



## McCormack Thought Leadership Spotlight

### More than Basketball: WNBA Fandom Represents the Fight for Gender Equality

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The Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) has [long been associated](#) with matters of social justice, and 2020 has seen this trend emerge in [other sport leagues](#) as well. One social movement particularly relevant to the WNBA is the women's rights movement. In a [recent study](#) of WNBA Minnesota Lynx fans published in the *Journal of Sport Management*, I found that fans' connection to the Lynx is rooted in the team's representativeness of gender equality and the women's rights movement.

#### A Case Study of WNBA Minnesota Lynx fans

Sport fans' connections to teams have been researched extensively over the years. Fandom [satisfies a need to belong](#) and is typically rooted in [geographic location](#), but an overwhelming majority of what we know about fan loyalty is based on men's teams. Given the significant [circumstantial differences](#) between women's and men's sport, interviews were conducted with 17 WNBA Minnesota Lynx season ticket holders to understand their psychological connection to the team. Interviews were conducted in 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the [social justice movement](#) within the WNBA in 2020.

#### Gender Equality is Central to Fandom

Among nearly all fans interviewed, gender equality was central to their connection to the Lynx. As one fan noted, being a Lynx fan is about "more than basketball." In talking about his connection to the team, one man passionately declared, "women matter." Essentially, many fans' support of the Lynx is intertwined with the women's rights movement. One fan remarked, "Sometimes you have to support things that are bigger than yourself." For fans, these feelings are exacerbated by a perceived lack of priority in women's sport, that "women are an afterthought," and that the Lynx are "the ignored team in town," despite [winning four WNBA titles](#) between 2011 and 2017. Fans continually remarked on the lack of media coverage in discussing their connection to the team, with one woman noting, "We get this message from day one that we're not on the list...Women don't count, that's not real sports. That's the message."

Some fans discussed fully detaching from or cautiously consuming men's sport as a result of observed disparities between women's and men's sport. Almost every fan mentioned the Lynx's 2017 WNBA title, which was won at the University of Minnesota's Williams Arena after the [Lynx were bumped](#) from two professional sport venues to make way for men's teams. As one fan shared, "It just says that women are second class citizens when it comes to equality."

Recognizing inequities between the Lynx and various men's sport teams in Minnesota, Lynx fans have tried to bring about change through their behaviors as consumers. One fan asked, "As a man, what can I do, how can I participate? Just being a fan isn't enough." Many fans discussed educating friends, family, and coworkers on the WNBA and the Lynx, even offering them tickets to a game. One man explained how he wears his Lynx jersey to his weekly men's basketball league games as a way to promote the team to other men. Collectively, fans were energized by their belief in growing the Lynx fan base, all in an effort to support gender equality.

#### Implications for Sport Managers

Based on the thoughts shared by Lynx fans, a relatively unique point of representation for the Lynx is a social movement organization: the women's rights movement. This is distinct from other (mostly men's) sport teams, in which a city or state is often the anchor of fan loyalty. For Lynx fans, their fandom is intertwined with a politicized identity that seeks to address the structural disadvantages for women in society. The entanglement of Lynx fandom with the women's rights movement fortifies fans' attachment to the team itself, as a result of what it represents.

The WNBA has long been associated with matters of social justice, and there is a trend in this direction with other leagues as well. In situations where a team's fan base advocates for change on social issues, teams should empower fans. Teams do not necessarily need to openly advocate with fans, but organizations should ensure fans feel welcome to share politicized identities while supporting their team. Such actions might also attract companies interested in aligning their brand with social justice movements. Indeed, we have seen this occur in the WNBA recently with the [launch of the WNBA Changemakers](#), a sponsorship initiative dedicated to positive change for women.

Finally, Lynx fans were noticeably passionate in sharing their desire for the team's fan base to grow. For women's sport teams in particular, who tend to have smaller marketing budgets, fans could be enlisted to serve as team ambassadors or social influencers. In the WNBA, such initiatives could supplement the league's planned [increase in marketing efforts](#). In such programs, teams should be sure to include fans of a range of backgrounds to encourage a diverse fan base and maximize market penetration.

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