This method involved first having a strong familiarisation with the data and then identifying reoccurring themes that were then placed into a 'thematic map' (Braun and Clark 2006, 87). The thematic map was developed after an ongoing period of consultation between members of the research team, who independently reviewed the data and coded extracts. The final themes were those that the research team agreed most authentically captured the female fan experience of going to watch League. Once the themes were identified they were refined and analysed in relation to the data set and academic literature using Braun and Clarke's inductive thematic analysis guidelines (2006). This involved a process whereby preliminary themes that emerged were examined with reference to previous literature to construct a framework to offer an explanation on the different types of female fans attending League fixtures. As a result, four match-going female fan types emerged from thematic analysis of the data. These were the *bring a bub* fan, the *social fan*, the *army foot soldier* fan and the *pink and proud* fan. Each of these fan types will now be explored separately and located spatially within inside of the stadium setting.

Sitting and Surveilling: *Bring A Bub Fan*

The *bring a bub* fan was a female fan that attended the match with an infant or child/children, playing a key role in introducing them to the sport and the fan culture of the Dragons. This fan type remains underrepresented in literature on sport fandom, including the typologies of female fandom discussed earlier in this paper (Borer 2009; Mewett and Toffolietti 2011; Pope 2012). Despite sporting organsiations (both in Australia and overseas) actively appealing for this type

of fan they remain silent supporters in literature (Crawford & Gosling 2004). Recent changes to how sports clubs are marketing their code relies on a strong focus on family fans, of which the *bring a bub* fan was a key part. Often, they were observed to be accompanied to the match with partners or with other fans who also bought their children. Saying that, in observations with the *bring a bub* fan they were always the primary caretaker of the children on matchday, even if they attended with a partner.

The family section of the hill is where *bring a bub fans* overwhelming located themselves on match-day. Before the game young children were observed to run up and down this section, emulating their favourite Dragons players in impromptu games of rugby league. Additionally, *bring a bub fans* spread overly large picnic blankets and unpacked various sizes and colours of plastic containers filled with healthy snacks. The presence of these fans softened the hyper masculine culture of League fans observed on the other side of the hill. As with Sveinson and Hoeber's (2015) research into female fans of the Canadian Football League, this fan type disapproved of inappropriate language and similarly negative behaviour. Therefore, despite existing within a predominantly masculine sphere, those located in this section of the hill believed they could actively regulate the conduct of other fans. As Trish explained when describing how she reacted to a male fan swearing and yelling in the family section of hill.

> Yeah (pauses) we gave him countless looks and eventually my friend told him to bite his tongue, he ended up leaving (laughs). I mean there are kids in this area, my kids, and I don't want them to be exposed to that type of behaviour, well not yet anyway (laughs).
>
> **(Interview: Trish)**

Despite protecting her children from 'that type' of behavior, this statement affirms that Trish expects that her children will be exposed to more masculine styles of fandom at a later stage in their life. This works to reinforce the pre-existing gender norms and performances of fandom, and the inherent naturalisation of masculinity on the other side of the hill. The fans

that sat in this section usually wore red and white (the traditional colours of the Dragons) in the form of a scarf and/or jacket. They were not usually seen in the replica Dragons jersey. Additionally, their motivation for attending Dragons games was not entirely predicated on watching and/or supporting the team. Rather, participants reflected that attending matches provided them the opportunities to develop and foster friendships and meet other likeminded supporters, as found by Crawford and Gosling (2004) in their study of ice hockey.

> **Helen:** We don't actually see each other than much outside of the games now. Kind of like my own family really (laughs). I mean I would see Trish as being my, um extended, well my sporting family. We get together every home game, with the kids and have like a picnic almost…It's a nice family day out, with the kids.
> **Interviewer:** I bet, and I can always count on you ladies for healthy snacks!
> **Helen:** Well, you're always welcome to sit with us (laughs). I don't want my kids eating the rubbish food they sell. No, actually me and Trish, we usually take it turns to bring the snacks.
> **Interviewer:** So you organise with each other before game day, like who brings what?
> **Helen:** Oh yeah, usually we do it mid-week. Being a mum is all about organisation you see [Interviewer name] (laughs). There is usually a quick phone call in the morning on game day to confirm.
>
> **(Interview: Helen**)

Helen described Trish as being a member of her 'sporting family'. Patterned by organised social interaction, they use the setting of the family hill as a leisure space. Their manner was observed to reflect stereotypical gendered norms associated with motherhood and parenting. They were dutiful at all times to the needs of their young children, where watching the game often appeared secondary. Additionally, by providing healthier food options for their children, *bring a bub fans* challenge the tradition of the masculine 'football fan diet' (Ireland and Watkins 2009), which in Australia usually consists of beer, meat pies and/or sausage rolls (Parry et al. 2017).

Considering the family section of hill appears to be getting spatially larger every season, this type of female fan continues to be warmly encouraged by other Dragons fan communities because they 'play to the script' of the masculine League discourse (Goffman 1959). As was

further evident in the Women in League[1] round, by adhering to nurturing feminine roles and gender displays their presence in the crowd provides the appearance that League is a family-friendly game. However, as the following sections of this article will illustrate, this type of fan identity remains constrained to the protected sphere of the family section of the hill, with other female fans who ventured out of this section not awarded such acceptance.

I'm Just Here to Hangout: *The Social Fan*

The *social fan* as a fan type remains an adaptation to the *accessory fan* proposed by Borer (2009, 2) who explained that these types of female fans can be 'more interested in the material and social accessories of the sport and socializing with friends'. However, while they did focus on socializing, this fan type has an active engagement with the sport, which is in contrast to Borer's description of the blasé attitude towards the game of accessory fans. According to Pope (2012), *social fans* are considered weakly identified fans because the Dragons are not considered as a center life interest, despite attending matches occasionally or regularly. The *social fan* was described by one interviewee, when explaining the different types of female fans she observes as a fan on match-day as:

> The girl of every guy's dreams (laughs). I have a friend like that, you, know, she has a little interest in footy but doesn't really know anything about the game. She doesn't complain when she comes with us, and like always asks questions to her boyfriend. I think the guys love it when chicks ask for help, I think it makes 'em feel, like, you know, like more important (laughs).
>
> **(Interview: Tegan)**

Social fans typically wore Dragons clothing, or at the very least the team colours as cultural signifiers to display their fandom (Goffman 1979) and in an attempt to present themselves as 'authentic' fans (Sveinson & Hoeber 2015). Recently, research that explored

[1] Women in League round is a dedicated round of matches that aims to acknowledge and celebrate the role that women play in rugby league.

merchandise consumption of North American sports found that most female fans expressed a genuine dislike for 'pink clothing' or that associated with a female merchandise range (Sveinson & Hoeber 2015; Sveinson et al. 2019). However, for social fans involved in this study, they noted their preference was purchasing their Dragons merchandise from the female merchandise range.

> **Interviewer:** So what types of Dragons merchandise do you own?
> **Lyndal:** Yeah, I recently bought the jersey.
> **Interviewer:** Was that the male or the female cut one?
> **Lyndal:** Um, the female one. Only because the male one is too long for me and makes me look stocky and fat (laughs). I guess, I mean, I also have a Dragons bear my boyfriend bought for me last year for Christmas, is that what you mean?
>
> **(Interview: Lyndal)**

While *Social fans* do not embody a boisterous masculine manner on match-day, they also do not adhere to Borer's (2009) description of 'fetishized accessories' whose sole purpose is to proudly display their sexual availability. These fans clap and applaud the Dragons when they score and were not observed to be completely passive supporters. Male fans play an influential role in recruiting them and are perceived by the *social fan* as legitimising their presence in the crowd on match-day. Similar to findings by Ben-Porat (2009), Mewett and Toffoletti (2011), Parry et al. (2014) and Pope (2012), usually it was the participant's fathers that introduced them to League at a young age, with boyfriends, brothers, and other male friends continuing to adopt the role of male sponsor on match-day.

> This is the first year that I have sat there... and it's only because of my boyfriend that I sit on the hill.
>
> **(Interview: Lyndal**)

> I think you're more accepted if you're with someone in the Army [core Dragons supporter group], or a male who is respected in the Army. I think you're more in.
>
> **(Focus Group: Alley**)

For the *social fan*, male sponsors generally take the role of being the source and facilitator of their sport knowledge of the Dragons and League culture generally, maintaining a power dynamic that reproduces hegemonic masculinity (Messner 1988). Nylund (2007), in a study on sport talk in live radio, describes how masculinity and sport talk often worked to undermine and trivialize females by reinforcing dominant ideologies, namely hegemonic masculinity. Nowhere was this reinforcement more acute than in the vocabulary and sport talk commonly overheard in observations on the hill.

> **Interviewer:** Well, do you then think male fans are more knowledgeable of the game?
> **Lyndal:** Well yeah, coming from my point of view, they are more knowledgeable than me. Sometimes I have to ask the guys what's going on, they try (pauses) but it's all a bit technical for me (laughs).
> **Interviewer:** What do you mean by its all a bit too technical?
> **Lyndal:** I don't know the rules and stuff, it's like they speak a different language.
>
> **(Interview: Lyndal**)

Lyndal defining sport talk as 'different language' reveals how language acts as a gender boundary within the sporting context for the *social fan*. During fieldwork it was observed that something similar occurs inside of the stadium, particularly with the explanation of rules often being imbued with unnecessary jargon. A practice that affords male fans a privileged position. Like the *bring a bub fan*s, the *social fan* performances and embodiment of fandom played to the script of traditional gendered discourse by engaging with League in an unthreatening manner and appearance. *Social fans* on matchday do not encroach, but rather complement the Dragons' masculine culture that is celebrated in this section of the hill. This fan type legitimises the status of male sponsors, not only of sport knowledge but also of standing within the football

crowd. This was then translated informally into influence and authority and works to strengthen the masculine boundary between male and female fans of League more generally.

The *social fan* often received harsh criticism from other fan types, namely the *army foot soldier fan* and *pink and proud fan*s in interviews and the focus group. One of the core and largely unanticipated findings of this research was the existence of a 'female fan hierarchy' whereby some female fans saw more legitimacy in their performance and embodiment of fandom over other types of female fans (Pope 2012 see also Sveinson, et al. [2019]). The *social fan* was often met with resistance from the *army foot soldier fan,* who suggested that that their engagement with League was 'not doing fandom properly' (Jones 2008).

Standing and Shouting: *Army Foot Soldier Fan*

> When I was younger, I used to say that I was going to a game on the weekend, and 50 or so of my girlfriends would want to come for the social scene…I think I would get lumped into that.
>
> **(Alley: Focus Group**)

The idea of being 'lumped into' the *social fan* subcultural group was perceived by the *army foot soldier* fan as an attack on the inherent qualities required of being an 'authentic' Dragons fan. Instead, Alley aligned her fan identity with the Dragons Army who are a group of well-known and hardcore Dragons supporters traditionally located just left of the halfway line on the hill. The Dragons Army occupies the prime geographical position to watch League at both stadiums. Unlike the family section of the hill, this section remains reserved by cultural (not physical) boundaries for the Dragons Army who have a long tradition and association with this area. The fans in this section of the hill draw immediate focus and gaze as they display the biggest banners and chant the loudest. Unlike fans in other sections that sit, it remains a rite of passage for this group to watch the entire game standing.

Standing in a crowd on the hill provides a sense of group security and stability for the predominantly male members of this group, which has been argued to be lacking in stadium seating (King 1997). Sitting while watching sport is seen to inhibit masculine solidarity, which remains an important part of the Dragons Army fan identity. This type of masculine culture is proudly encouraged and naturalised through the performance styles of the fans located within it that proudly celebrate boisterous male bonding and excessive drinking patterns (Safai 2002). Therefore, as a setting, this section of the hill has a social configuration that encouraged traditional masculine performances, rituals and practices. Fan chants driven by this group often constructed female sports, and by extension femininity, as removed from League culture.

> I overhear a male Dragons fan screaming out to an opposing team's player to put his wing attack [a netball playing position] shirt on. I correct him [netballers have traditionally worn bibs not shirts]. He laughs and continues the sledge this time telling the player to put his wing attack 'bib' on.
>
> (**Fieldwork Notes**)

The association with the predominantly female sport of netball, and its use as an insult to a player's performance, highlights how femininity is constructed as an inferior 'other' in the setting of this section of the hill. Since the Dragons Army culture juxtaposes traditional femininity, both male and female fans in this section exaggerated the gender binary in order to define this space as hypermasculine. The *army foot soldier* fan, in this male dominated space, would often mock femininity and female fans found elsewhere on the hill (Sveinson et al. 2019). To gain acceptance and respectability they adopt the traditional hypermasculine fan practices mentioned earlier. Not surprisingly, the appearance of these fans consisted of often wearing a male cut Dragons jersey, worn with jeans and sneakers – comparable with the attire described by Borer for the *tomboy fan*. They often appeared to be young adults and wore minimal (if any) make-up. They usually had their hair tied into a ponytail or bun. These fans were adamant (sometimes very assertively) that they wished to remain gender neutral and be

seen as part of the collective Dragons Army. However, this is not to say that these female fans did not at times feel different within the Dragons Army. As the following participants explained,

> I think because you're identifiable as women, in that crowd, and like most of the boys that are there know you and who you are. Like they may not know your name, but they know you by face. They are like 'oh she comes to all the games' and they know that you're not…you're not there just to flirt...you're there for the game.
>
> **(Phoebe: Focus Group)**

> Yeah like I will go to the Gold Coast and Brisbane with the boys and stuff. It is, sort of, they know me.
>
> **(Beth: Focus Group)**

Similar studies that have explored females in traditional masculine sport settings have argued that by 'challenging the boys' females can achieve a level of inclusiveness within the masculine sporting cultures. For example, in street car racing, female car drivers validate themselves as authentic members of the culture through modification to their cars, the choice of language they adopt in conversations and their style of masculine dress (Lumsden 2010). What studies such as these suggest is that females can reconfigure and 'do gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987) in ways that expands the meaning of femininity and masculinity to show resistance to masculine hegemony common in sporting subcultures (see also Jones [2008] Lumsden [2010] Wheaton [2012]). However, one must also consider that this negotiation is always on the terms of male members of the subcultural groups, with females in this group not having much capacity to disrupt the gendered script.

For this reason, the *army foot soldier fan* acceptance in this space had limits. Whilst isolation was reduced, full acceptance may be unattainable because of the gatekeeping of gendered norms and discourses by male fans in this subcultural group (West and Zimmerman 1987). Despite wanting to be perceived as gender neutral, these fans spoke of times where they

felt uncomfortable or received sexist comments directed towards them. Indeed, one encounter by a female researcher during fieldwork demonstrates this;

> Our five-eighth [player position] just took a massive hit and like the rest of the crowd, I let out a groan at the moment of impact and again whilst watching the hit on the replay screen. It was during this second groan that a middle aged man bumped my shoulder and noted; 'bet you make that noise a fair bit don't you... sweetheart'. This was then followed by a wink.
>
> **(Field Notes)**

Army foot soldier fans, more so than the other two fan types explored thus far, are more likely to be faced with what Kvande (1999) calls the 'dilemma of difference', which is described as someone who performs their gender reflexively, and always with caution. In a study on female engineers Kvande (1999, 306) explains that the concept refers to the process of females negotiating their gender and 'whether the meaning of gender should mean sameness or difference from men…and this influences the strategies they choose in response to men's masculinities'. In observations and discussions with the *army foot soldier fans* it became clear that they would downplay sexist remarks or comments, and at times, contribute and chant along with the largely male members of the Army who did. When such abuse was directed at them, they saw it as 'part of the game' and rarely challenged male fans on the issue, primarily because of the perceived repercussions of doing so, which could include mockery and/or exclusion from the mostly male social group. Such a finding is consistent with those of Jones (2008, 532) who argues that such abuse is also accepted as it is often argued to be 'individual acts, rather than evidence of oppressive social structures".

Pink and Proud: *Subverting Appearances*

Repurposing Borer's (2009) classification of female fans of the Red Sox, the final fan type discussed is dubbed the *pink and proud fan*. Borer (2009, 3) noted that a pink and proud fan is a female fan that 'confronts the accepted definitions of the gender order of male sports' and

challenges the use of clothing to designate authenticity in fandom. While the Dragons fan type here may still fit this description, we argue that they do not conform to 'the hegemonic masculine symbolic code that defines the boundaries of authentic sport fandom', as claimed by Borer (2009, 2). Thus, the *pink and proud* fan is a significant finding because unlike all of the other fan types they did not play to the script of the masculine discourse of League, primarily because their feminine appearance contradicted their masculine manner. Unlike *social fans,* they do not purchase their Dragons clothing from the female merchandise range. Rather, they augment or 'feminise' pre-existing masculine attire. For example, an oversized male replica Dragons jersey would be worn as a short dress. However, their behaviour was often at odds with their feminine appearance, as revealed by the following observation:

> That blonde girl just threw her half-eaten meat pie at a Wests Tigers supporter that stood up and aggravated the home crowd. As it hit, the crowd cheered and laughed. He mouths off and gives her the finger, to which she called him a Campbelltown Westie [a slur based on the team's Western Sydney origins].
>
> **(Field Notes**)

During an interview, a pink and proud fan that was observed at the match was asked about her behaviour at games, and whether she ever felt any unease or discomfort by dressing feminine on the hill:

> **Kim:** Yeah, guys try and give me shit all the time. They think I'm just some dumb blonde who doesn't know her footy. I think they are surprised by how much I know and love the game. Like, I know the game. So what, I don't dress like a bogan, but like who cares. I wear what I want to wear and if they don't like it then stuff them.
> **Interviewer:** So you think the way you dress has resulted in people making judgments about your footy knowledge, you know of the Dragons?
> **Kim:** Oh yeah, and the girls do it too...I mean they look at me and probably think I'm just a dumb blonde, here to perve and serve, you know. But if they speak to me, it's pretty obvious I know my footy (laughs).
>
> (**Interview: Kim**)

The *pink and proud fan* challenges the masculine discourse of League fan culture by making traditional props and masculine attire suit their own purposes. In many ways this behaviour can be considered as a way to subvert and/or mock hegemonic masculinity in this sporting context. By, for example, tying the replica Dragons jersey to near midriff length or wearing sport socks as leg warmers, these female fans celebrate their femininity by putting a feminine slant on the usually masculine appearance of Dragons attire. Although not explored in the context of League, similar examples of females modifying masculine attire or customs can be observed in skateboarding culture. Kelly et al. (2005, 130) offer a valuable contribution to these discussions, notably through the example of a female participant noting that, 'I can skate in a heel. I have done it, and it hurts…but I have done it'. This declaration affirms that this type of female engagement within a masculine sporting context involves a strong investment of physical and emotional energy in fashioning their identities.

Similar to the female skateboarder above, the *pink and proud fan's* technical sport knowledge and manner juxtaposes with her traditionally feminine appearance and subsequently contradicts the stereotypical patterns of behavior of female match-going fans on the hill (Borer 2009). As a consequence, these fans received extra attention from male and female fans alike. This focus is likely due to the perceived incompatibility of femininity and being a match-going masculine sport fan. However, this incompatibility is a systemic issue within League culture generally and not just confined to a local suburban League stadium. Murray et al. (2016) explored the popular League television program *The Footy Show*. Their research clearly demonstrated a disjunction and incompatibility of femininity with the sporting code with male players and fans being continually mocked and/or trivialized on the show for expressing any manner that could be considered feminine. However, by not conforming to the masculine structure, *pink and proud fans* have created a scene that could seriously threaten Leagues' masculine social front (Goffman 1959, 210).

Their sport knowledge combined with their confident displays of femininity was, however, often criticised by other members of the Dragons' community, most notably the *Army foot soldier* fans, as exemplified here:

> No you can't go to a footy game dressed feminine, in heels and stuff. It's a footy game (pauses) it's casual. No, I would think you idiot, go home and get dressed. It's not the right time and place.
>
> **(Interview Tegan**)

Not surprisingly, no *pink and proud* fans were observed to be in the Dragons Army, they were seen at the front of the General Spectators section. They avoid the Dragons Army because their appearance and the stereotype associated with dressing feminine at a League game would result in stigmatisation in the apparent naturalness of the 'man's world' of the Dragons Army (Pope & Williams 2011).

Conclusion

Given the invisibility of female fans of League in literature, this study has addressed this omission and adds to the growing research in female fandom generally by bringing the voices and experiences of female League fans to the fore. This paper reveals the significance of gendered norms in bounding the social and physical landscape of space within sports venues. Although this research was positioned within the Australian context, it revealed that female fans negotiated performances of fandom reflexively, and at times with caution and speaks to wider discourses relating to the gendered nature of social spaces and, therefore, society more generally. Caution should be taken in applying the findings to other sporting codes, but we hope that this research has provided scholars with more insights into the complexity and diversity of female fans.

We have argued that female fans' acceptance into sport fandom culture remains mostly contingent on adopting feminine roles and/or performances of fandom that do not encroach on the pre-existing masculine cultures. Our research is situated within a growing field of research focused on developing female fan typologies, which often draw heavily from the work of Goffman (1959). As we have demonstrated throughout this paper, his work offers valuable contributions for scholars studying sports fandom by highlighting the relationship between identity, space and performativity. We explored these issues through the examples of the *bring a bub* and the *social fan* types who were argued to have played to the script embraced by the wider Dragons community as an acceptable form of female engagement with the game. Moreover, the exclusion of female fans from the traditionally masculine culture of League is exasperated by the tendency to collapse female fans into a single female fan culture, which rests on the assumption that all female fans exhibit decidedly feminine traits. This presumption of femininity, however, was not embraced by all female Dragons supporters. Some fans, such as the *army foot soldier* and the *pink and proud fan* types, rejected this stereotype, with the *pink and proud* fans carving out a position in the fan subculture that resisted the stereotypical masculine norms.

While we acknowledge that previous studies have also identified that female fans are not a homogenous group, having distinct subcultures and hierarchies of different types of fandom, this research does offers a unique contribution to the study of League fans and the field of sports fandom more generally. Giving primacy to the female voice allowed us to advance Borer's typology of female fans, providing a greater depth of understanding of female fan typologies and with the addition of a fourth type, the *bring a bub* fan. This fan type is absent from earlier typologies and raises some questions as to the dominant position of the father as a primary means by which children learn about fandom. These fans also challenge some accepted aspects of masculine fandom such as the football fan diet. Whilst League has been perceived

to perpetuate hypermasculine culture, it can also be a space where masculinity can be challenged and possibly altered or changed within the sporting context (Pope 2017). However, given the aforementioned key role that sport plays in the formation of Australian (and other nations) cultural identity, this challenging of masculine culture is significant as it has the potential to feed into and influence wider social movements that challenge the privileging of masculinity. As such, it is the *pink and proud* fan type that has the greatest potential to weaken the dominance of the 'man's world' and the hegemonic masculine code that pervades sport fandom.

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