

Unseen but unstoppable: Latina sport fans and their fight for representation in the U.S.

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Abstract

Purpose – Latines (a gender-neutral term encompassing Latina and Latino individuals) constitute the fastest-growing demographic in the United States (U.S.), exerting significant influence on the cultural and economic dynamics of numerous industries, including the sport sector. Despite their substantial contributions, their lived experiences, particularly those of Latina sport fans, remain critically underexamined. This study addresses this gap by employing a qualitative phenomenological approach to investigate how intersecting identities of gender and race shape the lived experiences of Latina sport fans within the U.S. sport industry.

Design/methodology/approach – Semi-structured interviews with 10 participants revealed exclusion and systemic underrepresentation.

Findings – Nevertheless, Latina participants demonstrated remarkable resilience through deeply rooted familial and communal ties with other Latina sport fans.

Originality/value – This research provides essential insights for developing inclusive frameworks and fostering equitable representation in the U.S. sport industry.

Keywords Latinas, Intersectionality, Fan, Inclusion, Sports

Paper type Research article

Introduction

The United States (U.S.) Latine population (a gender-neutral term encompassing Latina and Latino individuals) is the fastest-growing demographic in the nation, projected to increase by 49% between 2021 and 2040 (US Census Bureau, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2024). As the second-largest demographic in the country, Latines are a driving force behind the growth of various U.S. economic sectors, including the sport industry (Clinkscale, 2024; Zong, 2022). Recent data reveals that Latines are “twice as likely” to attend weekly sporting events, exhibit “13% higher sports viewership,” and display a greater willingness to “purchase merchandise compared to non-Latines” (Boston Consulting Group and Ampere Analysis, 2022, p. 3). Moreover, women, particularly Latinas, play a role in this engagement, accounting for approximately 40% of major league sport consumption (Boston Consulting Group and Ampere Analysis, 2022). Despite their growing visibility and economic influence, Latinas (a term used to describe women of Latin American descent) remain underrepresented and underserved within the U.S. sport industry.

This disparity can be attributed, in part, to a historical tendency to frame U.S. sport through a predominantly male-centric lens (Cunningham, 2023), which often neglects the unique contributions and challenges faced by Latinas. This issue is further exacerbated by the scarcity of academic research addressing Latinas in sport. Alanis *et al.* (2022) highlighted that between 1980 and 2020, only 14 academic articles explicitly examined this demographic. While scholars such as Elsey and Nadel (2019) and McGovern (2024) have explored the experiences of Latinas within the sport context, there remains a notable absence of research specifically examining their roles as fans within the U.S. sport industry.

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Therefore, the purpose of this study is to critically examine the experiences of Latina sport fans through the theoretical framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991, 2022). Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research investigates how intersecting identities of gender and race influence the lived experiences of Latina sport fans within the U.S. sport industry (RQ1), explores the strategies Latina sport fans use to navigate the challenges they face in the U.S. sport industry (RQ2), and identifies how U.S. sport organizations can support Latina sport fans and foster greater inclusivity (RQ3). By examining these intersecting dimensions, the study provides critical insights into the role of Latinas sport fans in shaping the cultural and economic dynamics of the U.S. sport industry. Ultimately, this research aims to inform strategies that promote greater inclusion, representation, and empowerment for Latinas in the U.S. sport industry.

Intersectionality as a theoretical framework

A plethora of literature highlights how underrepresented groups from non-Western countries are frequently depicted as othered and homogeneous (Baca Zinn and Zambrana, 2019; Said, 1979; Toffoletti *et al.*, 2018). This reductionist perspective limits the ability to understand the complexities of individuals' backgrounds, perspectives and identities, which are essential for developing a more nuanced theoretical and practical understanding of their lived experiences (Ratna and Samie, 2017). To address these limitations, intersectionality as a theoretical framework allows me to examine how unique social identities intersect and create diverse experiences shaped by systems of power and oppression (Crenshaw, 2022; McCall, 2005).

According to Crenshaw (1989, 1991, 2022), intersectionality provides a critical lens for examining the interplay of multiple social identities – such as gender, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status – and their cumulative influence on individuals' lived experiences within systems of power and privilege. Crenshaw (1989) originally introduced the term to highlight the unique challenges faced by Black women, who encounter marginalization at the intersection of numerous social forces that systematically ostracize their identities in the U.S. For example, Black women's experiences of oppression are not solely rooted in their racial identity but are compounded by additional factors such as sexuality, social class, religion and even physical characteristics like height (Hooks, 2000). Similarly, Latinas often experience intersecting forms of discrimination, particularly within the hypermasculine and racially homogenous U.S. sport industry (Alanis *et al.*, 2024; Darvin *et al.*, 2017). Intersectionality, as a theoretical framework, is therefore instrumental in uncovering how systemic inequities and pervasive cultural stereotypes converge to shape the distinct experiences of Latina sport fans.

Furthermore, McCall (2005) outlined three methods to explore the complexity of identity through intersectionality: the anticategorical, intracategorical and intercategorical approaches. First, the anticategorical approach, rooted in deconstructionism, rejects fixed social categories and emphasizes the fluidity of identity (McCall, 2005). Second, the intracategorical approach examines disparities within existing categories, focusing on how intersecting inequalities shape experiences, such as the challenges faced by Black students in predominantly White institutions (McCall, 2005). Lastly, the intercategorical approach explores relationships across multiple social groups, highlighting how individuals navigate overlapping systems of inclusion and exclusion.

Scholars such as Collins (2019) and Cho *et al.* (2013) highlight that intersecting identities produce unique and complex experiences that demand comprehensive analysis. Building on this, McGovern (2024) observed in her recent research that Latinas from lower-income and immigrant families face significant barriers to accessing sport opportunities compared to their wealthier counterparts. Accordingly, this study adopts the intra-categorical approach to investigate the challenges faced by Latinas within the U.S. sport industry. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how intersecting factors – such as gender, ethnicity, cultural identity and socioeconomic status – shape their engagement with and representation in sports. As McCall (2005) suggests, this approach enables a deeper understanding of how

overlapping social identities interact to produce diverse and nuanced experiences. Moreover, intersectionality highlights the role of familial values in influencing Latinas' loyalty and economic contributions as sport fans, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive practices by sport organizations.

Literature review

The increasing engagement of Latinas in U.S. Sport

Over the past decade, the Latine and Hispanic populations have emerged as critical drivers of demographic and economic transformation in the U.S. (Zong, 2022). This demographic expansion is projected to reshape various sectors, including the U.S. sport industry, by fundamentally altering patterns of consumption and participation (Clinkscales, 2024). Recent data from Statista (2024) indicated that Hispanic and Latine individuals were rated the highest in avid and casual sport fans compared to other ethnic groups, including White, Black and Asian populations. Furthermore, research by Gutierrez *et al.* (2024) reveals that Latine fans, relative to the general population, exhibit heightened levels of passion across major sport leagues such as the NFL, MLS and WNBA. These findings underscore the growing centrality of the Latine population in influencing and redefining the cultural and economic dynamics of the U.S. sport industry.

The cultural and emotional connections that the Latine population maintains with U.S. sport further amplify their significance. Jensen and Limbu (2016) found that Hispanic and Latine individuals exhibit stronger motivation to attend and emotionally connect with soccer games compared to their Caucasian counterparts. For Latine communities, soccer serves as more than just a sport; it is deeply tied to familial traditions and community values, making it both a cultural and social phenomenon (Jensen and Limbu, 2016). This cultural affinity for soccer extends to other sports, as Latine individuals also display robust engagement with football, boxing, and other athletic pursuits, further highlighting their broad and multifaceted impact on U.S. sport industry (Alanis *et al.*, 2024; Clinkscales, 2024).

Participation trends in collegiate athletics provide additional evidence of the Latine population's growing influence. Over a 10-year span, NCAA data reveals a 70% increase in Hispanic and Latine student-athlete participation (NCAA, 2024). Notably, Latinas have experienced remarkable growth in representation across various sports, with wrestling, water polo, and softball showing the highest percentage increases at 18.9%, 13.1%, and 10.0%, respectively (NCAA, 2024). These trends – coupled with the rapid growth of the Latine population, their high rates of sport fans and increasing athletic participation – highlight the pivotal role that Latinas play in shaping the future of the U.S. sport industry. As this demographic continues to expand, it holds the potential to drive transformative changes within the sport sector, fostering greater inclusivity and cultural responsiveness.

Minimal representation and visibility of Latinas in U.S. Sport

While Latinas have made significant strides in U.S. sport engagement (NCAA, 2024; Statista, 2024), the representation and visibility of Latinas within the industry remain limited (Alanis *et al.*, 2022). Research has underscored that Latinas face pervasive biases across various dimensions of the U.S. sport ecosystem, including leadership roles, media coverage and athlete visibility (Darvin *et al.*, 2017; Lopez *et al.*, 2022; Toffoletti, 2017). For example, Stokes *et al.* (2016) found that Latina athletes are frequently objectified in media portrayals, which often emphasize their physical appearance over their athletic achievements. Such misrepresentations diminish their credibility and visibility as athletes, perpetuating harmful stereotypes that undermine their professional accomplishments (Cooky *et al.*, 2021).

Furthermore, Matusitz and Simi (2017) observed that U.S. Latina college athletes encounter significant barriers in attaining leadership roles within the sport sector. They described a “double tangle,” wherein Latina athletes face compounded challenges due to their

identities as both women and ethnic minorities (p. 155). This structural disadvantage is further highlighted by [Lopez \(2023\)](#), who found that Latina girls in sports are frequently “othered” and excluded by the dominant group. In the U.S. sport sector, this dominant group is often characterized by White, heterosexual, cisgender, non-disabled men ([Brassil and Lutz, 2020](#); [Cunningham, 2023](#)).

These systemic patterns of exclusion reinforce existing stereotypes and create substantial barriers for Latinas to fully engage within the U.S. sport industry. Therefore, addressing these disparities is essential to fostering inclusivity and equity within the sport ecosystem. By amplifying the voices of Latina sport fans, the U.S. sport industry can more effectively reflect the diversity of its fanbase and workforce.

Current study

This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship by critically analyzing the experiences of Latina sport fans within the U.S. sport industry. Employing intersectionality as its theoretical framework ([Crenshaw, 1991, 2022](#)), the study examines how intersecting identities – such as gender and race – shape the lived experiences of Latinas in a predominantly male-dominated and racially homogeneous industry ([Cunningham, 2023](#)). Intersectionality serves as a critical lens for understanding the compounded effects of systemic barriers and cultural stereotypes on Latina sport fans while providing insights into how these challenges intersect with their economic and social contributions to the U.S. sport industry ([Crenshaw, 2022](#); [Ratna and Samie, 2017](#)). The research is guided by three key questions to explore this multifaceted phenomenon:

- RQ1. How do intersecting identities of gender and race influence the experiences of Latina sport fans within the U.S. sport industry?
- RQ2. What strategies do Latina sport fans use to navigate the challenges they face in the U.S. sport industry?
- RQ3. How can U.S. sport organizations better support Latina sport fans and promote greater inclusivity?

Distinguishing sport fans and sport spectators

A sport fan is defined as an individual who maintains a lasting connection to sport, deriving emotional and personal significance from their engagement, even when not actively observing or participating in a specific event ([Norris et al., 2015](#); [Wann et al., 2001, 2008](#)). [Giulianotti \(2002\)](#) and [Dionísio et al. \(2008\)](#) underscore that fans represent a committed community, demonstrating enduring allegiance to specific sport teams over extended periods. Fans actively engage with their teams through cognitive, emotional and behavioral investments, such as developing strong loyalty and participating in tangible activities like attending games or purchasing merchandise ([Crawford, 2004](#); [Mullin et al., 2014](#); [Wann et al., 2001, 2008](#)).

In contrast, sport spectators are characterized by their more passive engagement ([Appelbaum et al., 2011](#)). They may watch a game or event, but lack the deeper emotional ties or sustained affiliations that define fan behavior. Sport spectatorship is often situational, driven by interest in specific events or outcomes rather than long-term commitment to a team or sport ([Trail et al., 2003](#)).

This study adopts these distinctions to analyze the unique dynamics of Latina sport fans and their roles in shaping the cultural and economic landscape of the U.S. sport industry. By examining Latina fans’ sustained engagement and identity formation within sports, this research provides a nuanced understanding of their influence and the systemic barriers they face within a predominantly male-dominated and racially homogeneous industry.

Method

Positionality statement

As a Latina athlete and sport fan, my identity has been profoundly influenced by my upbringing in a family of Mexican immigrants who shared a deep, intergenerational connection to sports. This cultural context cultivated an acute awareness of how sport served as a powerful social catalyst, fostering community cohesion and providing a framework for navigating the complexities of cultural assimilation and identity in the U.S. Additionally, my active engagement as a sport fan – particularly in soccer, football and boxing – has further enriched my understanding of the symbolic and cultural importance of sports within the U.S. landscape. These experiences, combined with my positionality as a Latina athlete and sport fan, have facilitated my ability to build rapport and trust with research participants (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2017), enabling me to access their “in-group” and authentically capture the nuanced realities of their lived experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2016).

Moreover, my research is firmly situated within a pragmatic constructivist paradigm, which underscores the contextual and interpretative nature of knowledge production through the application of methodologies tailored to the specificities of the research environment (Nørreklit *et al.*, 2016). This paradigm aligns with my scholarly commitment to centering the voices of Latina sport fans and amplifying their lived realities within the broader discourse of sport studies. By integrating my cultural heritage, academic framework, and dedication to inclusivity, I have crafted a research approach that prioritizes equity. My positionality informs not only the interpretative lens through which I engage with participants but also the broader methodological choices that underpin the study’s outcomes.

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological research design to investigate the lived experiences of Latina sport fans within the U.S. sport industry. A phenomenological approach is well-suited for this research, as it seeks to uncover, interpret and give voice to the unique lived realities of participants, focusing on the essence of their experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Donalek (2004) emphasizes that phenomenological research is especially valuable for exploring underexamined topics, offering a critical framework to examine the complexities of participants’ lived experiences. Therefore, by focusing on the experiences of Latina sport fans, this approach provides a nuanced understanding of how their intersecting identities inform their interactions within a predominantly male-dominated and racially homogeneous industry. Furthermore, it facilitates an in-depth exploration of how these fans navigate systemic underrepresentation, generating insights that can inform actionable strategies for fostering inclusivity and equity in the U.S. sport sector.

Participants

This study consisted of 10 participants, all of whom self-identified as Latinas. Seven participants were born and educated in the U.S., with parents who immigrated from Mexico. One participant was also born and educated in the U.S. but reported that her parents were originally from El Salvador. The remaining two participants were born outside the U.S., in Costa Rica and Brazil. The participant from Brazil completed her primary and secondary education (K-12) in her home country (Brazil) and is currently pursuing her undergraduate degree in the U.S. Similarly, the participant from Costa Rica completed her primary and secondary education (K-12) education, undergraduate, and master’s degrees in Costa Rica (her home country) but attended a U.S. institution during a portion of her doctoral studies. The mean age of the participants was 25.5 years ($SD = 5.30$), with ages ranging from 19 to 34 years.

To protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms were assigned in adherence to ethical research practices. Saunders *et al.* (2014) highlight that pseudonyms are a critical tool for safeguarding participant confidentiality. While Kaiser (2009) underscores the significance

of replacing respondents' names with culturally respectful and meaningful alternatives. Therefore, in this study, I selected pseudonyms that honored the participants' cultural heritage and identity. Additionally, given the geographic dispersion of participants, all interviews were conducted via Zoom. Before beginning each session, participants provided verbal consent for the interview to proceed and be recorded for transcription and subsequent analysis. To further ensure participant comfort, participants were encouraged in prior communications to select a location of their choice – such as their homes or academic institutions – where they could feel at ease from external pressures (Farhadi, 2017).

Procedure

Upon receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the recruitment phase commenced. Eight participants were contacted directly by the author through social media and email, while the remaining two were recruited via snowball sampling. As described by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2017), snowball sampling leverages participants' networks to identify and refer additional individuals who may be interested in participating in the study. Additionally, the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, which allowed for open-ended responses and enabled the interviewer to explore specific topics in greater depth through follow-up questions (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Each interview comprised 11 questions and lasted approximately 30 min (See Appendix).

Over the years, scholars have emphasized that understanding the duration of sport fans is significant as it provides insights into the longevity of engagement, which is a critical factor in analyzing fan behaviors and loyalty (Crawford, 2004; Mullin *et al.*, 2014; Gantz and Lewis, 2021). To explore this dimension, participants were asked to report the number of years they identified themselves as sport fans (see Table 1). Additionally, prior research has demonstrated that fans' affiliations with specific teams or leagues significantly influence their consumption behaviors, emotional investments and social interactions (Funk and James, 2001; Wann *et al.*, 2001, 2008). Therefore, participants were also asked to identify the sports, leagues, or associations they were most passionate about (see Table 1).

Finally, participants were asked to describe their family's socioeconomic background to provide insights into their social contexts. All participants identified as middle class (see Table 1). The middle-class classification in this study follows the Pew Research Center's definition, which considers households earning between two-thirds and double the median U.S. household income, estimated at \$65,000 (Frankenfield, 2022; US Census Bureau, 2021).

Analysis

The number of interviews was determined by data saturation, the point at which no new themes or insights emerged from the data (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Grounded in the participants' lived experiences, I employed a thematic analysis to allow themes to emerge organically from the data (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). Furthermore, an inductive approach was utilized to integrate these themes with the theoretical framework of intersectionality. This combined approach ensured that the findings were both deeply rooted in the participants' perspectives and aligned with the established theoretical framework, contributing to a comprehensive informed analysis (Patton, 2002).

Many scholars stress that creating a comfortable and trustworthy environment is fundamental in qualitative research, especially when engaging with diverse populations (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Corbin and Strauss, 2014). To facilitate this, participants were asked to indicate their preferred language for the interviews, ensuring they could express themselves in the language they felt most comfortable with. The interviewer, fluent in both English and Spanish, conducted the interviews accordingly. Of the ten participants, nine preferred to conduct the interview in English, while one participant (Katerina) preferred Spanish. In her case, the interview questions were translated, and the entire session was conducted in Spanish. This approach highlights the importance of linguistic inclusivity in fostering a supportive

Table 1. Participants' ethnicity, sports interests, fan duration and socioeconomic class

Pseudonym name	Ethnicity	Primary sports, leagues, and associations of interest	Number of years as a fan
Ari	Mexican American	College (NCAA) and Professional Football (NFL); Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA); National Basketball Association (NBA)	20 years
Belinda	Mexican American	National Football League (NFL); Major League Baseball (MLB); Major League Soccer (MLS)	12 years
Emilia	Mexican American	National Football League (NFL); NCAA Basketball, Soccer and Volleyball; Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA)	21 years
Elena	Salvadoran American	National Basketball Association (NBA); National Football League (NFL)	13 years
Katerina	Costa Rican	Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA); Liga de Fútbol de Primera División (Professional Soccer division in Costa Rica) Major League Baseball (MLB); National Basketball Association (NBA)	25 years
Lia	Mexican American	College (NCAA) and Professional Football (NFL); Major League Baseball (MLB)	10 years
Liliana	Brazilian	Brazilian football; National Football League (NFL); National Women's Soccer League (NWSL)	20 years
Lune	Mexican American	College (NCAA) and Professional Football (NFL); National Basketball Association (NBA)	12 years
Mireya	Mexican American	Liga MX (Mexican Soccer League); National Football League (NFL); National Women's Soccer League (NWSL)	17 years
Tatiana	Mexican American	National Football League (NFL); Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA)	24 years

Source(s): Created by author

research environment. As [Temple and Young \(2004\)](#) note, “language constitutes our sense of self,” making it a critical factor in qualitative studies (p. 174).

To further strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of this study, member checking was employed ([Lincoln and Guba, 1985](#)). This process involved sharing the emergent themes with participants to solicit their feedback and ensure that the analysis accurately reflected their perspectives ([Doyle, 2007](#)). [Curtin and Fossey \(2007\)](#) describe member checking as a critical method for determining whether “the data analysis is congruent” with participants’ lived experiences (p. 92). Furthermore, [Creswell \(2014\)](#) highlights that the effectiveness of member checking lies in presenting refined interpretive elements, such as themes and patterns extracted from the data, rather than unprocessed transcripts.

It is noteworthy to mention that during the data analysis phase, I maintained a self-reflexive stance, acknowledging my positionality as a Latina sport fan. As a member of the “in-group” population, she shared commonalities in identity, interests and cultural experiences with the participants ([Guba and Lincoln, 1989](#); [Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2017](#)). Recognizing the potential influence of this shared identity on the research process ([Savin-Baden and Major, 2013](#)), the investigator limited disclosure of her sport fan background to instances where participants directly inquired. Furthermore, a reflexivity journal was utilized throughout the study to critically examine the researcher’s potential biases and ensure that participants’ voices remained central to the data ([Hesse-Biber, 2014](#)). This reflective practice underscores the importance of trustworthiness in qualitative research ([Cassell et al., 2017](#); [Finlay, 2002](#)).

Findings

The purpose of this study was to critically examine the experiences of Latina sport fans within the U.S. sport industry. Findings revealed that Latina sport fans frequently feel

underrepresented and overlooked within the U.S. sport industry. Many participants attributed this exclusion to their identities as women, particularly of Latin descent, emphasizing that U.S. sport organizations rarely targeted them through marketing initiatives or inclusive outreach. Despite these challenges, participants exhibited remarkable resilience and maintained a strong passion for sports, fueled by deep familial connections to sport culture and a sense of solidarity with fellow Latina fans. When asked how U.S. sport organizations could better support them, participants overwhelmingly called for increased Latina representation in leadership roles, along with targeted marketing initiatives specifically designed to engage and Latinas.

Furthermore, the findings revealed six distinct codes, organized into three overarching themes: (1) *left out of the game*, (2) *powered by passion* and (3) *representation matters* (see Figure 1). Within two of these overarching themes, specific lower-order themes emerged, providing deeper insights into the lived experiences of the participants. The lower-order themes included (2a) *rooted in familia* and (2b) *sisterhood in the stands* under (2) *powered by passion*, as well as (3a) *educational and marketing initiatives for “mi gente”* under (3) *representation matters* (see Figure 1). Together, these themes highlight the complex challenges and strengths that characterize the experiences of Latina sport fans in the U.S. Each overarching theme and its associated lower-order themes are explored in detail in the following sections.

Left out of the game

Building upon the theoretical framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), the first research question (RQ1) explored how the intersecting identities of gender and race shape the experiences of Latina sport fans within the U.S. sport industry. Participants consistently illustrated their underrepresentation, which manifested through systemic and interpersonal barriers and was organized under the theme (1) *left out of the game*.

Crenshaw (1989, 1991, 2022) underscores that systems of power in the U.S. often exclude individuals at the intersection of multiple identities, such as gender and race. This notion is evident in the experiences shared by participants in this study. Belinda expressed, “as a Latina, there is maybe only one time of the year where U.S. sports represent me, and that’s during Hispanic Heritage Month . . . even then, I feel like I don’t exist as a fan.” Elena further remarked, “at games or on sport networks, I rarely see anything about Latinas—not in the ads, screens, or even among the cast members.” Similarly, Mireya stated, “the only time I somewhat feel seen is during big soccer tournaments where the sport teams try to display the Latin/Hispanic culture for more money.” These reflections accentuate how systemic inequities not only perpetuate the underrepresentation of Latina fans in the U.S. sport industry but also exploit their identities for capital gain.

Furthermore, Collins and Bilge (2020) highlight that systemic exclusions persist when institutions neglect to acknowledge and address the specific needs of marginalized groups at the intersection of multiple identities. This reality is echoed in Liliana’s reflection, “you see sport campaigns celebrating White men and women fans . . . they are lacking diversity . . . it makes us [Latinas] feel like we don’t belong.” Similarly, Lune noted, “U.S. sport organizations cater to their ‘biggest fan base,’ which is White men.” Such sentiments continuously

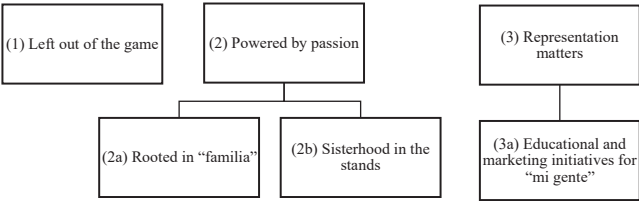


Figure 1. Main themes from the study. Source: Created by author

demonstrate the persistent underrepresentation Latinas face in the U.S. sport industry (Alanis et al., 2022).

Beyond institutional exclusion, participants described adverse experiences in community sport settings. Tatiana shared, “... because I am a Latina, oftentimes men get surprised at my level of knowledge when it comes to sports ... and they start to question me.” When asked to elaborate, Tatiana explained that she frequently had to validate her opinions or risk being dismissed. “If they asked me a question about sport and I accidentally got it wrong, I know they would stop listening to me and think I am not a “true” fan,” she added, emphasizing the double standards imposed on her compared to her male counterparts. Emilia also recounted her experiences of being overlooked during sport conversations, sharing, “when I try to share my thoughts on a play, they interrupt or steer the conversation elsewhere ... it’s like they don’t think I have anything valid to say.” This further reflects what Collins and Bilge (2020) describe as the systemic silencing of underrecognized voices, where dominant groups maintain control over discourse by dismissing contributions from disadvantaged groups.

Drawing on the theoretical framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991, 2022), this study contends that participants’ intersecting gender and racial identities significantly shaped their adverse experiences within the U.S. sport industry. Participants consistently reported being excluded and underrepresented across multiple dimensions, including marketing initiatives, fan engagement in the stands and personnel visibility within sport organizations. These findings are consistent with Vick and Cunningham’s (2018) research, which revealed that sport industry professionals often rated Latinas who strongly identified with their racial and cultural identities as a poor fit for roles within the field. Ultimately, these biases extend beyond hiring practices, reflecting a broader lack of recognition for Latinas and further perpetuating their invisibility within the industry.

Additionally, participants described feeling tokenized during limited cultural moments, such as Hispanic Heritage Month, while being excluded from sustained representation throughout the year. Lia reflected, “when I look back at NFL commercials during the season, we as Latinas aren’t normally represented in them ... but during the Super Bowl we are.” This selective engagement suggests that Latina fans are not perceived as integral to the U.S. sport industry’s target audience. Such patterns emphasize the urgent need for transformative initiatives to dismantle systemic barriers and cultivate a more inclusive environment for Latina fans.

Powered by passion. Research question two (RQ2) examined the strategies Latina sport fans use to navigate challenges within the U.S. sport industry. The findings identified their enduring passion for sports as a critical mechanism for resilience, encapsulated in the broader theme of (2) *Powered by Passion*. Additionally, two key lower-order themes emerged: (2a) *rooted in familia*, which highlights the pivotal role of familial connections in shaping and sustaining sport fandom and (2b) *sisterhood in the stands*, which emphasizes the development of supportive and empowering communities among Latina fans. These themes reveal how passion serves as both a personal and collective source of empowerment, enabling Latinas to overcome exclusion and maintain their engagement in the U.S sport industry.

Rooted in familia. One subtheme that emerged from the data was (2a) *rooted in familia*, underscoring the profound influence of family in shaping the sport fandom of Latina participants. Family connections not only introduced participants to the sport culture but also provided a foundation for sustained engagement and passion. Katerina shared, “my dad and uncles would play soccer games on weekends ... it became something we all looked forward to as a family ... it wasn’t just about the game, it was about being together.” Similarly, Ari reflected on how her sport fandom was deeply intertwined with her family’s collective enthusiasm- “I grew up watching soccer with my grandparents ... even now, it’s what brings us together during holidays or big games.” These accounts highlight how sports are woven into the fabric of family life for Latinas, serving as a communal activity that fosters belonging.

Furthermore, this theme aligns with the work of Elsey and Nadel (2019), who argue that sport served as a cultural bridge within Latine communities, preserving traditions and fostering unity. Similarly, Darvin et al. (2017) emphasize the centrality of family for Latinas, noting that

even as Latina and Hispanic NCAA Division I student-athletes faced biases, their persistence in sports was often supported by strong familial bonds. Additional research corroborates the integral role of family in Latine communities, highlighting its importance in various contexts, from academic achievement to college adjustments (Nuñez *et al.*, 2013; Ortega *et al.*, 2022; Pérez and Taylor, 2016). This study extends these findings by affirming that family serves as both a source of inspiration and an anchor for Latina sport fans, providing encouragement even when they encounter exclusion in broader U.S. sport spaces.

Overall, familial connections serve as a cornerstone for Latina sport fans. Elena reflected, “... even when I feel out of place at games or in conversations, I think about my mom and how she taught me to love the sport.” These familial ties not only nurture their passion for sports but also strengthen their resilience, underscoring the enduring role of family.

Sisterhood in the stands. The second subtheme that emerged was (2b) *sisterhood in the stands*, which accentuates the pivotal role of community among Latina sport fans. Participants underscored the transformative nature of building empowering connections with other Latina sport fans, both at live events and across social media platforms. These connections often transcended casual encounters, evolving into organized activities such as watch parties, thus fostering a deeper sense of inclusivity in the U.S. sport industry (Alanis *et al.*, 2024).

Lia articulated this phenomenon, stating, “... meeting other Latinas at games feels like finding your people ... we might start as strangers, but by the end of the game, we’re exchanging numbers.” Similarly, Lune recounted a meaningful experience: “I recall meeting another Latina sport fan at a college football game, and we became the best of friends ... to this day, we meet up and text game stats.” These narratives reveal how such connections extend beyond the momentary, developing into enduring relationships that provide emotional and social reinforcement (Collins, 2019).

Furthermore, scholarship highlights the significant role of social media platforms in shaping sport fan engagement and providing access to content across demographics (Billings *et al.*, 2017; Goyal, 2024; Hutchins and Rowe, 2013). This trend is particularly evident in the experiences of Latina fans, who utilize these platforms to build connections and amplify their representation within the U.S. sport culture. Tatiana shared, “I have a group of Latina friends on social media, and all we do is talk sports ... I really enjoy this.” Similarly, Elena reflected, “When I see a new Latina athlete, manager, or someone in a high-ranking position on a sports team, I follow their content, share their posts ... I support them for being in this male industry.” These reflections highlight how social media functions as a vital tool for fostering unity, transcending geographical barriers, and validating shared identities (Goyal, 2024).

Ultimately, by fostering sisterhood both in the stands and online, participants developed a profound sense of collective power that enhanced their engagement within the sport industry. Additionally, they actively challenged the dominant narratives in the U.S. sport industry that routinely exclude underrepresented groups (Evans *et al.*, 2020; Hindman and Walker, 2019; Hussain and Cunningham, 2022). This sisterhood highlights the indispensable role of community in redefining the U.S. sport culture to be more inclusive and representative.

Representation matters

Research question three (RQ3) investigated strategies U.S. sport organizations can implement to effectively support Latina sport fans. The findings underscored the critical importance of authentic representation, as participants consistently emphasized the need for meaningful inclusion and visibility across all facets of the sport industry. The overarching theme (3) *representation matters* encapsulated one distinct subtheme: (3a) *educating and marketing initiatives for “mi gente.”* This subtheme highlighted significant shortcomings in existing outreach efforts and underscored participants’ aspirations for marketing strategies that genuinely reflect their identities and contributions.

More educational and marketing initiatives for “mi gente.” When asked whether Latina sport fans have a significant economic impact on the U.S. sport industry, participant responses

were divided. Over half of the participant's believed Latinas have a substantial influence, while others expressed uncertainty. Lia, a participant who affirmed the economic impact, remarked, *"I believe Latinas represent a big portion of women sport fans . . . we attend a significant number of games and are loyal to our teams, compared to other women."* Belinda echoed this sentiment, adding, *"Latinas are a visible presence, and we bring passion to every game . . . if organizations tapped into this . . . they would see an economic benefit."* Ari also added, *"When there are certain things that I feel I connect with as a Latina (Spanish speaking commentators, Spanish music), I tend to show up for games physically and cheer on my teams more passionately."* These responses highlight a clear opportunity for U.S. sport organizations to recognize and strategically engage Latina fans, who not only contribute economically but also bring a unique cultural vibrancy to the sport industry.

Conversely, some participants expressed ambivalence about the significance of Latina fans' economic impact, instead emphasizing the broader influence of Latines as a whole. Emilia observed, *"I believe collectively Latinos and Latinas are known to have bigger and stronger family ties . . . this means more money for ticket sales and sports memorabilia."* However, participants also noted that for Latinas to make an even greater impact, they must feel a stronger sense of belonging within the U.S. sport industry. Tatiana reflected, *"Latina representation in sport marketing is improving, but without consistency, it's hard to feel like we belong."* These perspectives align with the analyses of [Cunningham \(2023\)](#) and [Singer \(2008\)](#), who highlight that U.S. sport organizations fail to meaningfully engage and reflect the diversity of their audiences.

Furthermore, participants emphasized the critical role of education as a strategy to bridge the gap in diverse representation among U.S. sport fans. Katerina underscored its importance, stating, *" . . . education should be a top priority . . . once U.S sport fans start to understand the diversity in sports, we [Latinas] will be seen."* Scholars such as [Lawrence and Davis \(2019\)](#) and [Toffoletti \(2017\)](#) maintained that educating both U.S. sport fans and organizations about the diverse identities and experiences within sports is essential to dismantling the misconception of fans as a monolithic group. Lune echoed this sentiment, stating, *"Sport influences society . . . [therefore] sport organizations must educate the benefits of diversity."* These perspectives highlight the transformative power of education in raising awareness, advancing inclusivity, and redefining the cultural landscape of U.S. sport.

Beyond education, participants emphasized the critical need to enhance the visibility and representation of Latinas through targeted marketing efforts. Mireya emphasized the power of visibility, stating, *"It would be nice to have more players, front staff, and individuals in leadership positions who look and sound like me. There's something powerful about a little girl seeing a player on the field or a manager on TV that sparks hope."* This call for representation underscores the imperative for structural reforms within the U.S. sport industry to ensure that Latinas are recognized not merely as fans but as integral contributors across all organizational levels.

Discussion and implications

This study contributes to the broader discourse on the intersectionality of Latines by critically examining the lived experiences of Latina sport fans in the U.S. ([Alemán, 2018](#); [Cuellar and Salinas, 2022](#); [Núñez, 2014](#)). Findings illuminate the multifaceted challenges faced by Latina sport fans, including minimal visibility within the sport sector, the absence of tailored marketing efforts, and pervasive feelings of isolation in communal sport settings. These findings align with prior research demonstrating that Latinas are routinely excluded from sport spaces, often made to feel unwelcome ([Lopez, 2023](#)), and objectified through reductive media portrayals ([Stokes et al., 2016](#)). These entrenched systemic inequities perpetuate the underrepresentation of Latinas within the sport context, underscoring the critical need for comprehensive and transformative interventions to promote equity and inclusion in the U.S. sport industry ([Alanis et al., 2022](#)).

Despite these challenges, participants exhibited extraordinary resilience, deriving strength from deeply rooted familial connections and supportive relationships with other Latina sport fans. This aligns with the findings of [Gloria and Castellanos \(2012\)](#), who observed that first-generation Latina college students benefit significantly from familial involvement in their academic endeavors, fostering a profound sense of belonging and persistence. Similarly, [Grafnetterova and Banda \(2021\)](#) identified that first-generation Latinx student-athletes heavily depend on familial support to navigate the complexities of their academic and athletic pursuits successfully. These findings underscore the indispensable role of familial and communal networks in sustaining Latina engagement within the U.S. sport context, serving as a vital foundation for perseverance.

Moreover, this study further reinforces the pressing necessity for inclusive strategies within the US sport industry. Sport organizations need to prioritize authentic representation and allocate resources toward community-building initiatives designed to cultivate an environment where Latina sport fans feel both valued and visible. For instance, marketing strategies must transcend tokenistic efforts and instead embody the richness of Latina fans. As [Cunningham \(2023\)](#) underscores, effective diversity and inclusion practices yield multifaceted benefits, including heightened community engagement and sustained organizational success. By addressing these systemic inequities, sport organizations can not only enhance their relevance in a changing demographic landscape but also contribute to the creation of a more inclusive and equitable sport culture that celebrates the contributions of Latina fans.

Future directions

This study opens several avenues for future research to expand the understanding of Latina sport fans and their lived experiences. First, while this study offers in-depth insights, it was conducted within a single setting, limiting its scope. Future longitudinal research could explore how Latina sport fans evolve over time, particularly in response to sociocultural changes and shifts within the sport industry. Additionally, examining the role of digital and social media in shaping Latina sport fans presents a promising direction. Given the increasing significance of online communities in sport engagement, understanding how Latinas navigate and contribute to these spaces could offer valuable insights for scholars and industry practitioners alike ([Hutchins and Rowe, 2013](#); [Sanderson, 2018](#)).

Limitations

While this study offers significant practical and theoretical implications, it is not without limitations. First, the researcher who collected and analyzed the data shared an identity with the participants as a Latina sport fan. This mutual identity, while fostering rapport and trust, may have introduced subjective bias ([Creswell and Poth, 2016](#)). Efforts to mitigate this influence included reflexive practices such as journaling and limiting personal disclosures during the research process ([Finlay, 2002](#)). Additionally, member-checking was employed to enhance the credibility of the findings, ensuring that interpretations accurately reflected participants' perspectives ([Guba and Lincoln, 1994](#)).

Secondly, the study included participants from four cultural backgrounds – Brazil, Costa Rica, El Salvador and Mexico – limiting the diversity of perspectives represented. This focus may overlook the unique experiences of Latina sport fans from other regions or cultural contexts. Future research should expand its scope to include a broader range of Latin backgrounds, ensuring a more holistic understanding of Latina sport fans.

Conclusion

This study highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by Latina sport fans within the U.S. sport industry, underscoring the urgent need for transformative action. Through the lens of

Crenshaw's (1991, 2022) intersectionality framework, the findings illustrate how the intersecting identities of race and gender shaped Latina fans' experiences of exclusion in the U.S. sport industry. Despite these adversities, participants exhibited remarkable resilience, drawing strength from familial connections and communal ties with other Latina sport fans. These findings contribute to the growing discourse on diversity and inclusion in sports (Cunningham, 2023), reinforcing the necessity of addressing structural inequities (Singer et al., 2010).

Participants expressed optimism for the future, envisioning progress driven by educational initiatives and targeted marketing efforts designed to amplify the visibility of Latinas and other underrepresented groups. As the U.S. demographic landscape continues to evolve (Pew Research Center, 2024), these shifts are expected to significantly reshape the sport industry, presenting both challenges and opportunities for sport organizations (Clinkscale, 2024; Pallavibhoj, 2024). To remain relevant and effectively engage audiences, sport organizations must implement inclusive strategies that celebrate the diversity of their fans. Such efforts are essential for fostering a more equitable and inclusive U.S. sport industry while ensuring sustainable growth and meaningful community impact.

Appendix

Interview questions

- (1) Do you consider yourself a U.S. sport fan? If so, which sport are you most passionate about?
- (2) How long have you been a sport fan? Can you share the approximate number of years?
- (3) Based on your experience, do you feel that the U.S. sport industry recognizes and engages with Latina fans? Why or why not?
- (4) If applicable, can you share an experience where you felt excluded or underrepresented as a Latina sport fan in the U.S.? What factors contributed to this feeling?
- (5) Do you believe your racial identity as a Latina influences your passion for sport? Did your family, such as parents or siblings, play sports, and did that influence you?
- (6) Do you think Latina sport fans have a significant economic impact on the U.S. sport industry? If so, in what ways do you see this influence?
- (7) In your experience, are U.S. sport organizations doing enough to represent Latina fans effectively?
- (8) How does your gender shape your experiences within U.S. sport fan communities?
- (9) Can you recall any specific marketing strategies or campaigns that have successfully targeted Latina fans? How effective were they in connecting with you personally?
- (10) What role do you think Latina fans play in shaping the broader sport culture in the U.S.?
- (11) What changes would you like to see in how sport organizations interact with and support Latina fans in the future?

Source(s): Created by author

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