

Does Being a Sport Fan Provide Meaning in Life?

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Adding to research on team identification and well-being, inquiry into meaning in life and team identification could illuminate how sport fandom impacts consumers' lives. In the current study, an instrumental case study design was used to explore how team identification impacts meaning in life, focusing on significance. Participant diaries and interviews with identified fans of a professional women's basketball team revealed that connecting with family and friends, supporting women's sport, and enhancing mental health via support of the team were sources of significance in participants' lives. The findings illustrate that meaning in life is not necessarily experienced just from being a highly identified fan. Instead, specific elements of one's connection to the team provide meaning. The findings also highlight the importance of close relationships over imaginary intimate relationships, impacting social justice among fans of women's sport, and how mental health via fandom may provide older adults significance.

Keywords: identity, social identity, team identification

Scholars have increasingly studied consumers' identification with a sport team alongside well-being. The primary aim of this research is to understand how team identification may impact consumers' lives (Doyle, Filo, Lock, Funk, & McDonald, 2016; Inoue, Berg, & Chelladurai, 2015). Through empirical and conceptual work, scholars have suggested that team identification is capable of providing fans social and emotional support, which enhances well-being or life satisfaction (Inoue, Funk, Wann, Yoshida, & Nakazawa, 2015; Inoue, Sato, Filo, Du, & Funk, 2017; Wann, 2006).

Well-being is influenced by meaning in life (Steger, Oishi, & Kesebir, 2011), which concerns an individual's subjective experiences. One's life is presumed to be meaningful to the extent to which the person recognizes coherence, purpose, and/or significance in their life (Heintzelman & King, 2014a; Martela & Steger, 2016). Despite sport consumer behavior scholars' acknowledgment of the essentiality of meaning in life to life satisfaction (Inoue et al., 2017) and the distinctiveness of the two concepts (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013), inquiry into meaning in life and team identification is scant.

Wann, Hackathorn, and Sherman (2017) did find that a sense of belonging mediates the relationship between team identification and meaning in life. Although adding support to the notion that team identification can influence well-being indicators, Wann et al. (2017) measured meaning in life globally rather than focusing on particular dimensions of meaning in life, which has been critiqued in the psychology literature for offering a relatively ambiguous understanding of the concept (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016). Recognizing the multidimensionality of the meaning

in life concept, the theoretical contribution of inquiry into team identification and meaning in life will be maximized if meaning in life is examined in greater particularity. Further, understanding the influence of team identification on specific aspects of meaning in life could allow practitioners to more precisely understand the social and psychological benefits of team identification.

Our purpose in the current study was to understand how team identification impacts meaning in life with a focus on the significance element of meaning in life—one's recognition of one's life having value or importance (Martela & Steger, 2016). We used interviewing and participant diaries to explore team identification and significance in one's life among highly identified fans of a professional women's basketball team in the United States. It is important to note that using a qualitative approach allowed us to understand the unique experiences of fans, which is needed given the complexity of team identification and well-being, which, to date, has largely been studied quantitatively.

Literature Review

Despite inquiry into team identification and well-being, research into team identification and meaning in life is limited; this is a critical research void as meaning in life is distinct from well-being concepts such as happiness (Baumeister et al., 2013). In this section, we review the literature on meaning in life. Subsequently, we discuss the team identification and well-being literature to explain how studies of meaning in life could add to our understanding of the impact of team identification on individuals.

Meaning in Life

Well-being is influenced, in part, by meaning in life (Steger et al., 2011). Research into meaning in life addresses the extent to which individuals realize meaningfulness in their lives through their

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subjective experiences (Martela & Steger, 2016). Meaning in life is informed by a range of sources and, at a macro level, is influenced by cultures, ideologies, and belief systems (Baumeister, 1991). Thus, meaning in life, although largely an individualized (and evolving) process, is also informed by larger cultural and ideological forces. Furthermore, although many scholars have assumed that the need for meaning is motivational, some have speculated that meaning is informative, allowing individuals to make sense of their experiences (Heintzelman & King, 2014b). Finally, although meaning in life is often discussed alongside well-being, meaning in life is distinct from common subjective well-being measures such as happiness. For example, meaning in life is influenced (in part) by identity, but happiness is more simply associated with the satisfaction of wants and needs (Baumeister et al., 2013).

Psychology scholars have proposed a number of factors believed to contribute to meaning in life (e.g., Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016), but the three most agreed upon dimensions are coherence (making sense of one's life), purpose (possessing goals or direction in life), and significance (having value or importance in life). One's life is presumed to be meaningful to the extent to which one recognizes coherence, purpose, and/or significance in one's life. These aspects of meaning in life jointly contribute to well-being and health among other positive outcomes (Heintzelman & King, 2014a; Hooker, Masters, & Park, 2018; Martela & Steger, 2016). It is critical, then, to better understand the sources of coherence, purpose, and/or significance in one's life.

Sources of meaning. People find meaning in life from a range of sources. As Baumeister and Vohs (2002) noted, "Having multiple sources of meaning in life protects the individual against meaninglessness" (p. 611). Sources of meaning have been discussed as relatively common (Heintzelman & King, 2014a), including family, social relationships, work, volunteering, or religion (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Hicks & King, 2009; King, Heintzelman, & Ward, 2016). It is important to note that sources of meaning are not static but, instead, are likely adaptive (Heintzelman & King, 2014a) as individuals continuously strive to obtain, maintain, and build meaning in life.

Assessing meaning in life. Despite scholars' inquiry into meaning in life over the past few decades, the concept tends to be relatively ambiguous and has suffered from definitional issues (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016). Specifically, despite known dimensions of meaning in life, many researchers have examined meaning in life in totality (or globally). Most measures of meaning in life result in a total score, which does not allow for distinction between dimensions and understanding of particular elements that provide meaning in life. For example, the widely used Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) contains broad items such as, "I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful." In assessing meaning in life via scales such as the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, the expectation is that study informants will (subjectively) determine what meaning in life means. Without any specified definition of meaning in life, researchers often leave it to study participants to determine what meaning in life means (Heintzelman & King, 2014a).

In addition to increased attention on this issue conceptually (e.g., George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016), scholars have also taken steps to assess meaning in life using a multidimensional scale (George & Park, 2017). Introducing the Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale, which differentiates the three dimensions of meaning, George and Park (2017) asserted that such a

measure allows for a more nuanced understanding of meaning in life. This supports scholars' encouragement of pointed inquiry into the separate dimensions of meaning in life (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016).

Significance as a component of meaning in life. As mentioned, significance (also referred to as "mattering") as an element of meaning in life concerns value—one's understanding of one's life having value or importance (Baumeister, 1991; King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; Martela & Steger, 2016). Significance, as a component of meaning in life, is largely concerned with one's evaluation of one's life in the present.

Although people who sense little significance in their lives might feel that their lack of existence would not make much difference in the world (George & Park, 2016), most individuals do believe there is significance in their lives (Baumeister, 1991). Such a positive outlook is particularly advantageous during difficult times (George & Park, 2016) as individuals cope or deal with various threats to their sense of self and, more broadly, their existence.

Scholars have argued that more research is needed on significance, in particular (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016). Both coherence (making sense of one's life) and purpose (possessing goals) are relatively established empirically (George & Park, 2013; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006), but minimal empirical work has addressed the significance dimension of meaning in life. Understanding how and from what sources individuals derive value in life should reveal what makes life worth living to people and, potentially, how achieving and/or maintaining a sense of significance might motivate particular behaviors (e.g., joining groups, supporting causes; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; George & Park, 2016).

Team Identification and Well-Being

Team identification is grounded in the social identity approach (Lock & Heere, 2017; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), which posits that the group(s) to which individuals perceive membership contribute to their self-image through the process of categorization. In line with the social identity approach, team identification involves one recognizing membership in a group (a "team"). Such recognition requires an individual to have a vested interest in the group, which influences their sense of self (Lock & Heere, 2017).

Scholars have learned a great deal about how team identification develops and is maintained (e.g., Doyle, Lock, Funk, Filo, & McDonald, 2017; Lock, Funk, Doyle, & McDonald, 2014), and perhaps even more understanding has centered around the relation of team identification to a range of consumer thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors (Lock & Heere, 2017). Scholars have increasingly focused on the impact that team identification may have on social well-being (Inoue et al., 2017; Katz, Mansfield, & Tyler, 2020; Wann, 2006), largely centered on the idea that consuming sport can enhance a sense of community and the creation of relationships among individuals (Doyle et al., 2016; Inoue et al., 2017).

Team identification and emotional support. Through conceptual work and empirical studies, scholars have found that team identification provides consumers social and emotional support (from other fans), which enhances well-being or life satisfaction (Inoue, Funk, et al., 2015; Inoue et al., 2017; Wann, 2006). In studying the relationship between team identification and post-disaster well-being after the 2011 Japan earthquake, Inoue, Funk, et al. (2015) found that perceived emotional support (from the

team) mediated the positive relationship between team identification and well-being (measured via community cohesion). Relatedly, in a study of team identification and life satisfaction, Inoue et al. (2017) found that individuals with higher levels of team identification perceived more emotional support from fellow fans, which fully mediated the relationship between team identification and life satisfaction. Others have similarly found that team identification positively impacted life satisfaction (Wann, Waddill, Brasher, & Ladd, 2015).

More recently, Katz et al. (2020) used a network theory approach to understand the nature of emotional support in fandom. They found that in-person interactions with others positively impacted perceptions of emotional support, with emotional support being particularly enhanced via connections with friends as well as in instances where individuals shared a favorite team. Such work aligns with the notion of team identification serving as a means to form and/or maintain relationships with others (Wann, Waddill, et al., 2011).

Collectively, this work has emphasized the important role that cohesion with and support from other fans may play in influencing well-being in sport fans' lives. However, well-being is informed (in part) by meaning in life (e.g., Inoue et al., 2017; Steger et al., 2011). If scholars wish to understand the role of team identification in well-being, they should examine meaning in life as well. Furthermore, although team identification has been found to influence life satisfaction (Inoue et al., 2017), life satisfaction, as a measure of happiness, focuses more on fulfillment of wants and needs, whereas meaning in life is more associated with identity and expressions of the self (Baumeister et al., 2013). Thus, a key question remains: Does team identification provide meaning in life?

Team identification and meaning in life. As mentioned, inquiry into meaning in life and team identification is scant, yet scholars have suggested that meaning can be found in "everyday experiences" (Heintzelman & King, 2014a, p. 569). Indeed, researchers have found leisure activity to provide meaning in life (e.g., Bailey & Fernando, 2012), so it is reasonable to speculate how sport fandom, as a form of leisure, might also impact meaning in life. Wann et al.'s (2017) study of team identification and meaning in life aimed to contribute to this knowledge; however, meaning in life was measured in totality, which has received criticism due to the multidimensionality of the concept (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016). Based on Wann et al.'s (2017) work, we understand that team identification can influence meaning in life, but we do not really know how—explicitly, we know meaning is there, but we do not know what that meaning is or where it comes from in supporting a team. As such, in the current study, our purpose was to understand how team identification impacts meaning in life with a focus on significance (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016). Our examination of a single dimension of meaning in life allowed us to ease participant burden (discussed in the following section).

Method

The current study is aligned with the interpretive paradigm. The focus of the current study was to understand a particular idea—how significance in one's life manifests through team identification. One could study this idea in many ways; however, we determined that an instrumental case study design was most appropriate for our research purpose. In this type of case study, the case itself is not the primary interest but, rather, the issue being examined as a means to

build theory (Hodge & Sharp, 2016; Stake, 2003). Data were collected via interviewing and participant diaries. Participants in the current study were all highly identified fans of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) Minnesota Lynx, located in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota metropolitan area.

Research Context

Although Minnesota has a number of professional men's sport teams, the Lynx is one of the few professional women's teams. In 2010, the Lynx were very successful, winning league championships in 2011, 2013, 2015, and 2017 (Megdal, 2018). More recently, with most of its veteran players moving on, the team has begun rebuilding (Souhan, 2020). Despite this change, many Lynx fans have remained committed, with the organization maintaining one of the highest season regular attendance figures in the league in 2019 (Levin & Broughton, 2019). Such unwavering commitment could be tied to the nature of professional women's sport. Historically, women's sport leagues have struggled to succeed, with many failing (Baxter & Rohlin, 2014). This struggle is tied to a lack of media coverage, sponsorship opportunities, and organizational resources available relative to professional men's sport teams and leagues (Cooky & Messner, 2018).

Participants

The staff of the Minnesota Lynx organization's research and sales departments assisted with recruitment of participants for the current study. Participants, all of whom were Lynx season ticket holders, were incentivized by the opportunity to receive a \$100 gift card for completing the study. As a screening criterion, participants had to identify with the Lynx; we measured team identification using the Sport Spectator Identification Scale-Revised (James, Delia, & Wann, 2019). It should be noted that the current study was part of a larger project involving Lynx fans. The interviews and diaries in the current study were completed by 13 individuals (a number arrived at by data saturation; Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

Every participant was a "highly identified" Lynx fan; some had followed the team for 20 years, whereas others had only been fans for a few years. Participants were a mix of women (seven) and men (six), ranged from 27 to 72 years old, and all were White. It is important to note that 90% of Lynx season ticket holders are White and average 49 years old per information provided by the organization. Participants were not asked about their sexual orientation; however, one woman openly identified as a member of the LGBTQ community, and many others expressed their allyship for this community, which came up in conversations about sources of significance.

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of interviewing and participant diaries and spanned a 7-month period beginning in May 2019 and concluding in December 2019, allowing us to achieve a more in-depth understanding of individuals through an extended period of data collection. The use of interviewing and participant diaries allowed for spoken and written discourse, providing opportunities for us to triangulate data (Flick, 2018; see analysis) and allowing participants multiple means to express how their Lynx fandom impacted meaning in life. After an initial interview (separate from the current study), participants kept a diary of their experiences as Lynx fans—including meaning in life provided—during the 2019 WNBA season. Afterward, participants completed an interview focusing, in part, on how being a Lynx fan provided meaning in life

(significance). Details of the data collection are included in the following paragraphs.

Participant Diaries

Qualitative diary research allows investigators to understand individuals in their everyday lives as diaries represent a personal record of an individual's experiences and thoughts (Patterson, 2005). Prior to the start of the 2019 WNBA season, participants were given a physical journal to keep as a diary throughout the season, which was collected via mail at the end of the season. During the season, participants were sent biweekly reminders to make diary entries. Participants were asked to journal about two prompts: (a) "What is it like to be a Lynx fan?" and (b) "Does being a Lynx fan give you meaning in life?" Given the focus of the current study, analysis focused on the second question. Although this question may seem directive, such direction is often necessary to ascertain individuals' own recognition of meaningfulness (Martela & Steger, 2016). Furthermore, the relatively broad framing of the question is in line with traditions of meaning in life assessment where meaning in life is understood as subjective and open to individuals' unique perception of such (Heintzelman & King, 2014a).

Recognizing that diary research requires commitment and dedication that can burden participants (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003), individuals in the current study were given the freedom to choose when they wrote diary entries. Specifically, participants were instructed to write in their diary at least once per week during the season, but they could choose when to write. Some participants took an event-based approach (i.e., writing on Lynx game days), whereas others used a time-based approach (i.e., writing on a certain day of the week). In addition, because diaries were not collected until completion of the season, participants were able to take ownership of their thoughts related to the prompts, allowing them to reach their own understandings (or lack thereof) of how their Lynx fandom provided them meaning in life.

Interviewing

Interviewing as a research method allows for an understanding of individuals' lived experiences and their meaning (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Interviews in the current study aligned with McCracken's (1988) long interview, using semistructured conversation yet still providing participants opportunities to engage in unstructured discussions. All interviews were conducted in public locations and were audio recorded for transcription purposes. Interviews were conducted following the 2019 WNBA season after diaries had been collected and briefly reviewed (for meaning in life discussion) to further understand how being a Lynx fan provided meaning in life. Interviews averaged 63 min.

In reviewing participant diaries, it was evident that some participants needed greater specificity or instruction to comprehend meaning in life. Explicitly, the question, "Does being a Lynx fan provide you meaning in life?" although aligned with broad measures of meaning in life (e.g., Steger et al., 2006), was too ambiguous for a few participants. As such, in the interview portion of the study, we reoriented the inquiry to focus entirely on importance or mattering—the "significance" element of meaning in life (Martela & Steger, 2016).

To understand significance (as a component of meaning in life) in relation to Lynx fandom, participants were first asked broad questions about significance, such as "What matters to you in life?"

and "What is important to you in life?" These questions were asked in an effort to ease participants into considering significance in their lives. Subsequently, participants were asked questions about significance in relation to the Lynx, such as, "To what extent does being a Lynx fan fill what matters to you in life?" and "Is being a Lynx fan an important part of your life?" Additional questions were asked, as needed, to understand aspects of fandom and significance in life. For example, if an individual mentioned supporting women through their Lynx fandom as important in life, we asked them to talk about that. If an individual did not mention supporting women as something important, we did not ask about it. Furthermore, participants who did not recognize any significance in their lives via their Lynx fandom were encouraged to detail this lack of significance during the interview.

Analysis

Empirical material for analysis included audio recordings and transcripts (266 single-spaced pages) from interviews as well as participant diaries. Interview analysis began during interviews and continued through posttranscription. The first author transcribed all interviews as a step in the analysis to allow the contents of the interviews to be "reawakened" (Kvale, 2008). Diaries were electronically transcribed, totaling 126 single-spaced pages.

Interview transcripts and participant diaries were read in their entirety several times. The first author led the analysis given their familiarity with the data collection through serving as the interviewer and sole research contact for participants. Common to thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2016), a two-phase approach was used, allowing for the identification of data-driven findings alongside recognition of theory.

In the data-driven phase, the first author immersed themselves with the data (MacLure, 2008) to understand how Lynx fandom provided participants significance in their lives with little consideration of the literature. Data were considered on an individual and collective basis in an effort to recognize unique participant experiences while also considering patterns across participants. At this point, data-driven codes were derived (Braun et al., 2016) and included: social, family/friends, community¹ (being a good citizen, contributing to the greater good), civility/social justice, supporting women, connecting with people, shared activities/experiences, and health.

Subsequently, data-driven codes were considered alongside the broad meaning in life literature as well as the team identification and well-being literature. This led to the following themes (codes from the data-driven phase): connecting with family and friends (social, family/friends, connecting with people, and shared activities/experiences), supporting/impacting women's sport (community, civility/social justice, and supporting women), and enhancing mental health (health). Although the family/friends and women's sport themes encapsulated their more specific codes, the opposite was true for the "enhancing mental health" theme. In the second phase of data analysis, we determined that all uses of the "health" code related to improving mental health, so we revised the label accordingly.

Stemming from the interpretive alignment of the current study, we followed a relativist approach to evaluating the qualitative approach used (Amis & Silk, 2008; Burke, 2016). Rather than a foundationalist approach, which might require meeting a set of universal criteria, the relativist approach allows for a more individualized approach to evaluating research. Following Tracy (2010), our list included worthiness of the topic (relevance to

the literature on team identification and well-being), rich rigor (data collection and time in field, which spanned 7 months), and credibility (triangulation via multiple data collection methods). Concerning credibility via triangulation, the use of multiple methods (i.e., interviewing and participant diaries) allowed findings from one method to illuminate the other (Flick, 2018). For example, topics raised by participants in their diaries were discussed in greater detail in an interview, allowing for convergence. Our evaluative list also included sincerity (critical subjectivity and transparency about methods through detail provided in this section), contribution of the research (theoretically expanding our understanding of team identification and well-being), and meaningful coherence (alignment of purpose, theory, method, and results).

Results

All but two participants indicated that they derive significance via support of the Lynx. Thus, although Lynx fandom does serve as a source of significance for most participants, it is important to note that not all participants articulated this much, a point taken up in the discussion. Nonetheless, among those who did indicate that their Lynx identity provides significance in life, the most common sources included connecting with family and friends (quality time and shared rituals), supporting and impacting women's sport, and enhancing mental health (learning and sharing knowledge). Each of these sources gives participants a feeling that their life has significance—a sense of importance, worth, or value (Martela & Steger, 2016).

Connecting With Family and Friends

For most participants, their Lynx fandom provides significance in life via time spent with family and friends. Many remarked on the importance of experiences they have had with spouses, parents, friends, children, and/or grandchildren. It is worth noting, however, that the individuals with whom these experiences are shared are existing family and/or friends. Notably, relationships they have with people at games (what some called “seat buddies” or “neighbors”) are thought of as surface level and are not perceived as contributing to significance in life.

As participants explained, existing relationships are enhanced via shared support of the Lynx; however, they do other things with these people, too. Participants' existing relationships are nurtured via quality time and shared rituals related to the Lynx, both of which are discussed in the following paragraphs. These relationships give participants a sense that their lives have significance, aligning with assertions that family and social relationships are a key source of meaning in life, broadly (Heintzelman & King, 2014a; King et al., 2016).

Quality time. As noted, many participants find significance in life via their Lynx fandom through time spent with family or friends. Reflecting on what she values in life, Robin said, “You know, things to share activities with [friends and family] and the activity that I particularly care for is sports. Especially college sports, women's sports, and the Lynx in particular.” For many participants, supporting the Lynx is a way to be with loved ones while doing something they enjoy together, and this provides significance. Commenting on how his Lynx fandom provides importance in his life, Bobby, who attends games with his wife and daughter, simply stated, “Within the family unit, it's something that we come

together on.” Abigail detailed how her Lynx fandom contributes to quality time with her mom:

I'm somebody who—if you take that love language quiz, quality time was always important. So, like, I'm a super experiential person. So I like to do stuff. I have two [Lynx] season tickets. And I think out of the 17 games [last season], I went to like 15 of them with my mom. So that's like, we both love sports. So I guess, a huge part of being a Lynx fan is just like, getting to spend quality time with my mom.

Grace, who attends Lynx games with her spouse and friends, noted the importance of time with friends, stating, “The friends, being able to do it as a group. My friends, being able to enjoy something together.” Jack, like several others, values the time spent with his spouse at Lynx games, explaining, “It's our date night. We still consider ourselves a couple in love, and we still like to do stuff together, and that's important to me.”

Shared rituals. Extending the idea of quality time with family and friends via support of the Lynx as a contributor to significance in life, some participants discussed the notion of such becoming a shared *ritual*—something done with loved ones that has taken on a larger meaning. Alan said,

Our two oldest grandkids are twin girls who love basketball, and exposing them to WNBA—it's really significant . . . I mean, we spend time with them all the time. We've got a gorgeous lake cabin, we've got a pontoon, we go fishing, we do all that kind of stuff. But it's a, it's a chance to have a special event that we look forward to. And they look forward to that—we go out and do this in downtown Minneapolis, and it's a big deal . . . It's a chance to see that, and it's also a chance for them to be exposed to something that's a role model that, because they're girls, that they can identify with, they can look up to, you know, I mean, it's, it's more than just something to do . . . It's a, it's a shared experience that has meaning, it's a shared ritual.

Matthew also commented on the significance of the ritual-like experience he shares with his wife, whom he attends Lynx games with:

The fact that I share this with my wife is a really big deal . . . We both have things we're involved in that are either solo or with other people. I'm an amateur musician, so I play in an orchestra. She does a lot of sewing and she hangs out with her sewing group, and we don't—we share those in that, I go to her exhibitions and she goes to my concerts. But doing it's not a joint thing, and so this way, [with the Lynx] you know, there's a whole, we have a whole ritual. We start out early, we walk to the light rail, we take the light rail downtown, we eat something, we go to the game, you know, take the light rail home, walk home, and it just makes for a really pleasant evening, that we both really enjoy. And, and we get to do it together.

Supporting Women and Women's Sport

In addition to the significance that Lynx fandom provides via time spent with family and friends, for many participants, their Lynx fandom provides importance in life through the support of women's sport. Several participants commented on how important it is to them to have an impact in the community. Support of the Lynx—a women's sport team that celebrates diversity—appears to aid in

this effort by giving them a sense of belonging and involvement. This adds support to the notion of group involvement and belongingness contributing to meaning in life, broadly (Lambert et al., 2013), with a specific focus on giving life value (significance).

Supporting the growth of women's sport. For many, supporting the Lynx is an important and meaningful opportunity to contribute to the growth of women's sport, which all participants recognize has lagged behind men's sport in development and prioritization. In her diary, Zoe noted,

So the Lynx Legends (us season ticket holders from the beginning) had our picture taken with Odyssey [Sims] after the Aces game. It is very important for me to be a part of this group, to keep supporting girls and women in sports. To have women to be role models for young girls to be in sports is a great thing. I really didn't have that when I was growing up—so I appreciate that women and girls have got so many more chances to be in sports.

The idea of support for the Lynx (and, thus, women's basketball) contributing to the future of girls and women in sport was shared by many participants in discussing significance. For example, in her diary, Robin wrote about the importance of *continuing* to support women's sport:

Women in sports have come a long way and it is a reason to celebrate. That doesn't mean we are satisfied of where we are. Women in sports need to continue to grow. Follow the women's path not the men's path. Carve out a niche for women.

Similarly, Grace said,

I guess I could say—when you talk about what matters to me, is I like to consider myself a feminist, and supporting women's sports is also part of it. You know, of all the things that we could be supporting or doing or whatever, there's that . . . I mean, being a feminist, actually, I mean, was one of the catalysts in, you know, in checking out [the Lynx].

Kevin, who like Grace, identifies as a feminist, had similar thoughts in his diary:

My own sense of social justice is very much in line with what is going on in the world regarding women's sports, and I now feel that I have the opportunity and the responsibility to speak up whenever possible. It is necessary and important. With each game, event, or function that I attend, I feel as though the contribution this makes to my life is completely in sync with what flows in the opposite direction. That is a gift, and one to be cared for with great intensity.

Supporting an impactful organization. For several participants, the Lynx organization is perceived as one that is active in the community, making a positive impact on issues such as race and gender equality. For these participants, being part of and having an impact on the community is important to them in their own lives, and thus, a connection to the Lynx in this way has occurred. For example, Betsy values having an impact on others, and she sees this value alignment with the Lynx:

What matters to me is . . . I become the person I'm meant to be, and people around me become—my job is to help people become their best. And what the Lynx provide for me, is, they demonstrate that. [Head Coach] Cheryl [Reeve] wants the best

for all her players. And she's created a culture, and that's what I try to do in my work, as a teacher—create a culture . . . So, that's where the Lynx, the culture they create, the atmosphere in the stadium, where you feel welcome, you feel valued as a fan. You feel part of the action . . . I feel, it, it blends into my, the rest of my life. And that's important to me.

Relatedly, in his diary, Jack wrote,

Does being a Lynx fan give me meaning in life? It does in a major way. There are so many issues affecting women today that I feel the Lynx is a positive statement about women, leadership and values. Win or lose I'm proud to support the organization.

For some participants, the Lynx organization's support of particular causes aligns with what they value in their own lives, again creating a synergy in significance. For Robin, who has an openly gay daughter, the Lynx taking a stand on issues such as LGBTQ rights is meaningful. In her diary, Robin wrote,

I'm proud to be a part of an organization that takes a stand. It's more about making a difference in society, not just winning. Being good role models for young boys and girls. It appears that the Lynx organization takes seriously its vehicle to make a difference.

Relatedly, Kevin commented on the diversity of the Lynx and fellow fans, indicating the significance of such to him in his life:

I think my own sense of feminism laid dormant for so many years, and was really obfuscated by my own profession . . . So, what this [Lynx fandom] has given me, is a better understanding of what is important to me on that level Once I started going to games and I found myself in a much more diverse culture—and I appreciate that the team and league in particular are involved in so many social arenas that mean things to me . . . I have learned so much from people, simply by being in their presence and having a totally different perspective.

Enhancing Mental Health

In addition to family, friends, and the support of women's sport as sources of significance, some older participants discussed how their Lynx fandom contributes to what they referred to as mental health—a way to be engaged, continue learning, and share knowledge with others—which provides importance. The link between meaning in life and general health has been emphasized by others (Steger, Mann, et al., 2009); the current findings add specificity in terms of how mental health may influence one's perception of one's life having importance, particularly later in life. In terms of the role of Lynx fandom in learning, Kevin noted,

I have found myself not just a fan, I feel like I'm a real student of the game. I watch, I watch to learn what I'm watching. And that's fascinating to me. And I do my research, and it's fun. You know? If I don't understand something, I go look it up.

He continued, "As I enter this stage of my life, I've found something that appeals to my curiosity that motivates me to learn more, to read more, and to participate as much as I can."

Continued learning as a result of being a Lynx fan extends to some fans' engagement with others. Jack, who is retired and recently underwent major surgery, explained,

I think it [Lynx fandom] certainly does [provide importance] because I think it maintains a good mental health. One of the reasons why we got season tickets to the Lynx was, it was nice to be committed. We've got some place to go, even after being retired. Having season tickets helped us really connect to something But you know, one thing, for health is it, I feel good knowing that I've got to be somewhere. It really forces me in my recovery to get off my butt and go out and to the games.

In addition to Lynx fandom providing an opportunity to continue learning and being engaged, it also can be a way to share accrued knowledge with others, which provides significance. Zoe finds a great amount of significance in this. In her diary, she wrote,

When we go to games the friends that sit all around me keep asking me why players aren't playing, why the refs call things, who is hurt and why—all sorts of things about rules, news and about players. It makes me feel pretty important that they are all impressed with my knowledge of what's going on. I read a lot, do a lot of research, more than most of my friends.

In interviewing Zoe, she expanded on this, explaining, "Well, I think I get taken more seriously when I talk about, or when people ask me about them [the Lynx] and basketball, than other times," discussing how she is a source of knowledge for her friends in this way and that, "it kind of makes you feel important." Relatedly, Amelie also commented on the importance of sharing knowledge, stating, "We're a group of people who are interested in one specific subject, and then we share that information. I know things, they know things. Everybody kind of fills it in."

Discussion

Our purpose in the current study was to understand how team identification impacts meaning in life, with a focus on significance. Sources of significance derived from participants' identification with the Lynx were: connecting with family and friends, supporting women and women's sport, and enhancing mental health. Our findings illustrate how team identification impacts a "life worth living" (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002) and build on the research of Wann et al. (2017). Adding to a broad understanding that team identification influences meaning in life (Wann et al., 2017), the current study demonstrates how a specific dimension of meaning in life—significance—is realized via identifying with a team, from a variety of sources, manifesting differently among fans. We detail these findings in the following paragraphs.

Team Identification and Sources of Significance

Time with family (Wann, 1995), supporting women's sport (Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2003), and mental health (e.g., acquisition of knowledge; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2000) have been studied as motives for sport consumption with researchers demonstrating that these topics may influence consumer behavior. The findings of the current study advance our understanding by helping us recognize that such topics are also linked to providing meaning in life.

The significance of close relationships. Most participants indicated that their identification with the Lynx provides significance in life via time spent with family and friends. The ability to spend quality time—and for some, engaging in ritual-like behavior—with these individuals allows fans the opportunity to nurture existing

relationships, which provide significance to individuals for the rest of their lives. The importance of connecting with family and friends aligns with the findings of Katz et al. (2020), who emphasized the significance of relationships with friends in fans' emotional support. However, in the current study, individuals outside of one's circle of close relationships—for example, the broader group of fans—did not provide participants significance in life. This is counter to others who have discussed the support of fans, in general, contributing to well-being (Inoue, Funk, et al., 2015; Inoue et al., 2017), and thus, future studies of team identification and meaning in life should endeavor to understand the role of other fans.

Anderson and Stone (1981) and Melnick (1993) discussed quasi-intimate fan relationships, for example, fans casually interacting with others who sit near them at games. Perhaps influenced by these early works, others have similarly emphasized this type of relationship (e.g., Funk & James, 2004; Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015) in its ability to fulfill social needs. We found that these casual relationships did exist among participants in the current study; however, we also found that such relationships did not provide significance to fans in terms of meaning in life. Instead, they were described as "nice to have" or "cool." These relationships may be a source of sociability (Melnick, 1993), but this need for sociability—at least among these participants—does not appear to be a source of significance in life. Considering that happiness (rather than meaning in life) is focused on the satisfaction of needs (Baumeister et al., 2013), it could be that quasi-intimate relationships among sport fans impact general happiness but not meaningfulness.

Sport teams as a community for social justice. In addition to family and friends as a source of significance, fans also found significance in life via their Lynx fandom from supporting women and women's sport. Specifically, participants talked about the importance of having an impact in the community and how supporting the Lynx, a team known for celebrating diversity, is a source of significance as a result. Conversations of community in relation to team identification have often centered around the team itself serving as a community (Katz & Heere, 2015; Yoshida et al., 2015) and/or a team being representative of a given community, usually a place (but also other external communities, at least conceptually; see Heere & James, 2007). Our findings add empirical support to the idea that a team may not just be its own community or representative of a place, which has mainly been discussed as providing feelings of belongingness. Scholars have discussed the importance of social change in group identity (e.g., Homsey, 2008; Reicher, 2004). Here, identifying with a team that seeks to impact issues related to gender equality gives fans a feeling that they themselves are having an impact on social justice, contributing to change on issues such as race and gender equality via support of an organization (and group of fans) that advocates for these issues. This work toward social justice fortifies fans' identification with the team while also directly making fans feel like their lives matter (i.e., their lives are significant).

The role of team identification later in life. Some participants found significance in life via their Lynx fandom from the mental health it provides them, either as a way to be engaged, continue learning, or share knowledge. Interestingly, this was discussed exclusively among older individuals (age 65 or older), most of whom are retired and some who also live alone. Scholars have discussed the presence of meaning in life among older adults (Steger, Oishi, et al., 2009). Within sport, researchers have

addressed the positive influence of team identification on older adults' perceived emotional support from fellow fans (Inoue et al., 2019) and decreased loneliness (Wann, Rogers, et al., 2011) among other benefits. The current study demonstrates that similar mental health benefits can extend to the women's sport context. More importantly, the findings illustrate the potential for team identification to aid in maintenance and/or enhancement of cognitive and physical function later in life. Although Wann, Rogers, et al. (2011) suggested this possibility, the current study adds empirical support to such speculation and extends it in that older individuals in this study have continued learning and staying engaged through their Lynx fandom and that doing so—maintaining mental and physical function—provides significance in their lives. It is not just feeling supported, being part of a community, or feeling less lonely that team identification can provide older adults (Inoue, Funk, et al., 2019; Wann, Rogers, et al., 2011) but also—as a result of behaviors associated with team identification—a sense that their lives are worth living even as they grow older.

Articulating Significance in Life

All but two participants indicated that being a Lynx fan provides significance in their lives. Broadly, these two individuals derive significance from contributing to the greater good, but both were hesitant to say that the Lynx, in particular, is a source of significance. This leads us to ask: Is it conceivable that not all highly identified fans perceive their identification with a team as a source of significance in life? Or could it be possible that not all identified fans *articulate* the significance of a team in their life? There is likely truth to both of these questions.

Variance among participants. Although there are themes among participants in terms of significance via team identification, the way in which individuals realize significance is unique. For example, although Bobby finds significance in life through his Lynx fandom via family and friends only, Grace finds significance in life through her Lynx fandom via family and friends as well as supporting women's sport. Further, although Bobby values the experiences with his daughter at games, Grace's experience is centered more around time with friends. Thus, just as scholars have suggested that team identity itself may vary between individuals (Delia & James, 2018), sources of significance, in terms of meaning in life, are also relatively unique.

Recognizing that particular sources of significance vary from one individual to another, it is reasonable to suggest that the weight of significance derived via team identification may also be different among individuals. We know that team identification itself varies (James et al., 2019). Similarly, then, it should be possible that among individuals who identify with a team, some will perceive greater significance via fandom than others, with some not perceiving much significance at all. This aligns with scholars' speculation as to how meaningful life really is and that some people perceive life to be more meaningful than others (Heintzelman & King, 2014a).

Difficulty in articulating meaning. It is also possible that some individuals may articulate meaning more easily than others. In the current study, it was apparent many participants do not routinely think about "meaning in life" (perhaps a result of a lack of meaning salience; Hooker et al., 2018). This illustrated to us that meaning in life is, indeed, ambiguous. Focusing on significance seemed to help participants articulate meaning in relation to their fandom, yet there was still cautiousness among some participants. When one

participant was asked whether the Lynx provided significance, their initial response was, "Nah, nah. You know, I would say, I'm not going to say—I won't say yes to that, but I wouldn't say totally no, either." Another participant remarked, "I should have a life," as she expressed her embarrassment over the team's significance to her. These participants' and others' restraint suggests a potential social desirability bias (Ebersole & Quiring, 1989; Heintzelman & King, 2014a) involved in evaluating the role of sport in one's life. Should sport fandom, which is associated with play or leisure, be a source of significance in one's life?

As Heintzelman and King (2014a) noted, meaning in life is not limited to "deep" sources (e.g., religion). Routine experiences, such as supporting a basketball team, can also be sources of meaning. However, it is also important to recall that it is not necessarily being a fan of a team that provides significance in participants' lives. Instead, it is being a fan of a team *alongside family or friends*, or being a fan of a team *while supporting women and women's sport*, or being a fan of a team *and learning or sharing knowledge* that provides significance in life. In its abstract sense, being a fan of a team may not seem to provide significance in life even among the most highly identified fans. Instead, the team appears to be a vehicle for deeper sources of meaning to be activated. We know that identification with sport teams often involves connections to people, groups, places, and experiences (Delia & James, 2018), and recognition of such has allowed scholars to understand that there is a greater depth to fandom. A similar "unpacking" may be necessary to understand how identifying with a sport team impacts meaning in life. Such inquiries should add depth to what we know about team identification and well-being (e.g., Inoue, Funk, et al., 2015; Inoue et al., 2017; Wann, 2006) and how this fits into the rest of life.

Managerial Implications

In the current study, perhaps the strongest source of significance in life derived from being a Lynx fan was connecting with family and friends. Teams have long emphasized community-oriented messaging in marketing activities (e.g., using terms such as "nation" to denote a collective), and research on team identification and belongingness supports such initiatives (Heere & James, 2007; James, Walker, & Kuminka, 2009). In addition to this, sport managers might benefit from using more personal messages. We found that close relationships were a source of significance among fans in the current study and that quasi-intimate relationships were not. Sport managers already leverage the significance of close relationships during games, for example, via family (or group) ticket packages or "faith and family" themed games. Teams could develop these initiatives further by offering occasional bonus tickets to season ticket holders to invite others to experience a game. In addition, teams could highlight fans' close relationships with fellow Lynx fans via promotional videos as a means to signal that the organization values familial relationships. In turn, such efforts could serve to maintain or strengthen identification with the team through fans' realized significance the team plays in nurturing close relationships.

Separately, for managers of women's sport teams, the findings of the current study illustrate that support of women's sport is not just a positive cause (Funk et al., 2003) but also a source of significance in life. As individuals seek to narrow the gap between men's and women's sport (Cooky & Messner, 2018), this finding could be helpful for teams securing corporate partners. As sport sponsors look to support social justice, women's sport has been discussed as a viable avenue (Grimley, 2019). In 2019, as the U.S.

Women's Soccer Team won the FIFA Women's World Cup, its sponsors (including Nike and Visa) stood by in support of equal pay (Draper, 2019). That a brand can align with a team whose mission gives fans a feeling of significance in life—a life worth living—is likely an attractive negotiating point.

Limitations and Future Research

Data collection occurred over 7 months, in part to capture realizations in participants' perceptions of meaning in life. However, this time period is still brief. Sources of meaning in life are adaptive (Heintzelman & King, 2014a), changing as individuals seek to obtain and maintain meaning. As scholars strive to understand the role of team identification in meaning in life, longitudinal studies might allow for the detection of variance in meaning.

All participants in the current study were Lynx season ticket holders who regularly attended games in-person. Because the in-person experience is different than that of fans who do not attend live, experiencing meaningfulness might also be different. Particularly, the extent to which quasi-intimate relationships with other fans (Anderson & Stone, 1981) provide meaning might vary depending on one's frequency of game attendance.

In the current study, we focused on the significance component of meaning in life. Although this eased participant burden and afforded us the opportunity to concentrate on how being an identified fan gives one's life importance, it was done at the expense of understanding other aspects of meaning in life (Martela & Steger, 2016). Researchers should strive to understand how team identification provides coherence and purpose in life. Finally, we focused on how team identification, in particular, provides significance in individuals' lives. Of course, there is a more to life than sport fandom. In talking to fans, we found that the same sources of significance derived from Lynx fandom were integral in their lives, in general. Future inquiries into team identification and meaning in life might include an evaluation of other activities and experiences that provide meaning and the relative importance of team identification.

Conclusion

Research into team identification and well-being has largely focused on measures of happiness. Recognizing the distinction between happiness and meaning in life, interviews and participant diaries were used to understand how team identification impacts meaning in life, focusing on significance. Connecting with family and friends, supporting women's sport, and enhancing mental health were found as sources of significance. These findings bring specificity to knowledge on team identification and well-being, particularly that the abstract team itself might not contribute to meaning in life. The findings also highlight the importance of close relationships over imaginary intimate relationships as well as the significance of mental health derived via fandom among older adults. Concerning women's sport, it appears that fans of women's sport may derive significance through the impact on social justice. Scholars should seek to understand how team identification contributes to coherence and purpose in life in addition to significance, as well as the role of team identification in meaning in life, in a more macro sense.

Note

1. Community can be conceptualized in a number of ways. Here, community focuses on a group of people supportive of women and, more broadly, social justice.

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