Individuals’ social roles are conceptualized as role identities (e.g., partner, employee, sport fan). Role identification is “a set of meanings applied to the self in a social role or situation, defining what it means to be who one is in that role or situation” (Burke & Stets, 1999, p. 349). One’s roles are organized within a ‘salience hierarchy’ (Stryker & Serpe, 1994), dictating which identity should be activated – or, which ‘hat should be worn’ – given psychological centrality (i.e., self-evaluation) and social context (i.e., environment).

Demands between role identities may compete. Indeed, two pieces of self may be complementary or come into conflict (Horowitz, 2012). Thus, individuals engage in ‘identity work,’ engaging in “the forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising (of) the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165).

Throughout life, individuals must negotiate all of their identities, including their attachment to sport teams (Hyatt & Foster, 2015), yet understanding of role identity within sport management is limited. As Lock and Heere (2017) observed: “there is a need to consider the relative salience of a fan (spectator) identity by measuring multiple role identities beyond the narrow focus on team, player, community that persists in prior research” (p. 16). Scholars have noted fan identity may compete with an individual’s other central identities (Mansfield, 2020).

With this project, we aimed to enhance a growing literature on identity work in sport fandom. Specifically, we explored how highly identified health-conscious sport fans negotiate their multiple role identities.

Interested participants completed a brief online survey determining their eligibility for this study, gauging the degree to which they base their self-concept upon fan identification and health identification. Once suitable participants had been identified, we conducted semi-structured long interviews (McCracken, 1988) with 17 individuals; these conversations lasted an average of one hour. As we were motivated to understand participants’ identity work, we asked them to share their perspective on these two roles, focusing on both identity centrality and salience. We analyzed data through open-focused coding (Saldana, 2016).

Interviewees described two distinct experiences. Some suggested the two identities compete for salience (i.e., one or the other must be chosen at a given time), and their accounts indicated they experience identity conflict (Backhouse & Graham, 2012). However, others explained that they view the roles as mutually supportive pieces of self; these participants’ accounts were instead indicative of identity integration (Ebrahimi, Kouchaki, & Patrick, 2019). We labeled these groups ‘Segmenters’ and ‘Synergistics,’ respectively. Individuals’ experiences were shaped by both individual (i.e., psychological) and social (i.e., sociological) factors.

This work provides a theoretical explanation of how health-consciousness impacts sport fandom. Further, this project advances understandings of the relationship between fandom and physical well-being, a topic in need of greater consideration (Inoue, Berg, & Chelladurai, 2019), and offers implications for sport marketers who seek to appeal to health-conscious fans.