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‘Who Are You Calling a Puck Bunny?’

Gendered Boundary Work and the Production of Legitimate Hockey Fandom

ABSTRACT

This article explores the experiences of women fans of the Vegas Golden Knights (VGK), focusing on how they create their identities, manage gendered expectations, and participate in fan communities. As a National Hockey League expansion team in a non-traditional hockey market, the VGK offers a unique opportunity to understand how fandom develops and how collective identity forms in a new market. Using a qualitative, multi-methods approach that includes netnographic analysis of online fan groups, ethnographic participant observation, and semi-structured interviews, this study examines how women negotiate legitimacy within a predominantly male sports culture. Results show that women fans actively perform symbolic boundary work, challenging stereotypes such as the ‘puck bunny’ label, and redefining and reclaiming these terms to assert authority, expertise, and a sense of belonging. Digital spaces are crucial sites where women work together to reshape mainstream narratives about women sports fans and set new standards for authenticity. By examining the connections among gender, sports, and cultural identity, this article contributes to broader discussions in cultural sociology, gender studies, and the sociology of sport, emphasizing women’s active role in shaping and transforming modern fandom cultures.

KEYWORDS

fan studies, boundary work, sport fandom, digital fan communities, authenticity

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Introduction

Sport fandom has long been regarded as a masculine domain embedded with assumptions about expertise, emotional restraint, and loyalty to teams (cf. Crawford 2004; Messner 2002). Although women’s participation in sport fandom has grown significantly, women fans still face skepticism about their authenticity, knowledge, and legitimacy (cf. Jones 2008; Toffoletti 2017). Both popular and academic narratives often depict women as secondary, inauthentic fans who hitchhike to games with their male escorts, attend only to socialize or ogle the male athletes, or who are simply consumers of sport-related clothing and accessories (cf. Borer 2009; Pope 2012), reinforcing gendered hierarchies that determine who is considered a ‘real’ fan.

Drawing on qualitative research with women fans of the National Hockey League’s (NHL) Vegas Golden Knights (VGK), this study examines how legitimacy is negotiated through discourse, interaction, and collective evaluation across offline and digital fan spaces. The VGK case study offers a strategic opportunity to explore these processes, as fandom norms were not inherited from long-standing traditions but developed alongside the expansion team itself. In this context, questions of who belongs, who speaks with authority, and what qualifies as ‘real’ fandom are actively negotiated rather than assumed. These negotiations occur not only at arenas and fan events but also, importantly, through social media and online fan communities, where visibility, evaluation, and interaction are on display.

This article examines fandom as a gendered social and cultural space and therefore uses ‘women’ and ‘men’ when referring to socially constructed gender categories rather than biological sex classifications. I use ‘female’ only when discussing prior scholarship, participant discourse, or group descriptions in which that term appears and not as a synonym for ‘woman.’ This distinction matters because sport fandom is structured by gendered expectations about legitimacy, authority, and belonging, including assumptions about how individuals should perform and present themselves in masculinized fan spaces (cf. West/Zimmerman 1987; Ridgeway 2011; Toffoletti 2017). Accordingly, the focus of this article is on women’s experiences in hockey fandom as a gendered formation rather than on biological sex as an explanatory category.

Scholarship on women’s hockey fandom has shown that women supporters are often treated as inauthentic and dismissed by the ‘puck bunny’ stereotype, which implies that women attend for players rather than for the sport itself. Crawford and Gosling’s (2004) study of UK men’s ice hockey challenged this assumption, demonstrating that women’s fandom was routinely delegitimized despite showing no meaningful lack of commitment or knowledge relative to men. Their work makes clear that gendered suspicion is not incidental to hockey fandom but central to how legitimacy has historically been policed.



Gender, Fandom, and the Problem of Legitimacy

Legitimacy is a key yet often implicit concern in studies of sport fandom. While fandom is usually described as participatory and inclusive, access to recognition and authority within fan cultures is unevenly distributed (cf. Bourdieu 1984; Hills 2002). Gender functions as a powerful organizing principle in these assessments, shaping assumptions about knowledge, commitment, and suitable emotional expression (cf. Messner 2002; Ridgeway 2011). Women fans are often required to prove their legitimacy through performances of expertise or devotion that go beyond those expected of men (cf. Jones 2008).

One ongoing form of delegitimization is the spread of gendered stereotypes that portray women's fandom as superficial or sexually motivated. In hockey fandom, the 'puck bunny' stereotype has been identified as a particularly gendered mechanism of delegitimation. Crawford and Gosling (2004) show that women hockey fans are often dismissed as 'puck bunnies,' a label suggesting that women attend games not out of commitment to the sport but because of sexual attraction to players. Importantly, their study found no meaningful differences in commitment or knowledge between men and women hockey supporters, demonstrating that the stereotype functions less as an accurate description of women's fandom than as a cultural myth that protects masculine authority within sport fan communities. Such labels serve as symbolic boundaries that Lamont and Molnár (2002) describe as conceptual distinctions used to categorize individuals and practices, thereby influencing judgments of worth and belonging. These boundaries do not just explain differences; they actively create hierarchies of legitimacy within cultural fields. This article builds on that insight by examining not only how such labels are imposed on women, but also how women themselves sometimes repurpose them to challenge their injurious force.

Rather than treating these stereotypes as background noise, this article examines how women respond to and resist them. In doing so, it builds on feminist scholarship that emphasizes agency within constraints, showing how individuals navigate unequal cultural terrains through strategic action. Women fans are not merely subjects of boundary-making processes; they are also boundary workers who draw distinctions, make claims, and evaluate others, thereby redefining fandom itself. Legitimacy in sport fandom should not be understood as an objective measure of devotion but as a socially organized and gendered form of recognition. The question, then, is not simply whether women are 'real' fans, but how the standards of 'real' fandom are themselves produced through gendered cultural assumptions about authority, expertise, credibility, and belonging (cf. West/Zimmerman 1987; Crawford/Gosling 2004; Risman 2004; Ridgeway 2011).

Symbolic Boundary Work and Cultural Authority

Symbolic boundary work provides a practical analytical framework for understanding how legitimacy is established and contested within fandom. Symbolic boundaries are the mental distinctions that social actors use to categorize people, practices, and objects. In contrast, social boundaries refer to the tangible and institutional results that stem from these distinctions (cf. Lamont/Molnár 2002). Boundary work is therefore a lively process through which actors negotiate inclusion, exclusion, and status within a specific cultural field.

Boundary work has been used to examine a wide range of cultural phenomena, including class distinctions (cf. Lamont 1992), moral evaluation (cf. Lamont 2012), and the reproduction of inequality (cf. Schwalbe/Godwin/Holden/Schrock/Thompson/Wolkomir 2000). In fandom contexts, boundary work often appears in debates over authenticity, expertise, and taste (cf. Thornton 1996; Hills 2002). Fans

regularly distinguish between ‘real’ and ‘fake’ fans, casual and dedicated participants, and legitimate and illegitimate forms of engagement. These distinctions are not neutral; they reflect and reinforce broader social hierarchies, including those based on gender.

Applying boundary work to women’s sport fandoms shifts the analytical focus from mere exclusion to the processes by which legitimacy is actively produced. Rather than asking whether women are accepted into fandom, this article asks how women define the terms of acceptance themselves. This approach highlights fandom as a site of cultural labor, where legitimacy is constructed through discourse, interaction, and collective evaluation rather than passively inherited.

In addition to symbolic boundary work, this article draws on Osborne and Coombs’s (2013) concept of performative sport fandom, which reconceptualizes fandom not as a stable identity or a matter of group membership but as something enacted through social performance. Challenging approaches rooted primarily in social identity theory, Osborne and Coombs argue that fandom is better understood through how individuals perform fan roles in relation to the audience, the setting, and competing identities. This perspective is especially useful for examining women’s sport fandom, public displays of knowledge, emotional expression, or participation in masculinized fan rituals. A performative lens, therefore, complements symbolic boundary-work theory by showing that legitimacy is not only externally granted or denied but also actively negotiated through repeated acts of presentation, interaction, and self-positioning.

To understand these processes more fully, this article also draws on work on linguistic reclamation. Brontsema (2004) argues that marginalized groups may take up injurious terms and redeploy them in positive, ironic, or oppositional ways, transforming language that once functioned primarily as a tool of exclusion. Crucially, reclamation does not necessarily erase stigma altogether. Instead, it may involve what Brontsema describes as “stigma exploitation” (ibid., 10) in which a term’s derogatory history is retained but strategically redirected toward new forms of group identity and resistance. This perspective is especially useful here because women hockey fans do not always respond to dismissive language simply by rejecting it. In some cases, they reuse and reshape it in ways that turn gendered insult into insider humor, solidarity, and self-definition.

Recent scholarship further underscores the need to situate legitimacy and boundary work within contemporary sport fandom as a mediated, gendered, and interactional space. Fandom is not simply a matter of attachment to a team but is increasingly shaped by digital platforms, where identity, belonging, and authenticity are continuously performed and evaluated (cf. Abeza/Sanderson 2022). In these spaces, fans actively create and police cultural boundaries, using discourses of loyalty, consumption, and unity to determine who counts as a ‘good’ or ‘real’ fan (cf. Sveinson/Hoeber 2023). At the same time, recent work on women sport fans demonstrates that authenticity remains deeply gendered: women continue to be watched, tested, and positioned as suspect participants even as their presence in fan communities grows (cf. Kossakowski/Besta 2023; Symons 2024). Studies of digital sport fandom likewise show that online platforms can foster connection and solidarity while also reproducing misogyny, harassment, and exclusion, making legitimacy an especially unstable and contested accomplishment for women fans (cf. Doehler 2026; Pope/Williams/Cleland 2022). Situating this article within this emerging scholarship highlights why symbolic boundary work is especially useful for understanding how women VGK supporters negotiate recognition, belonging, and authority across both online and offline fan spaces. Symbolic boundary work, performative sport fandom, and linguistic reclamation operate as



complementary rather than competing frameworks. Together, they explain how legitimacy is classified, enacted, and resignified within women’s fandom (cf. Lamont/Molnár 2002; Brontsema 2004; Osborne/Coombs 2013).

Digital Fandom and Networked Legitimacy

The rise of social media has transformed the world of fandom by increasing visibility, enabling interaction, and creating networked publics (cf. Boyd 2011; Baym 2015). For sport fans, digital platforms provide spaces to discuss games, share knowledge, express identity, and connect with others beyond geographic boundaries. At the same time, these platforms heighten scrutiny and evaluation, as fan performances become publicly visible and open to commentary, correction, and judgment.

For women fans, digital spaces present both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, women-centered online fan communities can serve as supportive spaces where participants share expertise, mentor newcomers, and affirm each other’s legitimacy (cf. Gray 2015). On the other hand, increased visibility can expose women to harassment and delegitimation, making boundary work an ongoing, collective effort. As Bucher and Helmond (2018) argue, platform affordances shape not only what users can do but also how social relations and power dynamics develop online.

This study views social media not just as a site where fans express their fandom but as an infrastructure through which legitimacy is created and negotiated. Online fan communities act as spaces of informal governance, where norms are articulated, enforced, and challenged through moderation practices, peer interactions, and discursive evaluation. Analyzing these processes provides insights into how gendered power relations are reproduced and challenged in digitally mediated cultural spaces. Digital fan communities do more than host expression: they organize recognition. Through repetition, moderation, and shared norms, they help determine who can appear as a credible fan (cf. Baym 2015; Bucher/Helmond 2018; Abeza/Sanderson 2022).

The Vegas Golden Knights as an Analytic Case Study

The VGK provides a good example for studying gendered boundary work in fandom. The VGK is a distinctive case because it was not a relocated franchise but an NHL expansion team founded in 2016 and ‘born and raised’ in Las Vegas, becoming the city’s first major professional sports team (cf. Marrazza 2016). Although Las Vegas had hosted earlier minor-league and semi-professional hockey teams, those organizations did not generate the same lasting cultural infrastructure as an NHL franchise (cf. *ibid.*; Berkeley 2023). The VGK’s inaugural season in 2017 further amplified the team’s importance, as its early emergence became intertwined with local mourning, solidarity, and civic identity in the aftermath of the 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting on Oct. 1, 2017 (cf. Carp 2017; Burroughs/Rugg/Becker/Edgmon 2021). This combination of expansion status, non-traditional market location, and deep connection to community recovery makes the franchise especially useful for examining how fandom, legitimacy, and belonging are constructed in real time.

Because the VGK entered Las Vegas without a long-standing major professional hockey tradition, fandom norms became unusually visible as they developed. For many fans, social media was central to early participation and community formation, and women’s involvement was especially important in shaping emerging norms of expertise, belonging, and legitimacy, making the VGK case especially useful for examining how gendered recognition is negotiated.

Research Question and Contributions

Guided by these concerns, this article asks: how do women hockey fans engage in symbolic boundary work to assert and negotiate legitimacy within a traditionally masculine sport fandom? Using interviews, participant observation, and netnographic analysis, the study explores how women challenge delegitimizing stereotypes, redefine authenticity, and collectively maintain the boundaries of legitimate fandom in digital spaces. By concentrating on women's boundary-making practices, this article advances fan and audience studies by redefining fandom as a space of active cultural production rather than mere passive consumption. It expands feminist scholarship by illustrating how legitimacy is negotiated through everyday interactions and discourse. And it contributes to social media research by highlighting how platformed visibility and interaction shape perceptions of worth and belonging. In doing so, this article positions women's sport fandom as a crucial site for understanding how gender, power, and legitimacy are constructed in modern networked cultures.

This article draws on data from a broader qualitative research study that explores women's hockey fandom through interviews, participant observation, and netnographic analysis. While the larger study examines various aspects of fandom, such as place-based identity, consumption practices, and emotional attachment, this article specifically focuses on moments when participants express, challenge, or negotiate the boundaries of legitimate fandom. This targeted approach deliberately highlights symbolic boundary work as a key process through which women fans establish legitimacy within a masculinized sport culture (cf. Lamont/Molnár 2002). This focused design is appropriate because boundary work becomes most visible in moments when participants classify, defend, or contest the terms of legitimate fandom (cf. *ibid.*; Small 2009).

The data analyzed here include semi-structured interviews with women fans, ongoing observation of women-centered online fan communities, and in-person participant observation. Because this study is concerned with fandom as a gendered social space, it focuses on participants who understood themselves (and were understood within these communities) as women. This framing centers gendered experience and representation rather than biological sex classification and allows for closer attention to how legitimacy is negotiated through gendered interaction in sport fan spaces (cf. West/Zimmerman 1987; Ridgeway 2011). Interviews were selected for analysis when participants explicitly discussed questions of authenticity, expertise, exclusion, or misrecognition, and online materials were examined when discursive interactions revealed processes of validation, correction, or resistance to stereotypes. This approach prioritizes analytic relevance over representativeness, aligning with qualitative strategies that focus on meaning-making processes rather than population-level generalization (cf. Charmaz 2014). By concentrating on these interactional moments, the analysis demonstrates how legitimacy is actively created and maintained through discourse and collective evaluation. These moments were analytically central because they made boundary work especially visible, revealing when participants classified, defended, or contested the terms of legitimate fandom.

Analysis was performed using an iterative, interpretive coding method based on constructivist grounded theory, specifically examining how participants define 'real' fandom and differentiate themselves from delegitimized fan identities (cf. *ibid.*). Codes related to place, emotion, or consumption that did not directly contribute to defining boundaries were set aside for separate analysis. Immersion in fan spaces fostered sensitivity to fandom's cultural logics, while maintaining analytical objectivity through memo-writing and constant comparison to avoid autoethnographic bias (cf. Emerson/Fretz/Shaw



2011). Although women's hockey fandom is influenced by intersecting factors such as place, affect, and consumption, this article emphasizes boundary work as a key process through which legitimacy is both created and challenged.

Viewed through a performative lens, legitimacy emerges as an ongoing accomplishment enacted through social interaction rather than a fixed trait. Women's fandom was actively performed, defended, and redefined across digital and offline spaces, where claims to authenticity were shaped not only by what participants said about hockey but how, where, and before whom they expressed their fandom (cf. Lamont/Molnár 2002; Ridgeway 2011; Osborne/Coombs 2013). Instead of occupying a marginal position within fan culture, women engaged in intentional practices that defined who qualifies as a 'real' fan and what types of participation grant legitimacy. These practices occurred across both offline and online platforms. They reflected a shared understanding that fandom functions as a hierarchical cultural field in which authority and belonging are unevenly distributed (cf. Hills 2002). The findings, therefore, suggest that legitimacy is best understood not as a trait possessed by some fans and lacking in others but as an interactional accomplishment. What matters is not only what women know and feel about hockey but how their fandom is read, challenged, and affirmed across different audiences and spaces (cf. Lamont/Molnár 2002; Osborne/Coombs 2013).

Reappropriating the 'Puck Bunny' Label

Reappropriation functions as a form of boundary transformation within women's hockey fandom. Rather than uniformly rejecting the 'puck bunny' label, many participants actively redefine and reclaim it, affirming women's presence within hockey fandom. While the label is often used as a form of gender delegitimation, framing women as sexually motivated or unserious fans, participants articulated alternative meanings that transformed the term into a positive marker of enthusiasm, expertise, and embodied engagement with the sport. One original poster (OP) shared a picture of a mother dressed in a VGK jersey, a golden tutu, and large bunny ears, all while holding her infant daughter, who was dressed as a hockey puck. The picture was posted alongside the comment, "If this doesn't explain us, I don't know what will...#puckbunny." This OP willingly chose and celebrated her and her daughter's Halloween costumes so much that she shared them on social media for all to see. It is evident from the picture, the comment, and the smiles of both the mother and daughter that they are celebrating and proud to identify as puck bunnies. The OP and her daughter have destigmatized the sexist label and instead sanctioned it as an affirmative label of their love for hockey.

This example can be understood as linguistic reclamation. Crawford and Gosling (2004) treat 'puck bunny' as a sexist myth that casts women hockey fans as unserious, sexually motivated, and therefore illegitimate supporters. In contrast, the women in this study sometimes adopted the label themselves and redeployed it in celebratory and humorous ways. Rather than simply rejecting the term, they altered its meaning by attaching it to visible expressions of commitment, community, and enjoyment of the sport. Following Brontsema (2004), this process can be understood as resignification, in which a pejorative term is not entirely stripped of its history but is reworked by its targets into a marker of belonging. In this sense, reclaiming 'puck bunny' did not merely resist exclusion; it helped transform a delegitimizing label into a resource for collective identity.

Accounts like this show how being a 'puck bunny' was reframed as signifying a woman who genuinely loves hockey, follows the team closely, or plays the sport herself. This reinterpretation

tion detached the label from assumptions of superficiality and repositioned it as an expression of passion and insider status. Instead of distancing themselves from the term, participants strategically embraced it, undermining its power as an exclusionary tool. This process reflects a form of symbolic boundary transformation in which actors do not merely resist imposed classifications but actively rework their cultural meanings (cf. Lamont/Molnár 2002). By reclaiming the label, women disrupted the evaluative hierarchy that positioned masculine fandom as authentic and feminine fandom as questionable. These findings show that boundary work is not only about exclusion or defense but also about creative cultural effort. By destigmatizing a delegitimizing label, women actively reshape the symbolic landscape of hockey fandom, demonstrating how legitimacy can be created through reinterpretation rather than opposition alone.

While Crawford and Gosling (2004) treat the ‘puck bunny’ as a dismissive label imposed on women by male fans, the VGK case shows that women may strategically reclaim and resignify the term. In doing so, they do not merely reject a stigmatizing classification; they alter the terms by which feminine-coded fandom can be recognized as legitimate. Reappropriation thus functions not only as resistance but also as a form of classificatory power through which women reshape the meanings attached to fandom, femininity, and authority (cf. *ibid.*; Lamont/Molnár 2002; Brontsema 2004).

Redrawing Gendered Boundaries through Reappropriation

This subsection demonstrates that reclaiming a stigmatizing label also enables women to challenge the evaluative terms through which fandom is judged. Participants’ redefinition of the ‘puck bunny’ label served as a broader strategy for negotiating legitimacy within hockey fandom. By turning a stigmatizing category into a positive identity, women claimed authority over how their fandom was understood and judged. This practice shifted the symbolic boundary from exclusion to inclusion, enabling women to claim space within fandom without conforming to masculine norms of authenticity.

Instead of rejecting femininity or downplaying gender differences, participants integrated gender into their fandom identities in positive ways. Reappropriation allowed women to recognize the gendered aspects of sports fandom while rejecting the idea that femininity diminishes legitimacy. In this way, reclaiming the label did not erase gender; it put women back at the center as genuine cultural participants in fandom (cf. Ridgeway 2011; Toffoletti 2017). “We break down plays, analyze coaching decisions, and debate trades just like any other hockey fans. There’s no ‘puck bunnies’ or ‘girls don’t know hockey’ attitude here. In our group, you’re not a ‘female fan’, you’re just a fan,” another OP wrote in a women’s-only VGK group. The OP of this post is reinforcing the purpose of the female-only VGK Facebook communities. She is supporting each reader of the post by affirming their legitimacy and authority as VGK fans. By reminding the group that, even though they are women, they are still capable of analyzing the game, coaching decisions, and organizational movement just as well, if not better, than their male counterparts. She also goes one step further by clarifying that they are not a marginalized group of fans who need a special label, such as ‘female fans,’ but should instead be referred to simply as ‘fans.’

These findings show that boundary work is not just about exclusion or defense but also involves creative cultural effort. By reinterpreting a delegitimizing label, women actively reshape the symbolic landscape of hockey fandom, demonstrating that legitimacy can be created through reinterpretation rather than solely through opposition. Redefining the ‘puck bunny’ label was just one example of how women fans continually work to prove their ‘real’ fandom.



More broadly, women were not merely seeking admission into an existing hierarchy of authentic fandom. They were intervening in the evaluative framework itself by asserting that feminine-coded participation need not be incompatible with credibility, expertise, or seriousness. In this sense, gendered boundary work becomes a struggle not only over belonging but over the authority to define fandom on new terms (cf. *ibid.*).

Redefining the Criteria of 'Real' Fandom

This subsection argues that women fans articulate authenticity as relational, not merely technical. Women fans in this study also engaged in symbolic boundary work by redefining the criteria for recognizing legitimate fandom. While dominant views of hockey fandom often prioritize technical skill, emotional control, and inherited tradition, participants articulated broader, more inclusive standards of authenticity. They highlighted emotional investment, community involvement, and ethical participation as key signs of genuine fandom. Knowledge remained important, but it was viewed as one aspect of legitimacy rather than the sole factor. The quote below is taken from the "About" section of the Ladies of the Knight Facebook group:

A place for female fans of the Vegas Golden Knights to interact nicely and promote VGK-related material, whether that be events, articles, thoughts/opinions, places to purchase cool stuff, meet and greet alerts, and promote related small businesses so that we can support our community! As some might say, "We Put The 'Ho' in Hockey" :) A Joke, of course, Kinda. Join us if you like hockey, friendship, and humor! (Ladies of the Knight 2023)

The phrase "We put the 'ho' in hockey" is especially revealing because it shows that women's legitimacy work is not limited to defending themselves against exclusion from the outside; it can also involve the playful reworking of sexualized language from within. Read literally, the phrase invokes a degrading term historically used to demean women. Yet within women-centered fan groups, it functions as irony, in-group humor, and a signal that members are collectively reclaiming language that has often been used to trivialize women's fandom. As Brontsema (2004) argues, reclamation may work not by fully removing stigma but by exploiting it, redirecting an injurious term toward oppositional or solidaristic purposes. Here, the phrase mocks and disarms sexist assumptions rather than affirming them, transforming a term of degradation into a performative marker of group belonging. In this way, both 'puck bunny' and 'ho' become sites of symbolic struggle, where women fans do not simply absorb gendered insults but actively reshape their meanings on their own terms (cf. *ibid.*; Crawford/Gosling 2004).

The group description implicitly defines authentic fandom in relational rather than purely technical terms. It frames legitimacy through positive interaction, shared knowledge, community support, and enjoyment, while also functioning as a gatekeeping device that establishes expectations for participation. The redefinition emphasizes the moral dimension of boundary work, in which women social actors articulate which forms of participation should be recognized (cf. Lamont 1992; 2012). By focusing on relational and emotional labor, women expanded the symbolic boundaries of fandom without appearing like outsiders.

So, you know how some gamer bros try to get gamer chicks to prove they are gamers? Like... Do they have to verify their status in the community? I have the same visceral response to that misogyny

that I have to the “prove you are a true Knights fan” nonsense that gets posted every other day on other groups. “Oh, I bet you knew nothing about the NHL until this season!” “I bet you wouldn’t have followed the team if we didn’t win!” “You’re just a part of the bandwagon!” I really need a nice, snarky graphics person to make an image that states that, yes—We (all of us) are genuine fans. Regardless of sex, n00b status to NHL, Cup, or no Cup, etc. What does it take to show your devotion?? My golly gee whiz. (Trish, VGK Ladies 2018)

Trish, the OP of the above Facebook post, voiced her frustration of having to emotionally, mentally, and physically prove her worth as a VGK fan to men in other non-gender-specific fan groups. She continues her post by telling the members of the VGK Ladies community, a female-only VGK fan Facebook group, that just being a fan should be enough to prove legitimacy. Instead, she raises the question with the group about what efforts others have made to prove their devotion. This post is very similar to many other women’s fan experiences during the first couple of years that the team played. However, with the creation of women-only fan groups, women no longer need to experience these ‘visceral’ interactions.

This suggests that authenticity in hockey fandom is not reducible to technical expertise alone. Participants instead articulated a broader model of legitimate fandom that includes emotional commitment, relational labor, and ethical participation. Such a model does not reject knowledge, but it relocates knowledge within a larger moral economy of belonging, thereby challenging the masculine tendency to treat expertise as the sole basis of authenticity (cf. Lamont 1992; 2012; Hills 2002).

Digital Spaces as Sites of Collective Legitimation

This subsection treats women-centered digital fan groups as informal institutions of legitimation. Social media and online fan communities played a vital role in supporting women’s legitimacy work. Participants described digital spaces as environments where they could share knowledge, affirm each other’s authority, and collectively resist gendered delegitimization. “Seriously, I hate those posts too. That’s a huge part of why I started this group. Couldn’t handle all the guys trying to prove that they are bigger fans than everyone else.” Katie’s response to Trish’s question showed that she created a female-only fan group rather than waste her time and effort trying to ‘prove’ herself to men. These women fans are using social media, especially Facebook, to create their own space and community (cf. Sanderson 2013), craft their own sport fan experiences, and shape their identities as authentic fans (cf. Stavros/Meng/Westberg/Farrelly 2013). Below, Katie, founder of VGK Ladies, explains why she started the group:

I started VGK Ladies 3 years ago (this month). I wanted to provide a space where women could talk about hockey and their love for the team without fear of ridicule, mansplaining, negativity, or being hit on. But quickly, I realized that women were undervalued and underrepresented in the NHL, and I wanted to change that. I wanted to give you guys everything you needed to be the kind of fan that YOU wanted to be. I created a website that provided answers to FAQs about the team, craft ideas, hockey 101, party and lifestyle ideas, and even reported on the team from an all-women’s perspective. (Katie, VGK Ladies 2020)

Katie writes about the importance of giving women online space to interact with others about VGK and their fandom without fear of being stigmatized or looked down upon for being women. Then she discusses the importance of this space as a site for the discovery and formation of the women VGK fan culture.



Legitimacy in these spaces develops collectively rather than through individual defense. Using moderation practices, peer reinforcement, and shared norms, online communities function as informal governance spaces where women's fandom is regarded as legitimate rather than questioned (cf. Boyd 2011; Baym 2015; Bucher/Helmond 2018). Returning to the VGK Ladies Facebook "About" section, we see the moderators repeatedly re-sharing the group norms—as shown by the following message:

This is a Ladies ONLY fan group for the Vegas Golden Knights. Talk hockey, ask questions, and cheer on the Knights without fear of ridicule or mansplaining. This is a fun fan page just for us girls! **No selling or advertising. Please read our Pinned Post for the rules.

If you follow the directions and visit the pinned post, you can find the group rules, including no negative posts about the team, keeping foul language to a minimum, instructions on how to handle posts that do not follow the rules, and a ban on business promotion because they have a separate page for that. Reiterating the group's norms and rules regularly helps enable members to police themselves, as everyone should know and follow them.

Crawford and Gosling's (2004) study highlights the marginalization of women within in-person hockey fan communities, particularly their exclusion from core male supporter networks. The present study extends that insight into the digital era by showing that online women-centered fan groups do more than provide refuge from exclusion; they function as spaces where legitimacy is collectively redefined, reinforced, and circulated. In this sense, digital platforms do not eliminate gendered boundary work, but they do alter the conditions under which it takes place.

A performative approach is especially helpful for understanding the significance of digital fan spaces. Social media platforms intensify the performative dimensions of fandom by making fan identity more visible, interactive, and continually open to evaluation. In these environments, legitimacy is not established once and for all but is repeatedly enacted before audiences who may affirm, question, or challenge one's authenticity. For the women in this study, digital communities provide spaces where those performances could be collectively validated rather than individually doubted. Women-only fan groups thus function not merely as sites of support but as spaces where alternative scripts of legitimate fandom are developed, practiced, and normalized.

These online communities, therefore, function as more than supportive networks; they operate as informal institutions that stabilize alternative legitimacy norms. Through moderation, peer reinforcement, and the repeated circulation of group expectations, women-centered fan spaces establish durable standards of credibility across interactions. Digital legitimation is thus collective rather than individual and institutional rather than merely expressive (cf. Boyd 2011; Baym 2015; Bucher/Helmond 2018).

Boundary Work beyond Resistance

Much of the research on women in sport fandom highlights their resistance to exclusionary norms and gender-based marginalization (cf. Messner 2002; Toffoletti 2017). While resistance remains a crucial analytical perspective, this article's findings show that it is not enough on its own. Women fans did not just oppose stereotypes that delegitimize them; they also redefined the symbolic boundaries that determine legitimacy itself. This difference is important. Symbolic boundary work usually involves

creating, maintaining, or challenging distinctions between groups (cf. Lamont/Molnár 2002). In this context, women engaged in what can be called boundary transformation—changing the meanings attached to existing categories rather than rejecting them completely. The reappropriation of the ‘puck bunny’ label shows how stigmatized terms can be reinterpreted to weaken their power to exclude. By embracing and reshaping this label, women changed its meaning from one of delegitimization to one of connection, challenging the idea that legitimacy must come from masculine norms of expertise or restraint. This complicates simple binary views of inclusion and exclusion by showing that boundary work is not only defensive but also productive, actively creating new meanings and evaluation frameworks within fandom.

Read alongside Crawford and Gosling (2004), these findings suggest an important shift in how we understand women’s hockey fandom. Earlier work demonstrated that the ‘puck bunny’ stereotype functioned as a myth that undermined women’s status as legitimate fans. The present study shows that women are not only subjected to this discourse but also actively engage with it, sometimes rejecting it, sometimes reappropriating it, and often using collective digital spaces to redefine the standards by which fandom is judged. This moves the analysis beyond mere exposure to marginalization and toward an understanding of women as active producers of hockey fan culture.

Adopting a performative perspective also deepens our understanding of women’s participation in sport fandom. The findings suggest that women were not merely resisting delegitimizing stereotypes or reacting defensively to exclusionary norms. They were actively producing legitimate forms of fandom through repeated acts of interpretation, affiliation, expertise, humor, moderation, and community-making. From this perspective, fandom is not only a site where symbolic boundaries are contested but also a place where new evaluative standards are enacted in practice. Women’s performances of fandom, therefore, did not merely respond to legitimacy criteria established elsewhere; they helped create new ones. This shifts the analysis beyond a simple framework of exclusion and resistance toward one that emphasizes performance, negotiation, and cultural production. This productive dimension of boundary work is inseparable from gender, since the standards women contest are themselves organized through assumptions about who can appear as knowledgeable, credible, and authoritative within sport culture.

Gender, Legitimacy, and Cultural Authority

Legitimacy serves as a gendered achievement; gender functions as a primary framework for status, influencing expectations of competence and authority across social contexts (cf. Ridgeway 2011). Within sport fandom, these expectations manifest in assumptions about who has knowledge, whose opinions matter, and whose emotional investments are valued. Women’s boundary work, discussed here, illustrates that legitimacy is constantly negotiated rather than automatically granted. Notably, participants did not aim to eliminate gender differences or conform to existing masculine fandom hierarchies. Instead, they proposed alternative standards of authenticity emphasizing emotional commitment, relational effort, and ethical involvement. This approach allowed women to challenge the link between masculinity and cultural authority without dismissing femininity as incompatible with legitimate fandom. These insights expand feminist critiques of sports culture by showing how gendered power influences not only exclusion but also evaluative practices that define meaningful participation. By redefining these standards, women claimed authority on their own terms, demonstrating that legitimacy is fluid and collectively constructed through ongoing interaction.



A performative reading of these findings also highlights that fan legitimacy is shaped by competing social expectations. Women are often required to navigate conflicting scripts: they must appear knowledgeable but not overbearing, emotionally invested but not unserious, visible enough to be recognized as fans but not so visible that their presence is sexualized or trivialized. In this sense, legitimacy is not simply withheld from women by others; it is negotiated within a field of gendered expectations that structures which forms of fandom are seen as credible. Attending to these performative tensions helps illuminate how women’s fan identities are constrained, adapted, and strategically enacted across different social settings.

Clarifying the distinction between sex and gender further sharpens this article’s contribution. The findings do not suggest that women are marginalized in hockey fandom because of biological differences; rather, they show that fandom is a gendered social arena in which legitimacy is distributed according to norms about how women should appear, speak, know, and belong. This is why terms such as ‘puck bunny,’ ‘girls don’t know hockey,’ or even ‘female fan’ matter analytically: they are not neutral descriptors but part of the cultural language through which gendered hierarchy is reproduced and contested in sport fan spaces (cf. Ridgeway 2011; Pope 2012; Toffoletti 2017).

At the same time, women’s fandom should not be treated as a singular or internally uniform category. The experiences analyzed here are shaped by race, class, sexuality, age, disability, and other social positions that structure how credibility, safety, and belonging are experienced within sport fandom spaces. The present study centers gender as its primary analytic lens, but a fuller account of women’s fandom must remain attentive to the heterogeneity of women’s experiences and to the ways different forms of marginalization and privilege may intersect within fan communities.

Digital Spaces and the Reconfiguration of Boundary Work

This study highlights how digital fandom communities emphasize social media as a space where symbolic boundaries are actively negotiated and reshaped. Platforms boost visibility and interaction, rendering legitimacy judgments more public and continuous (cf. Boyd 2011; Baym 2015). They also offer infrastructure for developing alternative norms and communities. In this context, digital spaces act as arenas of collective legitimation, not just extensions of offline fandom. Women’s online interactions serve to express shared values, uphold inclusive norms, and coordinate responses to gendered delegitimization. These processes demonstrate how platform features influence communication and the distribution of authority and recognition within cultural fields (cf. Bucher/Helmond 2018). Notably, the findings reveal that digital boundary work is not inherently emancipatory. Legitimacy within online fan communities remains relational and dependent on participation and alignment with community norms. Nevertheless, the criteria for assessing legitimacy are generally more flexible and less explicitly gendered than in many offline environments, highlighting social media’s role in enabling, though not guaranteeing, the reorganization of cultural hierarchies. If digital spaces help reorganize legitimacy, they also reveal fandom as a site of cultural production in which women are not merely participating but helping define what hockey fandom becomes.

Implications for Fan and Audience Studies

The findings have broader implications for fan and audience research by showing that legitimacy is an interactional, relational process. Rather than viewing fandom as a static identity, belonging and authority are negotiated through symbolic boundary work shaped by gender, platform interactions, and cultural

context. Focusing on women's experiences also reveals that marginalized groups actively reshape fandom cultures rather than merely navigating exclusion. This expands fan studies beyond gatekeeping and authenticity debates to include processes such as resignification, collective norm-setting, and cultural change. Women fans do not merely react to existing structures; they actively participate in constructing meanings, identities, and evaluative frameworks that define fandom itself. Rather than treating women's fandom as derivative of men's, this article shows how women's participation helps shape the culture of hockey fandom and the standards by which it is judged. In this sense, fandom is not simply consumption but cultural labor through which gendered hierarchies are negotiated and, at times, transformed (cf. Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005).

The present findings also speak to recent developments in sport fandom scholarship that call for greater attention to how fandom is negotiated in digitally mediated and gendered contexts. Contemporary research suggests that social media has heightened the visibility of fan identity, making authenticity claims more public, interactive, and open to challenge (cf. Abeza/Sanderson 2022). At the same time, newer studies show that women's fandom continues to be shaped by surveillance, sexist assumptions, and the need to manage credibility in ways that male fandom typically is not (cf. Symons 2024; Doehler 2026). Other recent work has demonstrated that women fans are not less invested than men and may report equally strong, or even stronger, forms of attachment, self-development, and collective engagement within fandom communities (cf. Kossakowski/Besta 2023). Read in this context, the VGK case extends current fandom scholarship by showing that legitimacy is not only defended against exclusion but also actively produced through symbolic boundary work, linguistic reclamation, and the formation of women-centered digital communities. The VGK case reinforces the importance of understanding sport fandom as a dynamic cultural field in which gendered power is reproduced, negotiated, and sometimes transformed through everyday fan practice.

Limitations and Analytic Scope

Like all qualitative research, this study's scope of analysis and case selection shape its findings. By focusing on women fans of a single NHL expansion team, the research offers a bounded account of boundary work within a specific cultural setting rather than a representative account of all sport fandoms. It also does not fully capture the diversity of women's fandom or the ways legitimacy may be experienced differently across racialized, sexual, classed, generational, or other social locations. While this article centers gender as its primary analytical lens, a fuller understanding of women's fandom requires closer attention to the heterogeneity of women's experiences and to how multiple forms of marginalization and privilege may intersect within fan communities. The analysis is also limited by the timing of the data. Over the last two years, the VGK organization has undergone additional developments that may shape how women fans negotiate legitimacy and belonging, including the organization's response to the National Hockey League and National Hockey League Players' Association reinstatement decision and the subsequent two-year contract with the club. Because those developments fall outside this study's data collection period, they are not analyzed here; however, they underscore that women's fandom is shaped not only by interpersonal fan dynamics but also by organizational decisions, public controversies, and changing moral evaluations surrounding the team itself. Future research could build on these findings by examining how gendered legitimacy is negotiated across more diverse women's fan communities and in response to evolving team contexts and controversies.



Conclusion

Ongoing struggles over legitimacy, authenticity, and belonging structure women's hockey fandom. In the VGK case, women were routinely positioned against gendered stereotypes that cast their fandom as suspect, superficial, or sexually motivated. Yet the findings demonstrate that women did not respond only by resisting exclusion. They also reclaimed stigmatizing language, redefined the criteria of 'real' fandom, and used women-centered digital communities to establish alternative standards of authority and participation. Legitimacy, therefore, emerged not as a fixed credential but as a relational accomplishment produced through discourse, interaction, and collective evaluation (cf. Lamont/Molnár 2002; Osborne/Coombs 2013).

The findings contribute to sport fandom scholarship in three main ways. First, they show that symbolic boundary work is not only exclusionary but productive. That is, women fans do not merely contest existing hierarchies of authenticity; they help generate new ones. Second, they demonstrate the usefulness of performative sport fandom for understanding how legitimacy is enacted differently across audiences and spaces, particularly where gendered expectations constrain how women can appear as credible fans (cf. Osborne/Coombs 2013). Third, they highlight the importance of digital fan communities as sites of collective legitimation, where alternative scripts of authentic fandom can be articulated, affirmed, and normalized through repeated interaction (cf. Baym 2015; Abeza/Sanderson 2022; Sveinson/Hoeber 2023).

Women are not only subjected to delegitimizing labels but may also strategically repurpose them. Reappropriation, in this context, becomes more than resistance. It is a form of symbolic struggle through which women reshape the meanings attached to fandom, femininity, and authority (cf. Crawford/Gosling 2004; Brontsema 2004). More broadly, the VGK case demonstrates that women fans are not peripheral to hockey culture. They are central to the making and remaking of fandom itself, not simply by seeking inclusion within existing hierarchies but by helping define what legitimate fandom can mean.

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