

Understanding the Lack of Diversity in Sport Consumer Behavior Research

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**Abstract**

Sport consumer behavior researchers have developed a robust understanding of how and why people consume sport, and the consequences of consumption. There has been little reflection, however, on the settings or populations used to study consumers and develop theory. In acknowledging the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion to advance both theory and practice, the authors conducted a scoping review of diversity in sport consumer behavior research, focusing on four sport management journals. The review revealed a widespread lack of diversity, with most studies focusing on men's sport in highly commercialized settings. Further, study participants often identify as White men, who are middle-aged or young, educated, and with at least some disposable income. Leveraging an institutional work lens, the authors address taken-for-granted norms that may have contributed to these trends and propose solutions.

*Keywords:* consumer behavior, diversity, spectator sport.

### **Understanding the Lack of Diversity in Sport Consumer Behavior Research**

Recognizing the important implications of sport spectating<sup>1</sup> for organizations and everyday people, researchers have studied sport consumer behavior extensively since the 1980s. Key topics include (but are not limited to) consumption motives, psychological connection, brand equity, image transfer, and consumer well-being. The end result is a robust theoretical understanding of why and how individuals consume sport, including: socialization into sport fandom (James, 2001), what motivates sport attendance or viewership (Kim et al., 2019), identity processes related to fandom (Lock & Heere, 2017), formation of brand associations with sport teams (Ross et al., 2006) and leagues (Kunkel et al., 2014), and the relationships between sport fandom and well-being (Wann, 2006).

Though knowledge of sport consumer behavior has progressed, explicit consideration of the settings or populations in which researchers collect data or develop theory is missing. As a result, two questions arise: what contexts have consumer behavior scholars (not) studied, and which consumer groups have researchers (not) studied? These questions are important for three reasons. First, when scholars in a given academic discipline focus on any one gender, race, social class, sport setting, or culture to the exclusion of others, they develop a partial knowledge of human behavior. Or, as Rad et al. (2018) commented, scientists' reliance on homogeneous samples and use of data in unreflective ways creates barriers in understanding human psychology, in knowing how context and culture influence outcomes, and in developing good theory. Second, and from a more applied perspective, diversity, equity, and inclusion are important topics in the sport industry. Leaders have called for sport organizations to proactively address matters of social justice (Deloitte, 2021). Such advocacy work involves understanding

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<sup>1</sup> We recognize sport consumer behavior includes participation in addition to spectating. In this article, however, our focus is on sport spectating. Therefore, our use of 'sport consumer behavior' refers to the spectator context.

the experiences of all, including underrepresented groups. Third, the importance of consumers to sport organizations highlights the necessity for sport marketers' to understand shifts in consumers' backgrounds, attitudes, and behaviors. For example, viewership of, and engagement with, women's sport (Gao, 2020), and the Paralympic Games are higher than ever (International Paralympic Committee, 2017). Recent data show differences in sport consumption among Black and White fans (Reid, 2019). Among Millennials, women comprise nearly half of sport fans (Black, 2020). Finally, in a study of United States sport fans, 70% reported that organizations should develop marketing campaigns that support diversity (Nielsen, 2020).

The preceding information suggests representation of different samples, settings, and cultures should be important parts of quality sport consumer behavior research. Put another way, diversity matters (or should matter) in sport consumer behavior research, where diversity represents "the presence of socially meaningful differences among members of a dyad or group" (Cunningham, 2019, p. 6). To what extent, though, does sport consumer behavior work reflect the ways in which people differ in socially meaningful and historically relevant ways? To what degree does it capture the breadth of sport, as opposed to privileging some sport forms over others? In this article, we respond to these questions via a scoping review of sport consumer behavior research in four sport management journals. Specifically, we aim to understand both the contexts and populations studied by sport consumer behavior scholars. In doing so, we adopt an institutional work lens (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) to understand what practices and forms of research have become engrained in sport management journals and consider the ways in which scholars might disrupt established norms. We conclude by discussing how (a) enhancing diversity in the samples we draw from and (b) increasing the variety of research settings can advance theory and practice.

## Theoretical Framework

### Institutional Work

Institutional work reflects “the broad category of purposive action aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 216). Institutions can be formal organizations or a broad set of ideas that, over time and through repetition, become rule-like norms (Nite & Edwards, 2021). Though institutional work was a “relatively unexplored” theoretical tool in sport management (Edwards & Washington, 2015), scholars have begun drawing from it more frequently to understand how individuals navigate institutions (Nite & Edwards, 2021; Robertson et al., 2021). Most of the research in this area focuses on how, why, and when actors work to shape institutions; what factors inhibit or facilitate actors’ ability to do so; and the experiences of those who engage in institutional work. Thus, researchers who study a particular topic (e.g., sport consumer behavior) are actors engaging in institutional work to shape the discipline as they conduct research.

Importantly, institutional work assumes that (a) “reality is socially constructed, mutable, and dependent on as well as embedded in the behavior, thoughts and feelings of people and collective actors” (Hampel et al., 2017, p. 559); and (b) people and collective actors do not simply accept institutions as innately enduring and their effects as unchanging but, instead, recognize their relationship with institutions and the impact of their agency. Though scholars recognize the power of the individual in creating institutional change, they also understand that actors are often constrained by institutions. The notion that actors are both enabled by and constrained by institutions, is known as ‘embedded agency.’

Whereas scholars initially maintained that actors’ actions must be purposive and intentional, many now recognize that mundane, ordinary activities also relate to institutional

reproduction and change. Such activities need not be formal—they are simply behaviors that are conducted on a day-to-day basis and align with “seemingly small, inadvertent, and often overlooked acts” (Dowling & Smith, 2016, p. 406) that affect organizations. Researchers who draw from institutional work, then, explore practices and processes associated with actors’ endeavors—both intentional and unintentional—to create, maintain, and disrupt institutions.

### **Types of Institutional Work**

There are three forms of institutional work—creation work, maintenance work, and disruption work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). First, *creation work* includes the actions associated with creating or modifying institutional arrangements. This work might manifest through political actions or cognitive processes that inspire construction or reimagining of meaning systems (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). To illustrate, researchers have examined how the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) created the institutionalized governance system for intercollegiate athletics in the United States (Nite et al., 2019), how the creation of new sport programs elevated elite sport within Canada (Dowling & Smith, 2016), and how eSports programs in the U.S. create regulatory and cognitive institutional arrangements to legitimize eSports as a university-sponsored activity (Pizzo et al., 2019).

*Maintenance work* relates to work focused on “supporting, repairing, or recreating social mechanisms that ensure compliance” to the status quo (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 230) and allows organizations to maintain their status and power (Quinn & Washington, 2009). Though often overlooked in institutional work research, maintenance work entails self-replicating actions and ways of thinking that legitimize social processes and structures within an institution that “persist beyond the life-span of their creators” (p. 234). Further, institutional maintenance involves the use of “regulatory and legitimate authority” (Quinn & Washington, 2009, p. 239)

through formal policies or informal standards that reinforce existing institutional norms and protect institutional practices against threats. According to Edwards and Washington (2015), “legitimacy and social acceptance are critical for the survival and maintenance of the institution” (p. 294). Institutional practices are reproduced and maintained through communication systems or frames, whereby information and norms are translated, interpreted, and enacted in order to preserve the institution (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). Within the sport management literature, researchers have demonstrated that maintenance occurs through media framing (Nite, 2017), aspirational programming (Edwards & Washington, 2015; McLeod & Nite, 2019), and actors neglecting their personal interests to preserve institutional norms (Agyemang et al., 2018).

Lastly, *disruption work* occurs when actors aim to destabilize engrained institutional arrangements in an effort to gain leverage or enact some sort of institutional change. Actors can accomplish as much by attacking or attenuating the mechanisms that lead members to comply with institutional practices (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Importantly, these activities seek to change the status quo within an institution and are typically classified in three ways: (a) redefining to question the correctness of rewards and sanctions, (b) separating institutional norms and processes from a moral foundation, and (c) critiquing or undermining core assumptions and beliefs (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Whereas institutional disruption has received the least attention within sport management (Nite & Edwards, 2021), research suggests that introducing new legislation (Heinze & Lu, 2017), refining frames (Woolf et al., 2016), engaging in social protests against inequalities (Agyemang et al., 2018), and responding to social protests (Nite & Hagan, 2018) can disrupt institutional norms.

### **Current Study and Purpose**

Institutions embrace actors who maintain the status quo (Nite & Hagan, 2018). In fact, “institutions embodied in routines rely on automatic cognition and uncritical processing of existing schemata” (Lawrence et al., 2009 p. 15). Consequently, one meaningful and disruptive act can be to “shift, even subtly, toward a more complex, reflexive, slow, and self-controlled form of thought” (Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 15). In doing so, an actor may begin to question the existing structures (c.f. Woolf et al., 2016). One of the aims of this paper is to bring awareness to the way things are done and start to shift researchers’ ways of thinking when it comes to what contexts and populations are worthy of scholarly attention.

In the literature review that follows, we consider the institutional work (including creation, maintenance, and disruption work) that has built the current body of sport consumer behavior knowledge. Then, through our scoping review and overarching aim to understand how sport consumer behavior work reflects diversity in participant samples, and variety in sport settings, we discuss how certain practices have (a) created and (b) maintained norms in this area, and (c) how other practices might disrupt the established norms, specifically by researching diverse contexts and populations.

## **Literature Review**

### **Sport Consumer Behavior Research in Sport Management**

Since the 1990s, researchers have developed a robust understanding of sport consumers. Individuals have a range of motives for consuming sport (Trail & James, 2001; Wann, 1995) and can develop a psychological connection to the sport entities they support, a bond which often forms early in life (James, 2001) but can also occur later in life (Hyatt et al., 2018). In addition, consumers often pass through various stages of psychological commitment, including allegiance, where they have persistent attitudes that are resistant to change (Funk & James, 2006). A

separate but related line of inquiry, largely borrowing from the social identity approach, has examined the group identities of sport fans (Lock & Heere 2017). To date, team identification is one of the most studied sport consumer behavior concepts. Still others have studied sport consumers in terms of their: role identity as fans (Trail et al., 2017); connections to other individuals, groups, or objects related to a team (Delia & James, 2018; Heere & James, 2007; Lock & Funk, 2016); and thoughts about supporters of other teams (Tyler & Cobbs, 2017).

With this theoretical knowledge of sport consumers in hand, sport consumer behavior scholars have examined outcomes for sport organizations and related entities in relation to attendance, brand image, and sponsorship. Considering attendance, Kim and colleagues (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of over 100 published studies. They found that (a) identification and commitment were most strongly linked with attendance, and (b) aesthetics, achievement, drama, escape, and knowledge were the most influential fan-focused motives for attendance.

Separately, sport branding researchers have studied the associations consumers develop toward teams (Ross et al., 2006) and leagues (Kunkel et al., 2014). Favorable brand associations positively influence behavioral outcomes, such as media consumption, loyalty, and ticket and merchandise sales (Kunkel et al., 2014; Ross, 2006). Related to brand associations, other scholars have focused on athlete (Kunkel et al., 2019) and team brand image (Bauer et al., 2008). This research stream prioritizes brand image itself and its influence on behavioral outcomes such as loyalty and commitment. Thus, consumers' associations with sport brands (i.e., athletes, teams, and leagues) bear important psychological and economic implications. Finally, sport sponsorship researchers have shown that consumers' evaluations of sponsor-sponsee relationships are often influenced by their identification or involvement with the sponsee, as well

as perceptions of fit. This fit has critical implications for organizational outcomes (Cornwell & Kwon, 2019; Kim et al., 2015).

Another thread of literature has focused on the consumers themselves—specifically, their well-being. Scholars in this area have primarily focused on the relationship between team identity and social well-being (Wann, 2006). For example, researchers have shown that shared team identity can provide individuals emotional and social support, thereby enhancing well-being or life satisfaction (Inoue et al., 2015; Katz et al., 2020). Collectively, this literature expands sport consumer behavior research by focusing on the implications of sport consumption on consumers themselves, in addition to organizations.

Separately, it is important to acknowledge studies of sport consumers through a socio-cultural theoretical lens. Much of this research is published in sociology or cultural studies journals, however a small amount has been published in sport management journals. Amato et al. (2005) focused on the role of culture in expected norms and behaviors for various levels of fandom, and Armstrong (2008) and Pons et al. (2001) explored cultural aspects of attendance and consumption in relation to consumers' race. The majority of work using this lens has explored consumers' experiences in relation to gender, specifically women sport fans (e.g., Farrell et al., 2011; Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016; Sveinson et al., 2019).

### ***Institutional Work in Sport Consumer Behavior Research***

The preceding review suggests scholars have learned much about sport consumer behavior over the years. Considering this literature alongside an understanding of institutional work, the sport consumer behavior literature was created with strong ties to social psychology and marketing. Many of the theoretical frameworks that guide work in sport consumer behavior today are derived from these areas, such as social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), brand

equity (Aaker, 1991), and motivation (Sloan, 1989). Scholars have maintained this practice over time, utilizing similar approaches (theoretically and/or methodologically) to expand understanding of phenomena. Indeed, meta-analyses (e.g., Kim et al., 2019) and reviews of the literature (e.g., Cornwell & Kwon, 2019) demonstrate creation and maintenance work in the discipline, as large bodies of knowledge around specific topics have accumulated over time, often at the expense of exploring other ideas.

At the same time, there is evidence of disruption work in sport consumer behavior research. For example, efforts to understand consumer well-being in addition to organizational outcomes of fandom (e.g., Wann, 2006), Lock and Heere's (2017) theoretical critique of team identification, and a recent flow of qualitative studies that directly challenged the quantitative orthodoxy (Delia & James, 2018; Hyatt et al., 2018; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016; Sveinson et al., 2019; Toffoletti, 2017) are all examples of disruption work. Perhaps most relevant to the purpose of the current study, a small stream of sociocultural research has pointed to the unique experiences of sport consumers, highlighting how individual and contextual differences (e.g., the experiences of women fans) may influence the consumption experience and, potentially as a result, sport consumer behavior theory (Esmonde et al., 2015; Richards et al., 2020; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2015; Toffoletti, 2017). Importantly, this work expanded what scholars had previously defined as a 'real' or 'legitimate' fan.

The previous point prompts the following: how much have researchers considered the settings and populations that have informed the sport consumer behavior knowledge base? Specifically, what contexts have scholars used to explore the various concepts related to sport consumer behavior? And in conducting empirical research, who has been researched? Whereas the simple answer to these questions may be "different contexts" and "different people," it is

important to take note of the research conducted, particularly as the sport industry continues to prioritize diversity, equity, inclusion (Deloitte, 2021; Nielsen, 2020), and sport scholars themselves have made similar calls (e.g., Cunningham, 2014; Fink, 2016; McGarry, 2020). What trends, if any, have prevailed in terms of contexts and populations studied, and what does this reveal about any creation, maintenance, and disruption work occurring in the discipline? What groups or settings have been relatively unexplored?

### **A Scoping Review of Sport Consumer Behavior Research in Sport Management**

We conducted a scoping review of research published in four sport management journals: *European Sport Management Quarterly (ESMQ)*, *Journal of Sport Management (JSM)*, *Sport Management Review (SMR)*, and *Sport Marketing Quarterly (SMQ)*. At the time of data collection, *ESMQ*, *JSM*, and *SMR* had the highest impact factors in the field, and the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) rated each as an A journal. We included *SMQ* because it is the official journal of Sport Marketing Association and a journal dedicated to research on sport marketing and consumer behavior. Finally, though the journals are open to all scholars, they represent different geographic areas around the world: North America, Europe, and Australia and New Zealand. Cunningham et al. (2021) adopted similar criteria in their review of sport management research and theory.

Scholars conduct scoping reviews to examine the nature of research on a particular concept or topic (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). As Levac et al. (2010) noted, "Researchers can undertake a scoping study to examine the extent, range, and nature of research activity, determine the value of undertaking a full systematic review, summarize and disseminate research findings, or identify gaps in the existing literature" (p. 1). The purpose of our scoping review was to understand how sport consumer behavior work reflects diversity in participants samples and

variety in sport settings, focusing on the contexts and populations studied to identify how practices and norms have been created, maintained, or disrupted.

To conduct the review, we searched within each journal for the terms “consumer” OR “fan” OR “spectator.”<sup>2</sup> It is important to note these terms were searched across a number of fields, including: article title, abstract, subject headings, and keywords. However, because we did not search all text (or simply review every article published across the journals), it is possible our search did not return all articles in which the author(s) contributed to sport consumer behavior knowledge. We searched each journal from its inception through 2020. The initial search yielded 995 results across the four journals. After reviewing abstracts and eliminating irrelevant search results (i.e., digests, book reviews, applied case studies, and unrelated empirical studies), we selected 629 articles for analysis. Subsequently, we removed any participant sport studies. Though this work is important to sport consumer behavior, the focus of our study was spectator sport. Separately, conceptual articles were reviewed, but placed in a file for further analysis, separate from empirical studies. Thus, the final number of empirical articles included in the review was 535: 81 in *ESMQ*, 144 in *JSM*, 89 in *SMR*, and 221 in *SMQ*.

For each article, we recorded the following: article information (authors, publication year, title, journal, and research purpose); study context (consumer type and research setting); and participant details (gender, race and/or ethnicity, sexual orientation, income, education, age, and ability status). We also noted, when applicable, whether the article addressed diversity and inclusion.

### **Review Findings**

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<sup>2</sup> The term “supporter” was added to the *ESMQ* search due to the prevalence of this term to describe sport consumers in European countries.

Overall, our scoping review findings revealed that sport consumer research lacks diversity among study participants and variety in study settings. Further, despite the journals being based in different parts of the world (*ESMQ* in Europe, *JSM* and *SMQ* in North America, and *SMR* in Australia) and attracting submissions from authors worldwide, the makeup of study contexts and participant details looked relatively similar. In this section, we detail findings of our review.

### **Study Context**

Collectively, the contexts of articles reviewed across the four journals were similar—researchers seem to routinely conduct research in similar settings at the expense of exploring other sport contexts. Specifically, a majority of empirical papers examined spectators of men’s sport. Most often, researchers examined men’s football (professional or amateur) of any type (e.g., association, gridiron, or rugby), comprising about 43% of all studies ( $n = 228$ ) reviewed. An additional 12% of studies ( $n = 66$ ) focused on other North American “big four” men’s leagues—Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), and National Hockey League (NHL). Fewer researchers collected data from consumers of women’s sport—about 7% of all empirical articles reviewed ( $n = 40$ ). Two articles had a specific focus on consumption of historically Black college and university (HBCU) sport (less than 1% of all empirical articles reviewed), and just one article focused on consumers of Parasport (less than 1% of all empirical articles reviewed).

Figure 1 illustrates the frequency of publications by research setting over time. As previously described, the total number of articles using men’s football or MLB/NBA/NHL as a research context is far greater than those focusing on women’s sport, HBCU sport, or parasport. Figure 1 shows that this disparity has grown dramatically in the past decade; for example, in a

time period where 156 articles were published using men's football (of any type) as the research setting, only 11 articles were published using any women's sport as the research setting. Not only has the disparity grown in terms of frequency, but in proportion of articles as well. Between 2001 and 2010, the proportion of men's football, MLB/NBA/NHL, and women's sport articles was 36%, 7%, and 15%, respectively. Between 2011 and 2020, the proportion of men's football, MLB/NBA/NHL, and women's sport articles was 45%, 15%, and 3%, respectively.

<INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE>

### ***Women's Sport***

As mentioned, researchers used women's sport as a research setting in 7% of the articles sampled. Of the 40, 18 included both women's and men's sport contexts, whereas researchers examined women's sport exclusively 22 times. Though some of the articles simply used women's sport as a data source, 26 of 40 articles had a research purpose that called for research in a women's sport setting. Research with a stated purpose focusing on women's sport focused on the following topics: motives for spectating (Ferreira & Armstrong, 2004; Filo & Funk, 2005; Funk et al., 2002; Funk et al., 2003; Koo & Hardin, 2008; Lough & Kim, 2004; Kahle et al., 2001; Ridinger & Funk, 2006; Valenti et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2003); demand/preference for women's sport (Farrell et al., 2011; Ferreira, 2009; Fink et al., 2002; Meier et al., 2016; Shackelford & Greenwell, 2005); media coverage and perceptions of women's sport (Dixon, 2002; Greenwell et al., 2017; Hallmann, 2012; Kane & Maxwell, 2011; Zhang et al., 2011); sponsorship of women's sport (Boyd & Shank, 2004; Lough & Irwin, 2001; Maxwell & Lough, 2009); psychological connection (Delia, 2020; Kerstetter & Kovich, 1997); and perceptions of LGBTQ-focused marketing (Mumcu & Lough, 2017).

### ***HBCU Sport***

Two articles in the review, both published by Armstrong, focused on consumption of HBCU sport (Armstrong, 2001, 2002). In one study, Armstrong (2001) examined the profile of consumers attending an HBCU sporting event to understand the marketing and economic implications of HBCU sporting event attendance. In the other study, Armstrong (2002) sought to understand how Black consumers' general perceptions of sport, psychosocial involvement with HBCU sport, and ethnic identification influenced HBCU sporting event attendance and non-HBCU consumption. Among other findings, Armstrong found that ethnic identification and involvement with HBCU sport positively influenced HBCU sporting event attendance, and that involvement with HBCU sport positively influenced general sport consumption.

### ***Parasport***

Finally, as mentioned, only one article focused on consumers of Parasport (Cottingham et al., 2014). This study, which used the collegiate wheelchair basketball national championship as the research setting, aimed to assess motives for consuming disability sport. The authors developed the Motivation Scale for Disability Sport Consumption, which included traditional sport motives as well as some unique to the setting (e.g., inspiration, supercrip image). Interestingly, the authors did not disclose information about participants' ability status.

### ***Summary***

To date, most sport consumer behavior studies across *ESMQ*, *JSM*, *SMR*, and *SMQ* have examined popular men's sport settings. Of the studies conducted on women's sport, HBCU sport, and parasport, a prevailing trend has been to understand consumption motives or attendance factors within these settings. This pattern is not surprising given the prevalence of sport consumer motivation research, particularly in the 2000s. However, considering other sport consumer behavior theoretical knowledge—for example, research into identity, psychological

connection, consumer well-being, brand image and associations, and sponsorship effectiveness—the preceding review reveals a majority of this knowledge has evidently accumulated in men’s sport settings, with little regard to other diversity dimensions.

### **Participant Details**

Across the articles reviewed, participants generally either lacked diversity or demographic data were not disclosed. Table 1 displays the percentage of articles reviewed within each journal (and overall) where participant information was published. Across the journals, participant gender (81.1%) and age (72.3%) are most often reported; race or ethnicity (33.3%), education (29.9%), and income (22.4%) are reported sometimes; and sexual orientation (0.002%) and ability status (0.004%) are almost never reported. Below, we breakdown the composition of demographic identifiers within the articles reviewed.

<INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>

### ***Gender***

Researchers reported participant gender<sup>3</sup> frequently (81.1%, or 434 papers). Whereas gender was fairly balanced in many studies, 96 articles (22% of articles reporting gender) reported samples comprised of 75% or more men, compared to just 7 (2%) articles where 75% or more of the sample were women. In six articles, the sample consisted entirely of men. In these manuscripts, the study focus was not particular to men; however, the sample recruited included only men. In four articles, the sample included only women. The focus in each article was understanding an aspect of sport consumption among women. Farrell et al. (2011) interviewed women who attended men’s sporting events but not women’s sporting events to understand the

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<sup>3</sup> Across the articles reviewed, some authors reported biological sex, while others reported gender (as a binary – men/women). Consistent with Lips (2017), we do not distinguish between the two. Reflective of the articles in our review, we discuss gender as a binary here. However, we urge researchers to be mindful of movement beyond the gender binary, as well as considering the implications of studying gender vs. biological sex.

lack of women consuming women's sport. Sveinson and Hoeber (2016) studied highly identified women sport fans to understand their experiences of marginalization and empowerment. Dwyer et al. (2018) examined women's motives for fantasy football consumption. Finally, Sveinson et al. (2019) interviewed women sport fans to understand their perceptions of team apparel options.

### *Age*

In nearly three-quarters (72.3%) of articles, researchers reported the age of study participants. Most reported the mean age of participants ( $n = 202$ ; 52% of articles reporting age), followed by frequency ( $n = 102$ ; 26%), range ( $n = 84$ , 22%; including some that also reported mean), or another reporting method ( $n = 54$ ; 14%), including instances of disclosing only partial information. Among studies reporting mean age, about 80% reported means below 40 years old; the midpoint of all mean ages reported is 31.5 years. Studies disclosing age by frequency distribution tended to be fairly balanced, though studies relying on student samples certainly leaned younger. In studies disclosing age range, most (73 of 84; 87%) had a low point of 21 years old or younger, whereas less than half ( $n = 38$ ; 45%) had a high point of 65 or older.

### *Race and Ethnicity*

About one-third of articles reviewed (178 of 535) disclosed information about participant race or ethnicity. In 118 (66%) of these articles, 75% or more of the sample identified as White/Caucasian; in 33 (19%) articles, 90% or more of the sample identified as White/Caucasian. Interestingly, in several studies where a large majority of the participants identified as White/Caucasian, the authors did not provide information on race for the other participants. Racial minoritized individuals were the majority of the sample in just six studies.

In 15 studies (8% of articles disclosing race or ethnicity), researchers focused on race or ethnicity. Eight articles had an emphasis on Black consumers and/or consumption of sport

contested by Black athletes (Armstrong, 2001; Armstrong, 2002; Armstrong & Peretto Stratta, 2004; Armstrong 2008; Brown et al., 2016; Lyons & Jackson, 2001; Schmidt et al., 2018; Stadler-Blank et al., 2014). Three articles focused on Asian consumers (Clarke & Mannion, 2006; Kim & Cheong, 2011; Kim & Heere, 2012), one focused on Latino consumers (Harrolle et al., 2010), and three others focused on broad ethnic/cultural consumer differences (Kwon & Trail, 2001; Nadeau et al., 2011; Pons et al., 2001). About half of these researchers examined attendance or consumption factors (Armstrong, 2002; Armstrong, 2008; Armstrong & Peretto Stratta, 2004; Clarke & Mannion, 2006; Kwon & Trail, 2001; Lyons & Jackson, 2001; Stadler-Blank et al., 2014). Others focused on an array of topics, including loyalty (Harrolle et al., 2010), branding (Kim & Heere, 2012), identity (Pons et al., 2001), activism (Schmidt et al., 2018), spending (Armstrong, 2001), and athlete-consumer race/ethnicity alignment (Brown et al., 2016; Kim & Cheong, 2011; Nadeau et al., 2011).

### ***Education***

Similar to race, participant education level was disclosed in about one-third of articles (160 of 535). Information about education was only fully shared, however, in about half ( $n = 82$ ; 51%) of these articles. In articles with a full disclosure, just three had samples with a majority never attending college (excluding articles with a focus on minors). In 57 (36%) articles, 75% or more of the sample had completed at least some college. In about half of articles disclosing education ( $n = 78$ ; 49%), authors only partially reported information on participant education; most often (in 65 articles), authors reported the proportion of the sample with a college degree (of any type). The authors' descriptions take different forms, including "69% had completed at least an undergraduate degree," or "a majority" of participants were college educated.

### ***Income***

Reporting on participant income tells a similar story to that of education level. Of 120 articles disclosing information about participant income, income information was only fully disclosed half ( $n = 58$ ; 48%) of the time, with the other half of articles ( $n = 62$ ; 52%) providing some information about income. Considering partial disclosure of information on income, 23 (19%) articles reported a single percentage of participants clearing a given income threshold (e.g., “26.6% had household incomes over \$100,000”). Fourteen (11%) reported information on only the mean, median, mode, or range of income, and some others reported information on a few income categories, but not all. Looking at articles where income information was fully disclosed, income levels appeared relatively evenly distributed; instances of relatively large proportions of low-income individuals tended to appear in studies with student samples, whereas instances of relatively large proportions of high-income individuals tended to appear in studies with season ticket holders or attendees of major (men’s) professional league events.

### ***Sexual Orientation***

Of 535 articles reviewed, only one article disclosed information about participant sexual orientation. In an article published in *SMQ*, Mumcu and Lough (2017) surveyed participants on their attitudes toward the WNBA’s Pride campaign and the impact of fandom and sexual orientation on future consumption intentions. The authors disclosed that 43.3% of participants identified as heterosexual, compared to 38.8% identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

### ***Ability Status***

Two articles (both published in *ESMQ*) in our review disclosed information about participant ability status. Garcia and colleagues (2017) studied members of disabled supporter associations (DSAs) at football clubs in England to understand how membership improves access of fans with disabilities. The authors noted participants had a range of disabilities,

including illness, wheelchair users, learning disability, and reduced mobility or ambulant disability. Separately, in studying the impact of sporting event attendance on subsequent sport participation, Ramchandani and colleagues (2015) noted 94.7% of participants did not have a disability that limited their daily activities.

### *Summary*

In the articles reviewed, authors frequently report participant gender and age, while they report on race, education, and income just some of the time, and sexual orientation and ability status only rarely. It is possible many of these questions are made optional in research. Perhaps more problematically, a lack of any reporting on these measures could indicate that in some instances, they are excluded from the research altogether. Collectively, scholars have frequently researched middle-aged or younger White men who are college-educated and have at least middle-class income. Whether intentional or not, these types of people appear to have been prioritized in research over others, including women, racial minoritized individuals, older individuals, those with less than a college education, and individuals with low incomes.

Among articles that address minoritized groups, researchers have most often focused on motives or factors in attendance, as well as general consumption patterns or the consumption experience. Thus, it seems sport consumer behavior research among minoritized groups is in its infancy; the topics we have a decent understanding of among these populations (e.g., women, racial minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, disabled people) are more or less the same topics scholars investigated with White male (heterosexual, able-bodied) consumers 20 years ago.

### **Discussion**

The overarching purpose of this paper was to examine the state of diversity in sport consumer behavior research. To do so, we conducted a scoping review, focusing on both the

context researchers used in their studies and the samples from which they drew. Across four journals in the field, similarity was the norm: most studies focus on men's sport in highly commercialized settings; the demographics of study participants are routinely under-reported; and the characteristics of study participants suggest that most research is based on studies of White men, who are middle-aged or young, educated, and with at least some disposable income. We observed, for example, that samples heavily skewed toward men (i.e., at least 75% of the sample was men) appeared 13 times more frequently than those heavily skewed toward women. The disparities were even greater for race, where mostly White samples were present almost 20 times more frequently than samples of predominantly racially minoritized individuals when race or ethnicity was reported. But these statistics likely understate the problem, as authors were comparatively unlikely to note the participants' race or ethnicity, education, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability status. This type of reporting (or lack thereof) was consistent in articles reviewed over time, indicating norms created early on in sport consumer behavior research have been maintained by researchers with little to no disruption work.

### **Lack of Diversity in Sport Consumer Behavior Research**

Our research shows similarity—in contexts and sample characteristics—characterizes most sport consumer behavior research. The pattern of findings supports previous critiques that sport management and sport consumer behavior research lack diversity in research focus and its participants (Shaw & Cunningham, 2021; Toffoletti, 2017). Why, though, has this pattern developed and continued? We offer several possibilities here, presented as norms developed through creation and maintenance work by sport consumer behavior researchers. In addition, we offer potential methods by which researchers can engage in disruption work, all in an effort to increase diversity, representation, and quality in sport consumer behavior research.

### *Norms Influencing the Lack of Diversity Research*

Norms created and maintained in the discipline have contributed to the demonstrable lack of diversity in the study samples and homogeneity in settings among sport consumer behavior research. Here, we discuss three potential norms: researching consumers in popular settings; only acknowledging diversity when it is the focus of the work; and assuming no responsibility for examining people from minoritized groups or settings that are under-researched.

First, researchers might pursue research contexts and samples that are easily accessible and popular (Delia et al., 2021). When the sampling method is chosen due to ease of access to participants, a lack of diversity may seem justified. Researchers should consider a more purposive approach to sampling. Of course, the academic system may play a part here – the ‘publish or perish’ mentality and tenure publishing requirements in some contexts may influence researchers to design studies around convenience or accessibility, thereby maintaining the status quo. Additionally, for a host of cultural, historic, and systemic issues (Delia, 2020; Fink, 2016; Sveinson et al., 2019), men’s sport has been socially constructed as more legitimate, and as such, generally (but not always) generates more fan interest than women’s sport. Given the differences in perceived legitimacy and attention, it is possible researchers are simply drawn to men’s sport, and that this practice—choosing to study a particular type of consumer in a particular type of setting as a result of popularity—has become engrained over time. Indeed, given that early sport consumer behavior scholars focused on men and men’s sports, thereby socially constructing acceptable forms of knowledge production (e.g., Quatman & Chelladurai, 2008), subsequent researchers might have taken these cues and simply followed suit to maintain the norm.

Second, scholars might assume their research, by design, does not focus on diversity and, therefore, does not need to acknowledge varied settings or populations. They may not have

explicitly sought to exclude certain settings or populations, but nonetheless disregarded these details in pursuit of their primary research aims. This practice suggests an unspoken rule that, unless the specific purpose of a study is to better understand a diversity dimension, researchers do not need to be concerned with who is researched and in what setting. Relatedly, if the researcher did not state a desire to examine demographic differences, institutional review boards may have suggested removal of demographic questions to limit the data collected. While such action may be done to protect participants, it simultaneously signals that demographic differences are not critical, contributing to the maintenance of this practice.

Third, some researchers might not consider it their duty to include demographic information or to collect data in varied sport settings (Delia et al., 2021). Instead, they may believe they should be able to research whatever they wish to study, wherever, and with whomever, bearing no responsibility for what or who is not researched. If this is the case, then a focus on people from majority groups and an emphasis on men's sport is intentional.

Whatever the motivation behind the pattern of similarities, the outcomes lead to an incomplete and therefore potentially deficient theoretical understanding of sport consumers. That is, if (a) the extant scholarship is based largely on similar samples that are not characteristic of sport consumers in general, and (b) they are usually collected from settings that do not capture the breadth of sport contexts, then *it is unlikely that existing studies have established a complete understanding of sport consumer behavior*. Our position is similar to that of Rad et al. (2018), who wrote about the broader discipline of psychology: "Despite powerful demonstrations of the importance of cultural diversity in human psychology, most papers in a leading psychology journal sample a very narrow cultural base and generalize inappropriately from that sample to humans more generally" (p. 11403).

Scholarly efforts contribute to the sum of diversity and inclusion efforts broadly (Cunningham, 2014). Research remakes the sport industry (Newman, 2014). If scholars maintain norms of researching and theorizing (even implicit norms) about consumers that are mostly White, middle-class, heterosexual, non-disabled consumers of men's sport, they will perpetuate a sport industry that only serves this particular type of consumer.

### ***Disrupting Norms***

A key form of institutional work is disruption, in which institutional processes are destabilized in pursuit of change (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). To address the lack of diversity focus in sport consumer behavior research, scholars must intentionally engage in disruption work that allows the field to explore the full sport consumer experience—not merely the limited samples and contexts that researchers have studied thus far. Here, we offer a number of ways researchers might attempt to rectify the issue. First, sport consumer behavior scholars should acknowledge their collective output has under researched and undervalued the importance of diversity in participants and variety in settings. In this regard, all sport consumer behavior researchers should accept some level of responsibility (even if just a tiny piece) for diversity lacking in the discipline. Though our review suggests some scholars have indeed recognized and accepted this responsibility (e.g., Armstrong's research on Black sport consumers), the widespread similarity of settings and populations researched suggests the collective has not yet done the same. It is also incumbent on reviewers to raise objections/concerns when scholars do not report demographic information or do not offer justification for their setting, and question authors if a homogenous sample is not a requirement of the research question/purpose. If reviewers fail to raise these concerns, whether intentional or not, they act as gatekeepers and maintain the status quo (Woolf et al., 2016).

Recognizing collective responsibility for settings and participant samples used in sport consumer behavior research will also require acknowledgement that diversity dimensions are important in all research, not just research with an explicit focus on diversity. This responsibility includes diversity in sample and variety in setting. As one example, in studying LGBTQ marketing, Mumcu and Lough (2017) noted participants' sexual orientation, as sexual orientation was embedded in the research purpose. This study, however, was also the only article in our review to note participants' sexual orientation. Just as scholars have deemed it important to collect and report information on gender and age, they should prioritize other diversity dimensions. Researchers should strive to always include dimensions like race, gender, age, sexual orientation, social class, and disability status when collecting information from consumers. Until scholars begin routinely collecting and reporting this type of information, they will never scratch the surface of understanding how the diversity of sport consumers may impact the concepts they study. The same is true of the contexts used to conduct research. For example, researchers should not assume that theoretical explanations derived from research with consumers of men's sport will extend to women's sport (see, e.g., Delia, 2020); theory may often transcend context, but there is danger in making such assumptions without empirical evidence.

Finally, extending from the suggestions above, researchers should articulate how their work takes diversity into account, in terms of sample and setting. This discussion should not be reserved only for studies that focus on diversity (e.g., Black fans or women's sport), but also when a study *does not* focus on a diverse population or setting. Indeed, journal editors—who shape what research and information is deemed legitimate—might take steps to require this information in submissions, either in the text or as a supplement. The journal *Autism*, for example, requires authors to include information about who from the Autism Spectrum Disorder

community was involved in the research.<sup>4</sup> The *Journal of Organizational Behavior* asks authors to include information on research context.<sup>5</sup> Similar to contribution-to-length ratios, journals might consider the contribution of the research in relation to the extent to which it addresses the diversity of sport consumers and/or breadth of sport settings.

## **Conclusion**

It is apparent there is work to be done to grow the understanding of diversity as it relates to sport consumers. Such work should complement societal and organizational shifts prioritizing diversity and inclusion. In attempting to address the lack of diversity in sport consumer behavior research, we offer the following closing points. First, studying different contexts and populations will allow for comprehension of boundary conditions related to understanding consumers, thereby increasing generalizability – where this is a goal of research. Second, there is a need for theorizing about differences between consumers. Much of the sport consumer behavior scholarship is grounded in psychological theories focusing on attitudes, motivations, identities, and various forms of connections with sport. How, though, are individual differences linked with these important psychological processes? Diversity researchers have shown surface-level differences are predictive of more deep-level, psychological outcomes (Cunningham, 2007), and sport consumers from underrepresented groups continually report different, more negative experiences in sport than do their majority counterparts (Cleland, 2014; Melton & MacCharles, 2021; Sveinson & Hoerber, 2016). Scholars play a critical role in developing theoretical knowledge of sport consumer behavior; key to this process is acknowledging differences among consumers and contexts.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/author-instructions/AUT#EditorialPolicies>

<sup>5</sup> <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/10991379/homepage/forauthors.html#manuscript>

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Figure 1. Publications by research context over time

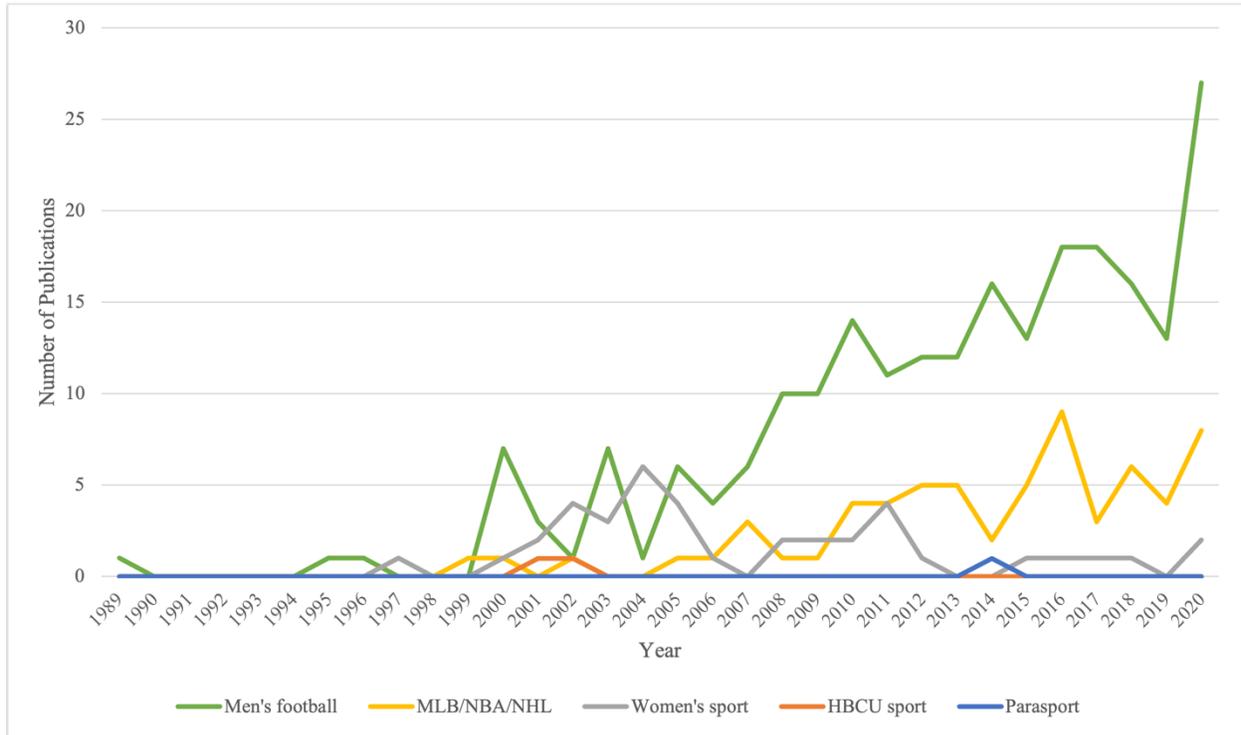


Table 1.

Percent of articles disclosing sample diversity information

Diversity dimension	<i>ESMQ</i>	<i>JSM</i>	<i>SMR</i>	<i>SMQ</i>	Total
Gender	74.1%	88.2%	70.8%	83.3%	81.1%
Age	69.1%	83.3%	70.8%	67.0%	72.3%
Race	19.8%	41.7%	21.3%	37.6%	33.3%
Education	23.5%	30.6%	27.0%	33.0%	29.9%
Income	12.3%	22.2%	24.7%	25.3%	22.4%
Ability status	2.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.004%
Sexual orientation	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.005%	0.002%