

# Paying the Way: The Ticket to Gender Equality in Sports

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Past research shows that consumers tend to equate higher prices with higher value. However, it remains unclear whether consumers of athletic events follow the predictions of equity theory when attributing value to particular teams. We conducted 3 studies to investigate the existence and consequences of a disparity between men's and women's college basketball ticket prices. In Study 1, a survey of 303 NCAA Division I programs demonstrated that the gender of a basketball team is a primary indicator of the price of a ticket, such that women's tickets are significantly less expensive than men's tickets nationwide, even after controlling for a number of contextual factors (e.g., win-loss records, size of the schools). Consistent with equity theory, Studies 2 and 3 revealed that such a price disparity can result in lower evaluation of women's teams than men's. These findings indicate a need to consider the costs and benefits of maintaining differences in ticket prices within a context of gender inequity.

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**KEY WORDS:** female athletes; gender and sports; equity theory.

Although both Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments and the advent of professional women's sporting leagues have led to dramatic increases in opportunities for women in sports at high school, collegiate, and professional levels, significant discrepancies still exist between men's and women's sport. For example, inequity persists in the quality and quantity of media coverage, access, promotion, and institutional support. Moreover, no legislation provides direction to institutions regarding the price charged for public admittance to men's and women's athletic events. Thus, the price of attendance may be discrepant depending on the gender of the team.

The tenets of equity theory suggest that discrepancies in financial indicators lead to differences in perceptions of value (e.g., Adams, 1965). In other words, if the price of attendance at men's and women's athletic events differs, so might the value associated with each team. To investigate this possibility, we examined extant norms in the price of tickets to athletic events, and then considered the potential ramifications of gender differences in pricing.

## Equity Theory and Stereotyping

Equity, a standard by which resources are distributed according to relative contributions, has been evaluated from a number of perspectives (e.g., Adams, 1963, 1965; Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973, 1976; Walster & Walster, 1975) including sociology, economics, and psychology. For example, Adams (1965) argued that when inequity is perceived to exist, an individual experiences psychological stress, and is, therefore, motivated to correct the inequity in order to eliminate uncomfortable feelings. Thus, as opposed to seeking equity in and of itself, people seek equity simply to avoid, or at

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least to reduce, the dissonance that accompanies inequity. To address inequity, Adams (1965) argued that an individual may choose from a variety of strategies, including: (1) an alteration of one's own inputs and/or outcomes, (2) a modification of another's inputs and/or outcomes, (3) a cognitive distortion of the inputs or outcomes to oneself and/or others, and (4) a utilization of a different situation for comparison. Keeping their own self-interest in mind, individuals will choose that option that is perceived to be least costly in terms of self-esteem.

In the field of economics, however, internal forces, such as dissonance, are not typically considered. Instead, market forces and equilibrium dominate the discussion. When consumers are faced with products that are equivalent in function, but different in price, a choice between the two must be made. The price a consumer is willing to pay will depend upon the utility that is expected from consuming the product (Pindyck & Rubinfeld, 1998). Microeconomics theory assumes that the utility of the product increases with an increased consumption of goods, and that consumers simply wish to maximize their utility given their limited budget. Accordingly, an individual will only purchase a product with a higher price if it provides that individual with something that the lower priced alternative does not. If the lower priced alternative is deemed equal or better in utility, then the consumer will buy it over the higher priced alternative. As such, the marketer's job is to make consumers believe that the higher priced alternative is somehow better than the lower priced alternative. For example, consumers may be more inclined to buy a name brand laundry detergent (e.g., Tide<sup>®</sup>, All<sup>®</sup>) over the generic brand because they believe that the increased price translates into increased cleaning power. From a broader perspective, stereotypes and heuristics associated with high prices also play a large role in the consumer's evaluation of the value of a product. When unsure of the quality of a product, high price becomes an indicator of quality, and consumers operate according to an "expensive = good" heuristic. Braun and Wicklund (1989) referred to this phenomenon as the "snob effect." This effect refutes traditional economic principles of the relationship between price and demand (i.e., as price decreases, there is an increase in sales), and instead replaces it with a relationship between price and value. That is, when the price of a product increases, there is also an increase in value, and consequently an increase in sales. According to this perspective, consumers have learned to take different prices at face value and to

make attributions of higher value to higher priced items. To reduce the dissonance that accompanies the choice of one product over another, consumers must rationalize the difference in utility, and usually the higher-priced alternative is viewed as being *better* in some regard.

### Equity and Sports

There are many examples of the application of equity theory in athletics from the perspective of athletes (e.g., Lord & Hohenfeld, 1979; Wann & Fortner, 1997). However, very few studies have addressed the perceived value of athletic teams from the perspective of the consumer. The principles of economics and consumer valuation strategies can be applied to the attitudes held by potential customers of athletic events. Though not yet addressed by psychological research, equity theory may apply to the price that sports fans are required to pay. Within the same game, ticket prices, which may vary as much as \$20, reflect a difference in the seat location and the relative visibility from that location. Seats closer to the action are more expensive than those farther away; fans believe that closeness brings more excitement, and thus are willing to support the difference in price. However, the difference in price to see men's (relative to women's) teams play the same sport may not be so easily justified. If ticket offices charge lower fees for entry into women's games than for entry into men's games, they may be perpetuating differences in the perceived value associated with each team. Thus, the public's perceptions of men's and women's sports may depend in part on the price of tickets. Two critical questions emerge from the application of equity theory to gender issues in college sports. First, is there a gender disparity in the price of tickets? Second, do games that cost less have less perceived value?

To respond to these questions, we investigated the existence and potential implications of gender differences in the price of sports tickets. In particular, we considered basketball, the most popular sport for women ("Participation Numbers," 1995; National Federation of State High School Associations, 1991) that has a comparable men's counterpart in college athletics. First, we surveyed National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, 1992) Division I basketball programs to ascertain the degree of discrepancy between men's and women's ticket prices. Because no previous research has documented whether

such an inequity exists, confirmation of this discrepancy would justify subsequent studies to determine whether this disparity negatively affects the valuation of women's sports, as equity theory predicts (Adams, 1963, 1965). Second, we examined students' evaluations of written descriptions of women's teams based on the absolute price of their tickets as well as the price of their tickets relative to men's. Third, we assessed the potential generalizability of absolute and relative evaluations of women's teams to actual game situations. On the basis of anecdotal evidence of gender discrepancies, we hypothesized that a disparity would exist in ticket prices between men's and women's basketball games. We further predicted that this inequity would engender an unequal valuation of the two teams.

## STUDY 1

### Method

#### *Participants*

The ticket offices of the 308 universities supporting a NCAA Division I Collegiate Basketball team voluntarily participated in this study.

#### *Procedure*

A directory of phone numbers and addresses of the 308 Division I basketball teams' athletic ticket offices was created from a listing published by the NCAA and the National Directory of College Athletics (National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics, 1998). One of 10 undergraduate research assistants called the ticket office of each school. The callers introduced themselves as researchers and proceeded to ask the ticket manager specified questions regarding the regular season ticket prices for admittance to both the men's and women's basketball games between 1994 and 1997. Only adult admissions for single games were recorded; discounts for children or senior citizens were excluded. Similarly, special rates for families, groups, affiliates of the school, or multiple-game packages were not recorded.

If a school utilized a general admission, one-price ticket in any particular year, then this price served as the average price that year for that team. However, if there was a difference in price depending on the location of a seat, then the price to sit

in each section each year was recorded for both the men's and women's teams. For example, if a men's team charged four different prices that corresponded to four different seating sections (e.g., court side, upper side, balcony, mezzanine), then a total of 16 prices would be recorded: the price for each of these four sections during each of the four seasons (1994–1995, 1995–1996, 1996–1997, and 1997–1998). After they provided the relevant prices, the ticket managers were thanked for their time and assistance. These calls continued over a period of 6 months until all 308 schools had been contacted and the relevant data had been recorded. The average ticket price across seating levels was calculated for both men's and women's teams independently for each year. The overall average price for the 4 years was also computed. Callers also recorded the attendance rates and win/loss records of each team.

### Results

As hypothesized, the data indicated that fans pay significantly more to see men ( $M = 9.07$  dollars,  $SD = 3.95$ ) than they do to see women ( $M = 4.76$  dollars,  $SD = 1.59$ ) play basketball,  $t = 16.81$ ,  $p < .01$ . A 2 (gender of team)  $\times$  4 (year) repeated measures ANOVA further suggested that this disparity changed over the 4-year time period between 1994 and 1997. A significant main effect for year,  $F(3, 550) = 46.66$ ,  $p < .01$ , suggested that the price of tickets increased over time. This main effect was qualified by a significant year  $\times$  gender interaction,  $F(3, 548) = 6.43$ ,  $p < .01$ , which revealed that the price of men's tickets rose faster between 1994 ( $M = 8.76$  dollars,  $SE = .18$ ) and 1997 ( $M = 9.45$  dollars,  $SE = .19$ ) than did the price of women's tickets during that same 4 year block (1994:  $M = 4.63$  dollars,  $SE = .19$ ; 1997:  $M = 4.96$  dollars,  $SE = .20$ ; see Fig. 1).

Hierarchical regression analysis was used to predict the price of tickets from the gender of the team, after controlling for contextual variables that could potentially affect ticket prices (see Becker & Suls, 1983; Pan, Gabert, McGaugh, & Branvold, 1997). In the first step of the regression equation, we controlled for these contextual variables, including the gender composition of the undergraduate population, whether or not there was a professional basketball team in the city, the win–loss average of the team, the size of the venue, the city's per capita income, the average attendance at games, and the

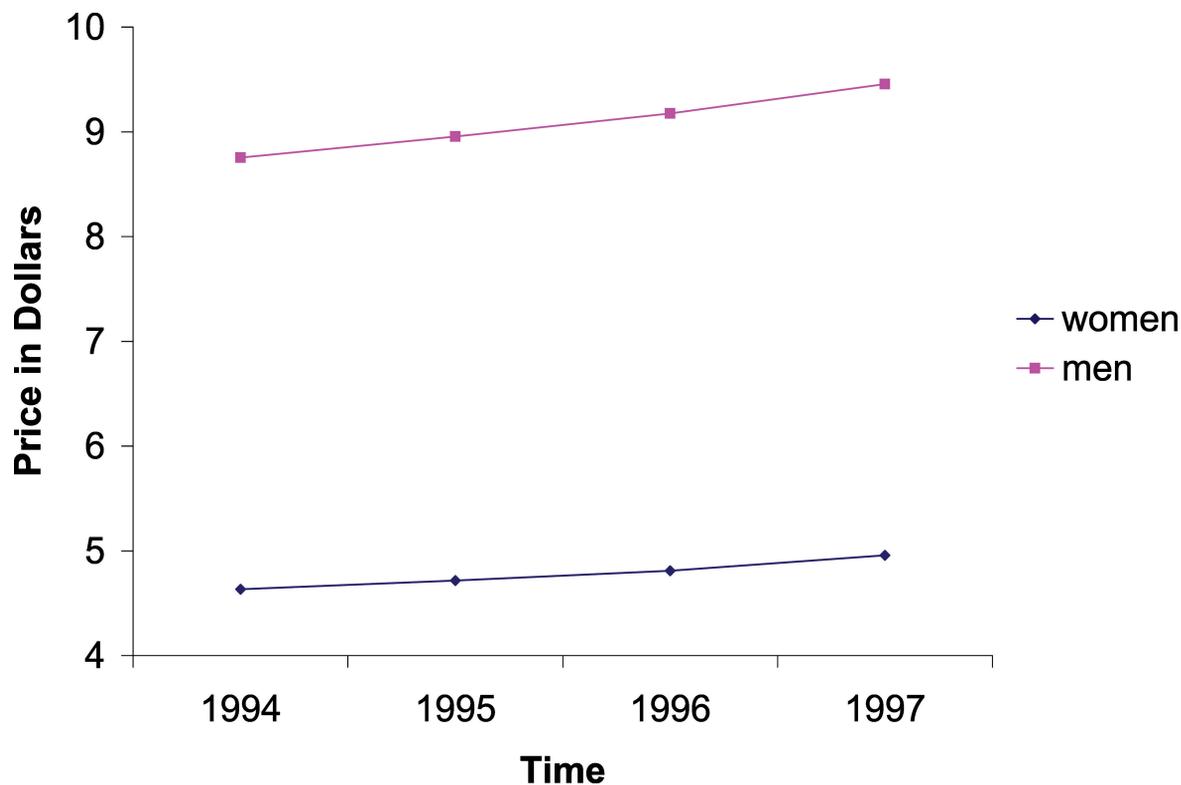


Fig. 1. Team gender differences in the price of college basketball tickets over time.

number of students in the school,  $R^2 = .66$ ,  $p < .01$ . Attendance was positively related to the price of tickets,  $\beta = .84$ ,  $p < .01$ , as was the per capita income of the city,  $\beta = .12$ ,  $p < .01$ . When a professional basketball team was located in the school's city, tickets cost significantly less,  $\beta = -.10$ ,  $p < .01$ . Finally, as the size of the venue increased, the price of tickets decreased,  $\beta = -.07$ ,  $p < .05$ . As hypothesized, when we entered gender of the team in the second step of the regression equation, significant variance in ticket price was explained over and above these contextual variables,  $\Delta R^2 = .05$ ,  $p < .01$ .

## Discussion

The results of this study confirmed that a disparity in the ticket prices exists between men's and women's Division I basketball teams. That is, the price of a ticket to a men's basketball game costs more than the price of a ticket to a women's game. The data further indicate that this discrepancy has grown over time. Moreover, even when we accounted for other potential explanations for the dis-

crepancy, gender of the team is a significant predictor of ticket price. Given the persistent disparity in the price of tickets, it is essential to consider the potential implications of differential pricing structures. As the absolute price of a ticket increases, so might the value attributed to that team. Thus, in Study 2 we examined the consequences of absolute differences in ticket price on the evaluation of women's basketball teams. Because individuals who have a strong understanding of basketball may respond differently to price indicators than do those who do not have a strong knowledge base, we also considered the potential effects that knowledge of basketball might have on the evaluations.

## STUDY 2

### Method

#### *Participants*

One of three researchers approached students on a small, private college campus in the southern

United States. Twenty-six men and 29 women who ranged in age from 18 to 28 years ( $M = 20.70$ ,  $SD = 2.34$ ) voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. The ethnic composition of this college is approximately 65% Caucasian, 15% Asian, 10% Hispanic, and 8% African American.

### Design

As part of a one-way between-subjects design, participants received information that a women's basketball ticket cost \$1, \$12, or \$25. Participants were randomly assigned in a double-blind procedure to the ticket price conditions.

### Materials

Participants received a four-page questionnaire titled "The Influence of Written Sports Articles." First, participants read a one-page article about a fictitious women's basketball team. The article described the last game played by the team and gave information concerning the next game (e.g., time, date). The only information that varied across conditions was the price of a ticket to attend the team's games. The price appropriate to each condition was listed after the article title (e.g., "Do you have \$25 and a few hours to spend this Thursday night?").

Following the article, participants reported their evaluation of the team by rating (1) how successful the team would be, (2) how talented the players on the team were, (3) how loyal the team's fans would be, (4) how exciting a game played by the team would be, (5) how much they would enjoy seeing a game, and (6) the team's value to the school's athletic program. These items were designed to assess a wide variety of relevant attitudes that could be formed about a sports team. Participants indicated their responses using a 7-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Extremely*). The internal consistency reliability for these six items, which comprise a Total Positivity index, was .76.

As an additional behavioral dependent measure, participants also reported the dollar amount that they would be willing to pay to watch the target team play. To control for differences in background knowledge of basketball, participants reported their knowledge of basketball on a 7-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (*Not at all good*) to 7 (*Extremely good*).

Finally, participants completed a manipulation check in which they were asked to circle the price of the team's ticket. Three men and two women failed the manipulation check and were excluded from further analyses. Thus, the results are based on the responses of 50 participants.

### Procedure

One of three female researchers approached participants and asked them to complete a survey on recall of sports in printed media. The participants studied the article, rated the targeted team, provided their demographic and personal information, and returned the completed packet to the researcher who remained in the general vicinity distributing more surveys. This procedure lasted approximately 10 min, after which time the researcher thanked the participant.

### Results

To test the hypothesis that absolute differences in the price of tickets to a women's basketball game would lead to a corresponding difference in the value attributed to the team, we computed independent one-way ANCOVAs on the Total Positivity index and on the price that participants would be willing to pay to attend the team's games. In both cases, the price of a ticket was the independent variable; the degree to which participants were knowledgeable about basketball was controlled for as a covariate.

In the case of the Total Positivity index, knowledge of basketball was not a significant covariate,  $F(1, 50) = 1.73$ ,  $p = .20$ . Furthermore, although the direction of change in the positivity composite followed the hypothesis, such that those participants who evaluated the team with the highest ticket price also rated the team more positively ( $M = 4.62$ ,  $SE = .21$ ) than did those who evaluated the team with the lowest ticket price ( $M = 4.04$ ,  $SE = .20$ ), the effect for the price of the ticket was not significant,  $F(2, 50) = 2.50$ ,  $p = .11$ .

In the case of the price participants were willing to pay, knowledge of basketball was not a significant covariate,  $F(1, 49) = 1.40$ ,  $p = .24$ . However, there was a significant main effect for ticket price,  $F(2, 49) = 11.76$ ,  $p < .01$ , such that those participants who evaluated the team with the highest ticket price were willing to pay more ( $M = 6.83$ ,  $SE = .67$ ).

than were those who rated the team with the lowest ticket price ( $M = 2.33$ ,  $SE = .65$ ).

## Discussion

Contrary to our expectations, the results of Study 2 showed that the manipulation of women's ticket prices did not result in significantly different ratings of the team. More specifically, we predicted that as the price of a ticket to a woman's game increased, the positivity of an evaluation of the team would also increase. Although the magnitude of the means across conditions tended to follow this prediction, the results were not significant. Further, because the covariate was not significant, the results also imply that the null effects of discrepancy in price are consistent across knowledge levels. The price that participants were willing to pay to see the team play did follow our predictions, but this may be due to the use of anchoring and adjusting heuristics (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974) rather than to attribution of value. In other words, participants may have used the price that was provided as an anchor from which their responses derived.

Overall, the results of this preliminary study cannot confirm that women's teams are valued relative to the price of attendance. However, the strength of any conclusions is limited by a small sample. We were unable to consider the participants' gender as a potential moderator of the effects of ticket price on the evaluation of the target team. By including more participants, Study 3 served as a replication of these preliminary results, and allowed for consideration of participant gender. Another potential limitation of Study 2 is its uncertain external validity. Whereas participants in Study 2 passively read about a team, in Study 3 we considered the potential generalizability of the results to a situation of greater external validity by including an audio presentation of an actual basketball game.

Finally, and most importantly, Study 2 is limited by its design. Participants only read information regarding the price of a ticket to a woman's game, but not comparative information about the price of a ticket to a men's game. In many instances, individuals will be cognizant not only of the price of admission to a women's game but also of the price of admission to a men's game. Whereas we found that there were no significant absolute differences in value attributed to athletic teams based on the price of a ticket, there may well be differences in value

that vary dependent on relative information. Thus, in Study 3 we considered the evaluation of women's teams as the price of attendance to a women's game differed relative to the corresponding men's team prices. After reviewing the prices of both men's and women's teams, participants in Study 3 listened to and rated an actual game. In this way we replicated and extended the results of Study 2.

## STUDY 3

### Method

#### *Participants*

A total of 82 participants (43 women, 39 men), 70% of whom were European American, 11% Asian, 10% Hispanic, and 6% African American, from a large, public university in the Southwest took part in this study. Of the 82 participants, six women and seven men responded incorrectly to a manipulation check. Thus, the analyses are based on the responses of 69 participants.

#### *Design*

As part of a one-way between-subjects design, we manipulated the ticket prices so that: (a) both teams' prices were equal (\$9 each), (b) the men's game was more expensive (\$14) than the women's game (\$4), or (c) the women's game was more expensive (\$14) than the men's game (\$4). These prices were derived from the averages of the NCAA ticket prices for men's and women's teams found in Study 1. Participants were randomly assigned to one of these conditions using a randomization Javascript<sup>®</sup> code. To ensure that the prices would be salient to participants, the ticket prices were displayed as animated (flashing) graphics.

#### *Procedure*

Participants logged onto a website, read a statement of informed consent, and clicked "I Consent" to begin the study. On the following webpage, participants were led to believe that they were to provide their initial impression of a student basketball announcer who had auditioned for a sports announcing job. After reading this cover story, participants

were instructed to try to remember all the information presented. Next, they viewed a fictitious basketball team's (the Smithville Bearcats) homepage that had both the men's and women's teams season information—including their win/loss records, the dates of the next games, and ticket prices for the games.

### Materials

After reviewing this background information, participants listened to a 3-min audio clip from the first half of a recent Lady Bearcats basketball game. All participants heard the same audio clip. The transcript for the game was taken from the last few minutes of an actual Division I 2002 playoffs game. The game was transcribed and re-recorded using a volunteer male announcer, because most announcers are men. All gender identifying information was deleted from the game transcript (e.g., "he shoots") and replaced with the player's last name (e.g., "Moore shoots"). In addition, all authentic names of the players were changed.

After listening to the audio clip, participants answered a series of questions, and responded on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*Not at All*) to 7 (*Extremely*). The participants rated the team using the six questions from Study 2. The average responses comprised a Total Positivity index ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

Participants also made relative evaluations of the men's and women's teams by answering the following questions: (1) "How do you think the Bearcats compare to the Lady Bearcats, overall?," (2) "How do you think the Bearcats compare to the Lady Bearcats in ability?," and (3) "How do you think the Bearcats compare to the Lady Bearcats in filling the stadium with fans?" These three items comprised a Relative Positivity index on which higher averages indicated the relative superiority of the men's team ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

As a manipulation check, participants were asked to recall the ticket price and gender of the featured team. After they completed the questionnaire, the participants were thanked and debriefed online.

### Results

A 3 (price of women's ticket relative to men's: lower, equal, higher)  $\times$  2 (gender of participant: man, woman) between-subjects ANOVA was utilized for

each of the two dependent variables, Relative Positivity and Total Positivity. For the former construct, the results indicated a main effect for relative ticket price,  $F(2, 69) = 4.09, p < .05$ , such that the women's teams were rated worst compared to the men's teams when their ticket prices were lower than men's ( $M = 2.47, SE = .21$ ), and best compared to men's teams when their ticket prices were higher than the men's ( $M = 3.26, SE = .19$ ). Tukey tests indicated that the difference between these conditions was significant ( $p < .05$ ), but that neither the high nor low conditions differed significantly from the condition in which ticket prices were equal for men and women ( $M = 2.90, SE = .20$ ). There were no other significant effects for the Relative Positivity dependent variable, and there were no significant effects for the Total Positivity composite.

### Discussion

The results of Study 3 indicated that when individuals are given objective evidence of a women's team's ability (i.e., audio presentation of a game), their *absolute* ratings of the team are not influenced by the *relative* price of tickets compared to men's. However, *relative* differences in the price of tickets did influence the *relative* ratings of the women's team compared to the men's team. In other words, when women's tickets cost less than men's tickets, the women's team was rated lower than the men's team. When the cost of women's tickets was greater than the cost of men's tickets, the women's and men's teams were considered equivalent in ability and fan support. As such, the results provide evidence of the consequences of the disparity in ticket price that was found in Study 1. These data also clarify the generalizability of the results of Study 2 by considering relative prices in a more externally valid experiment.

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

Within the last few decades, a great deal of reform in athletics has been achieved, including the creation of more women's teams and increased funding, which has helped to equalize the opportunity for the involvement of women in sports (Naughton & Srisavasdi, 1996). Despite this reform, the results of the current research suggest that there is a persistent and even increasing disparity in the price of men's and women's basketball tickets. Furthermore,

the results suggest that the value associated with women's sports may be denigrated due to this disparity.

Specifically, the results of Study 1 demonstrate that there is a growing disparity in the price of tickets to men's and women's basketball games such that men's tickets cost more than women's tickets. Consistent with equity theory, the results of Study 3 show that the relative prices of tickets may create an internal reference price within consumers that is used to compare or judge the value of a sporting event ticket. Analyses showed that relative differences in the price of tickets translated into relative differences in the evaluation of teams. When women's tickets cost more than men's, the women's team was rated more positively in relation to the men's team than when women's tickets cost less than men's. In other words, when participants saw that it cost more to watch the women's games than the men's, they perceived the women's teams as equivalent in value to the men's teams.

The literature provides two possible explanations for the differential price and valuation of men's and women's athletics teams. First, system-justification theory poses that people justify "existing social arrangements" even if the system denigrates self and group interests (Jost & Banaji, 1994, p. 2). Moreover, people tend to develop a "false consciousness," or hold beliefs in order to maintain the status quo, even if it involves maintaining a disadvantaged position of the self or of the group. Thus, systems are justified simply because they exist. With respect to the ticket price disparity, it can be argued that the difference in the men's and women's team prices justifies the existing social structures. People, in general, may be more interested in men's athletics, and, therefore, women's athletics should not cost as much. Furthermore, it can also be argued that the lower price of women's tickets encourages more people to get involved with and view women's sports. Unfortunately, this is a troubling mechanism by which social inequity may persist.

A second possible explanation comes from theories of hostile sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996) and marginalization (Kane & Stangl, 1991), which together suggest that the representation of women in traditionally masculine domains engenders hostile and negative reactions, which lead to women's marginalization from that domain. Indeed, this pattern of negativity toward women in male-dominated occupations is found across many fields, including coaching and sport administration (Kane & Stangl,

1991), academics (Valian, 1998), and police forces (Warner & Steel, 1989). Thus, the marginalization of female athletes through disparity in ticket prices can result in a devaluation of women's skills, abilities, and athleticism, and, ultimately, to the continued underrepresentation of women in sport.

Because the current studies focused on collegiate basketball, which is commonly perceived as a gender-neutral sport, caution must be taken in generalizing the results to sports that are traditionally masculine (e.g., hockey) or traditionally feminine (e.g., gymnastics). As such, future researchers should determine whether the ticket pricing discrepancy is stronger within typically "masculine" sports and, conversely, whether this inequity is attenuated or even reversed within sports typically perceived as "feminine." An additional limitation of our studies is that we used only cognitive and affective measures without including behavioral measures. Therefore, it is not known whether relative differences in ticket prices would translate into behavior changes, such as actual decisions to purchase individual or season tickets. Future research is needed to test this possibility.

Despite these limitations the current studies offer several practical implications for administrators of collegiate sporting programs. For example, extant literature posits that the adjustment of internal reference prices will occur after the repeated presentation of the new price, which suggests that, in response to repeated exposure to lower ticket prices for women's games, consumers will establish an internal reference for women's games as lower in value. In order to change the internal reference prices that are associated with women's sports teams, our results imply that the cost of tickets to women's games relative to men's should be increased. An increase in relative price and, in turn, an increase in relative value could attract more fans and foster more support for the teams. However, we must also caution that the results of the current studies do not adequately address the potential effects of raising the price of women's sports. Although the value of women's teams may increase as a result of changing the ticket prices, it is possible that some fans will be discouraged by raised prices. Future researchers should consider the effects of changing ticket prices on the valuation and attendance of men's and women's sports events. Given recent debate over the persistence of gender inequality in athletics and the greater social context, it is essential to investigate issues of equity and modern prejudice in college sports.

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