

“What it Means to be a ‘Lady’”: Defending the “Lady Vols” Nickname and Logo

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Scholars have contested the use of *Lady* in team nicknames since the 1980s, as the practice might suggest otherness and inferiority (Eitzen & Zinn, 1989). This study is set in the context of the 2012 merger of the women’s athletic departments at the University of Tennessee and the 2014 announcement that the university would eliminate the *Lady Vols* brand for all sports but women’s basketball. The latter decision has been met with resistance and applause from various parties. Using textual analysis of voices of athletes and comparing and contrasting them with perspectives of scholars, this study suggests a reading of *Lady* and *Lady Vols* as polysemic text with coexisting and competing cultural interpretations.

Les universitaires ont contesté l’utilisation du terme *Lady* dans les surnoms des équipes dès les années 80, étant donné que cette pratique pouvait suggérer l’altérité et l’infériorité (Eitzen & Zinn, 1989). Cette étude s’inscrit dans le contexte de la fusion des départements sportifs de l’Université du Tennessee en 2012 et de l’annonce faite en 2014 que l’université supprimerait la marque *Lady Vols*, hormis pour le basket féminin. Cette décision a rencontré des résistances et des applaudissements de la part de différentes parties. En se basant sur une analyse textuelle des positions prises par des athlètes et en les comparant et les contrastant avec les perspectives d’universitaires, cette étude suggère une lecture des termes *Lady* et *Lady Vols* comme un texte polysémique avec la coexistence d’interprétations culturelles concurrentes.

Being a Lady: Defending the “Lady Vols” Nickname and Logo

In November 2014 the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UT) announced that “beginning with the 2015-16 academic year, all sports other than women’s basketball will compete under the name, ‘Tennessee Volunteers’” (para. 1). Consequently, the *Lady Vols* nickname would no longer be used in UT sports, with the exception of basketball. UT’s decision was met by a wide spectrum of reactions. *USA Today* columnist Christine Brennan (2014) called the nickname “antiquated and discriminatory” (para. 1), whereas *Washington Post* columnist Sally Jenkins (2014) compared its removal to “chiseling the face off a priceless work of art” (para. 1). These comments suggest that the use of *Lady* in women’s sport has been regarded as both a symbol of oppression and empowerment.

Scholars have contested the use of *Lady* in nicknames for girls’ and women’s sport teams for decades, since the practice suggest otherness and inferiority (Eitzen & Zinn, 1989). Racial and social class connotations contribute to

the debate (Palek, 2008). For example, Hargreaves (1985) identified, “behaving like ladies” as a central theme of the formative years in the history of women’s sport (p. 40). Studying gender differentiation in the naming of college sports teams in the late 1980s, Eitzen and Zinn (1989) found that more than half four-year colleges and universities used sexist naming practices in sports. The researchers also found that the practice was more prevalent in southern schools.

Palek (2008) concluded her discussion of sexist team names and athletic opportunities by noting,

These data do not address whether sexist naming practices are actively contested and do not tell us anything about the meanings that athletes and coaches themselves give to naming practices. ...future research should explore the meanings that athletes and coaches attach to team names and investigate the incidences in which sexist team names have been dropped. (p. 207)

In this study, we seek to address Palek’s (2008) point by answering the following research question: How and why do some female athletes defend the *Lady Vols* nickname and logo?

By examining a spectrum of meanings that have been brought to the prefix *Lady* for women’s teams in general, and at UT in particular, this study adds to scholarship in

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the areas of women's sport (Cahn, 1994), the mis- and underrepresentation of women in media discourse (e.g., Billings, 2007; Messner & Cooky, 2010), and naming practices of mascots and teams (e.g., Palek, 2008).

To put the athletes' voices in perspective, we begin by providing brief overviews of historical developments and scholarly literature. Next, we detail the process with which we examined meanings *Lady Vols* athletes have brought to their team name. In the discussion of the findings, we compare and contrast those meanings with scholarly perspectives.

From Volettes to Lady Vols

A women's athletic training department at the University of Tennessee opened in 1899, eight years after the university had fielded its first men's football team (Kloiber, 1994). In its February 1900 report about women's athletics, UT's student newspaper referred to "young ladies" and "girls" on the front page:

The young ladies of the University... have taken up athletics with a vim. In the fall, little more than a good start was made at Basket Ball. But the winter's hard training in the Gym is doing wonders toward hardening tender muscles and preparing the girls for the out of door sport as soon as pleasant weather shall come to stay. (As quoted in Kloiber, 1994, p. 13)

A first competitive basketball team was formed in 1901, preparing for the inaugural intercollegiate contest of a UT women's team against the "Highland Lassies" of nearby Maryville College in March of 1903 (Kloiber, 1994), making basketball the first women's varsity sport at UT (Schriver, 2008). Notably, UT's men's basketball team, already nicknamed *Volunteers*, did not compete against another college until December 1909 (Byrd, 1974). During the 1920s, in a period of expanding athletic opportunities at UT, the women's basketball team was most commonly referred to as the *Volettes* by campus publications ("Girls' basketball," 1924, p. 11). At the same time, the men's teams continued to compete under the traditional nickname of *Volunteers* or *Vols*. Although writers also used other names for UT's women's team, such as "Orange and White lassies" ("Girls' basketball," 1924, p. 12) or the "Tennessee feminine basketeers" ("Girls have good cage outfit," 1926, p. 16), the moniker *Volettes* persisted through the first half of the 1970s.

Over a year after the passing of Title IX, the university agreed to provide a budget of \$20,000 for seven women's sports, \$5,000 short of what the athletic department spent to host VIPs at that year's football bowl trip. Further, the women's teams moved under the umbrella of the School of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation, where they resided until 1976, still nicknamed *Volettes* (Kloiber, 1994). In 1974, the university hired Pat Head (later Summitt), a 22-year old graduate from UT-Martin, as the new basketball head coach. At UT-Martin, Head had competed in basketball for the *Lady Pacers* and represented

the United States at the inaugural women's basketball tournament at the World University Games in Moscow (Davidson, 1973). By 1976, UT established an independent women's athletic department, offered athletic scholarships for women, and both women's and men's basketball teams competed in the same arena. "To go with it," Coach Head (Summitt) decided, "we needed a new identity, a break from the dingy, underfunded past" (Summitt & Jenkins, 2013, p. 122). In her 2013 autobiography, she recalled the 1976 decision to go from *Volettes* to *Lady Vols* as follows:

"We need a new name," I said. "What do you want to be called?" The team stared back at me, . . . "A name," I said. "We need to choose a name." Up until then we were the "Volettes," somebody's idea of a feminized version of the Tennessee Volunteers. But to me it sounded too much like a chorus of dancing girls. It was our choice what to call ourselves, I told them. We could remain *Volettes*, or we could pick something else, something new. "Who do you want to be?" I said. "Do you just want to be the Volunteers, like the guys? Or what about the Lady Volunteers?" "Lady sounds classy," someone said. "Yeah, 'cause we're so good-looking," [another player] said. They voted, and *Lady Vols* we became. (Summitt & Jenkins, 2013, p. 122)

In 2009, UT announced plans to merge the women's and men's athletic departments. The move was completed in 2012, leaving the University of Texas as the only remaining major university with separate athletic departments. In the merger process, women reportedly held 12 of the 15 eliminated positions, resulting in at least two gender discrimination lawsuits brought against the university (Rau, 2015). In October 2014, following a four-year branding study, the university announced that the *Power T* logo, formerly symbolizing the men's athletic department, would replace all other symbols as the primary mark for the entire university (UTsports.com, 2014). "Brand consistency across the university is critical as we strive to become a top 25 public research university," said Chancellor Jimmy G. Cheek. "It is important that we take advantage of all of the successes across this great campus, both in academics and athletics." (UTsports.com, 2014, para. 10). Potentially contributing to the decision to remove the *Lady Vols* moniker was a sponsor switch from Adidas to Nike. This move occurred in the context of an accelerated financial arms race in the early twenty-first century that includes the continued restructuring of conferences and the emergence of the College Football Playoff, as well as college athletes calling for increased compensation and presenting unprecedented legal challenges to the power of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2010; Smith, 2013). The university emphasized that the branding restructure coincided with "its own 2015 transition to NIKE" and came after the advisement "from the talents of the NIKE Graphic Identity Group...one of the world's foremost authorities and leaders on branding and marketing" (UTsports.com, 2014, para 1, 10). Rebranding sexist

nicknames primarily for marketing reasons is not without precedent. The “Lingerie Football League” founded in 2009 and rebranded as “Legends Football League” in 2013 provides a recent example of contested naming strategies in women’s sport. In this case, the change came in the context of efforts to reach mainstream audiences in global markets (Khomutova & Channon, 2015).

Scholarly Perspectives

Since the 1980s, an increasing number of scholars have argued against the use differentiating women’s teams by using prefixes like *Lady* and other practices that they characterize as sexist. Eitzen (2006), for example, concluded,

naming women’s and men’s athletic teams is not a neutral process. The names chosen are often badges of femininity and masculinity, inferiority and superiority.... Despite advances made by women in sport since the implementation of Title IX, widespread naming practices continue to mark female athletes as unusual, aberrant, or invisible. (p. 40)

Palek (2008) similarly determined that unequal nomenclature “marks and devalues women athletes as the inferior ‘other’ and constructs men athletes as the norm” (p. 192).

Just a few years after the adoption of the *Lady Vols* nickname, in their first edition of *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*, Miller and Swift (1981) noted that although a phrase like “first lady” can express certain esteem, “when incorporated in a job title, *lady* usually implies a lesser valuation,” as in *cleaning lady* (p. 73). They further argued, “*Lady* is used most effectively to evoke a certain standard of propriety, correct, behavior, or elegance” (p. 72). Many of these characteristics might, of course, be seen as antithetical to what it means to be a modern athlete. Palek (2008), for example, reasoned,

The racialized and class-based ideal of “a lady” is, by definition, in opposition to the ideal of a physically strong, daring, and independent athlete. The use of the modifier *lady* thus dismisses women’s athleticism and reflects sociocultural limitations that are imposed on women’s physicality. (p. 204)

Thus, Felshin’s (1974) concept of the feminine apologetic can be applied to understand the use of *Lady* in team names:

Basically the apologetic suggests that the woman athlete: can *appear* feminine, which is why so many descriptions of women’s sports include reference to the attractiveness and physical attributes of the athletes; is feminine, which has to do with sexual normality and attractiveness as well as so-called lady-like behavior; and *wants* to be feminine, which means that social roles are valued more than sport roles, and life goals include marriage and motherhood rather than being a champion athlete. (p. 204)

Several studies have demonstrated that the use of sexist nicknames is a common practice in American sports (Eitzen & Zinn, 1989, 1993; Palek, 2008). In the late 1980s, Eitzen and Zinn (1989), for example, surveyed 1,185 four year schools in the United States and found that “more than half used names, mascots, and/or logos that demean and derogate women’s teams” (p. 362). Studying 112 Division I-A colleges and universities in 2000–2001, Ward (2004) concluded that sexist names for athletic teams were no longer as prevalent, as less than one third of schools used them. Ward’s approach, however, counted only those institutions that used the same sexist name for all teams. Based on this methodology, for example, UT currently would not be considered as using a sexist nickname, since it only applies to distinguish the two basketball teams. Eitzen and Zinn (1989) and Ward (2004) agreed that *Lady* was among the most common form of sexist naming. In Ward’s study, *Lady* was the most common sexist nickname (86%, $n = 31$). Apart of the use of male names as a false generic (55%), *Lady* was the most prevalent form among eight sexist naming categories identified by Eitzen and Zinn (1989).

Eitzen and Zinn (1989), Ward (2004), and Palek (2008) all found that sexist naming practices were particularly established in the southern U.S. Palek, for instance, examined colleges and universities in nine southern states in the U.S.: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Two other former confederate states, Florida and Texas, were not included, because of differences in racial demographics and sociopolitical contexts. Palek summarized the findings as follows:

69.5 percent of the institutions use some form of sexist naming and 30.5 percent use nonsexist names. ...By far, the most common form of sexist name was the use of the feminine qualifier *lady*. ...a total of 61 percent of the schools used the term *lady* in naming their women’s basketball teams. (p. 192)

Thus, given UT’s location in the south, its original use of the *Lady Vols*, the continued use for the basketball team, as well as the resistance to the name change fall in line with national and regional trends.

Pro-Lady Vols Perspectives

In this section, we discuss the meanings selected athletes, who are proponents of the naming practice, have brought to the *Lady Vols* nickname and logo. We first describe how we gathered and analyzed their voices. Next, we present the findings with themes and subthemes, before we engage in a broader discussion.

Methods

Participants. To capture voices in support of the *Lady Vols* nickname, we employed purposive sampling to identify a collection of letters posted on

bringbacktheladyvols.com written by current and former UT athletes calling for the reinstatement of the *Lady Vols* moniker for all of the institution's women's intercollegiate athletic teams. Specifically, pursuit of the "intensity" of cases suggested by Patton (1990) was achieved, whereby we selected this source for the depth of the authors' connection to the university, their teams, the *Lady Vols* nickname, and athletic experiences. The site went live shortly after the university's decision to change the nickname. Originated by former volleyball player Leslie Cikra (2014), the site featured "a collection of letters from current and former Lady Volunteers," as well as a few male athletes (para. 1). The female authors of the letters available during the data collection phase ($N = 37$) represented a variety of current or former intercollegiate athletes from several sports: eight track and field, seven swimming and diving, six volleyball, six soccer, three rowing, two softball, two golf, two basketball, and one tennis. As self-reported by the writers, their time of participation in intercollegiate sport ranged from the early 1980s to the present. The authors also self-reported a high level of athletic success, ranging from all-conference honors to NCAA champions and Olympic participation.

Data Collection. Upon receiving permission from the authors' Institutional Review Board, letters were examined from the website's archive. The selected letters were posted between November of 2014 and May of 2015. We saved the text of the letters as local files, to ensure potential changes in the website would not interfere with data collection or analysis. We also recorded the authors' names, sport played, years played in a spreadsheet.

Thematic Analysis. We applied elements of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis, with recursive reflection integrated at each step. First, we immersed ourselves in multiple readings of the letters, beginning with a general analysis and followed by rereads with manual highlighting and notes taken. We read letters individually and together during collaborative meetings. Second, we used reflection and notes to systematically create initial codes from the data and assigned contextual excerpts from each letter to each code. Third, we shared and compared notes for the purpose of identifying emergent themes. Fourth, existing themes were reviewed and reconnected with initial notes and data excerpts to confirm their coherence. In this step, we sought homogeneity of data within themes and heterogeneity between themes and tabulated eventual themes in a spreadsheet. Fifth, we refined, collapsed, or separated themes, with specific names assigned to each one. The sixth and final step called for going "beyond description" to bring themes to life. In this analytical phase, final themes were paired with powerful, colorful excerpts that reveal potential importance in thematic patterns, illustrate the polysemy of *Lady Vols* and aligned or contrasted with extant literature.

Findings

Seventeen codes were condensed into three themes that emerged from analyzing the letters written by former *Lady Vols* about their experiences as student-athletes and their reflections on the university's rebranding: (a) "tradition, legacy, and excellence," with a subtheme of "empowerment through tradition," (b) "more than a brand" with a subtheme of "honor, family, and sisterhood," and (c) "sense of loss."

Tradition, Legacy, and Excellence. 29 of the 37 letters explained that a rich foundation of tradition and legacy was found in the *Lady Vols* brand, logo, and women's athletic department. The authors mentioned the concepts of tradition, legacy, and history 82 times relating to the topic of being a *Lady Vol* student-athlete. Specifically, many of the letters talked about the tradition of establishing excellence on and off the field or court and that the *Lady Vols* programs were regionally and nationally known for their excellence. For example, Anna Newell, a first-year golfer in 2014–15, expressed, "Female athletes at UT have cemented their legacy in collegiate sports under the Lady Volunteer brand and it has become a symbol of excellence." Chelsea Hatcher (soccer, 2008–2012) argued, "'Lady Vol' is synonymous with excellence wherever you go." The idea that the tradition of excellence was found off the court was especially important to the contributing athletes. Jill Pierce (swimming and diving, 2007–2011) shared how pursuing excellence did not just pertain to sport but to life, "My experience as a Lady Vol taught me to pursue excellence in every aspect of my life. Anything but my best in any part of my life was unacceptable and that philosophy has completely molded the woman that I am today and continues to guide me through life."

The athletes also spoke in their letters about recognizing the importance of former female athletes providing them with the traditions and standards of excellence. Gabrielle Trudeau (diving, 2008–2012) detailed that "Being a Lady Volunteer not only meant performing at the highest level, with devoted and empowered teammates, it also meant following in the footsteps of great leaders and athletes that had built up a reputation." Laura Lauter Smith, a soccer student-athlete from 1997–2000 stated,

It was the Lady Vol name I knew. The name had tradition. It meant something. It represented excellence. It represented a commitment to athletes, coaches, and fans both on and off the field. It meant a place where the female athlete could meet and exceed expectations.

For the athletes that wrote the letters protesting the removal of the *Lady Vol* brand, name, and logo it was about losing the tradition of excellence and the involvement in a legacy of great female athletes.

Subtheme: Empowerment Through Tradition. Many of the letters included the tradition of empowerment that came from being a part of the *Lady Vols* legacy.

Empowerment was mentioned 15 times in the letters. Specifically, the letters demonstrated that having a separate athletic program or being called *Lady* was not seen as inferior to the male athletic teams and programs, it was a motivation and a reason many of them decided to choose the University of Tennessee over other schools. Trudeau voiced,

Being a Lady Volunteer had nothing to do with being inferior to the men’s teams, in fact it allowed female athletes to feel empowered, having the attention from athletic trainers and strength and conditioning coaches necessary to become healthier and more powerful athletes.

Anna Newell echoed saying, “Lady Volunteers do not feel like the name is condescending, but empowering.” For AJ Newell, golfer (2011–2015), “to be again melded in with the male teams” by adopting the previous symbols of men’s athletics meant a step backward:

As a male, I don’t think you can comprehend what it means to be a Lady Vol. To have our own name as female student athletes is empowering, it makes us feel like we are just as important as the male athletes.

Holly Kane Douglas (track and field, 2007–2011) articulated in her letter that being a female athlete at UT possessed attributes of power, dominance and respect from surrounding athletes, universities, and communities. She mentioned, “For decades it’s reminded us that the power of the female athlete is to be treasured and respected.”

The authors also talked about empowerment from being a part of an exclusive lot of women that could claim the title of *Lady Vols*. Amy Stewart (swimming, 2000–2002) mentioned that being a part of a tradition and legacy that was not available elsewhere was encouraging. The letter stated, “I loved being a part of a school that specifically lifted up women in their competitive gifts and contributions to the NCAA and the world of sports.” Trudeau recognized the significance of being a part of an exclusive group of women: “Being a Lady Volunteer not only meant performing at the highest level, with devoted and empowered teammates, it also meant following in the footsteps of great leaders and athletes that had built up a reputation.”

The writers explained that losing the tradition of the *Lady Vols* also meant losing a sense of empowerment felt by past, current, and future University of Tennessee female athletes.

More Than a Brand. References to the logo, brand, symbol or emblem of the *Lady Vols* were the most mentioned theme in the analysis of the letters. This theme was mentioned 106 times by 30 out of the 37 athletes who posted letters site. The letters explicitly mentioned that for them it was not the ridding of the logo, name, brand, symbol, or emblem that was upsetting, but the meaning that they shared and found behind it. Many of the letters

talked about how the logo represented a way of life or a mindset that embodied what a *Lady Vol* was during her athletic career and after.

Trudeau communicated this saying, “Being a Lady Volunteer was more than a symbol, it formed a mindset that endures even after graduation, driving us on to continue seeking new challenges and always hold ourselves to a higher standard.” Shanna Cheatham (track and field, 2004–2008) proclaimed, “Nothing else ever stood out to me like that baby blue and orange that made the Lady Vol logo. It was beautiful. The colors aren’t what made it beautiful though—but the attitude behind it.” Bryttany Curran (swimming, 2006–2010) revealed being a Lady Vol was seen as a path for future success:

The Lady Vol ‘bias’ is one that encourages women to use our uniqueness as a woman to change our life for the betterment of ourselves, our team, our community, and the world. It teaches that each woman has value, and this value is needed in the world of athletics, in academics, in our families, and in our workplace.

Many of the letters emphasized that the logo allowed the athletes themselves to feel pride and respect for their work, accomplishments, and programs, but also that it generated respect from others. Leslie Cakra (volleyball, 2009–2012) shared, “The Lady Vol logo is more than a brand that’s worn for games and meets. It’s a signature of excellence that has been carved out by hundreds of women’s blood, sweat, and tears.” Ashlyn Halvorson (track and field, 2009–2014) emphasized the impact of the logo, “The Lady Vol logo is a force unto itself, standing out in a world of college athletics, shouting out a message of diversity and dedication.” Tiffany Baker (volleyball student-athlete, 2011–2012) expressed the logo as an elevation of female athletes from the University of Tennessee over other athletes and universities explaining, “The Lady Vol symbol and what it stands for is powerful, historical, and a substantial element that raises that University of Tennessee above and beyond other universities.” The letters explained that for many of the former and current female UT athletes the logo provided them with a sense of pride, respect, and unifying mindset.

Subtheme: Honor, Family, and Sisterhood. As part of the theme “more than a logo,” a subtheme of “honor, family, and sisterhood” emerged. Out of the 37 letters, 17 related to this subtheme with 44 mentions of family, sisterhood, an everlasting connection, or a shared identity that formed the theme. The bond they explained was detailed as feeling as if other female athletes were family, sisters, and a support system. Katie Ross (rowing, 2006–2010) explained the concept of this bond and sisterhood, “A Lady Vol is a teammate, a hard worker, a ‘sister.’ We were taught as freshmen, when you wear the Lady Vol logo, you wear it with pride and respect; because being a Lady Vol is an honor.” Smith echoed the distinctiveness of being in the sisterhood of *Lady Vols* athletics saying, “I wanted all of that. I wanted to be a Lady Vol. I still

count it one of my greatest honors to call myself part of that special sisterhood.” Paula Coughlin (rowing, 2008–2010) wrote that despite various backgrounds and diversity being a *Lady Vol* gave female athletes a unifying quality. She said, “We are a group of individuals from all backgrounds that came together to represent a very well respected family; the Lady Vol family.”

The bond felt reached beyond experiencing support, it explained a shared identity felt by past and current *Lady Vols*. Shelby Burchell (softball, 2008–2012) discussed a shared identity stating, “The Lady Vol identity is a special bond that I would hold with only a handful of women athletes.” Missy Kane Bemiller, a former track and field student-athlete, reiterated the importance of a Lady Vol identity saying, “The women who mentored me as a Lady Vol taught me, that we should have a voice and an identity and commit to excellence.” This bond and connection to the *Lady Vols* logo is one of the major reasons why the athletes wrote their letters expressing the need to keep the *Lady Vols* brand. Many of them warned that without it, current and future female UT student-athletes would lack the uniqueness that past players experienced.

Sense of Loss. The final theme was “sense of loss.” The theme came up 49 times in 24 letters. The letters focused on how taking away the *Lady Vols* name and logo was shocking, disappointing, discouraging, and a mistake. The writers expressed that without the logo there could be consequences in recruiting as well as dishearten and even discourage long fans and *Lady Vols* donors. The majority of the writers expressed reactions including anger, frustration, and disappointment.

Jessica Rolfs (soccer, 2009–2013) shared, “Even though I wasn’t surprised by the news, I was extremely disappointed that the department would agree to destroy the women’s history that it’s [sic] athletic teams are built on.” Halvorson recalled her reaction as, “My feelings about the brand dismissal started with shock, which quickly moved through anger into grief and now my feelings sit solidly somewhere between disbelief and disappointment.” LaVonna Martin Floreal (track and field, 1984–1988) exclaimed, “That is why my heart is vexed by the decision to minimize the immense honor I’ve always felt in being part of a special fraternity of women who have a unique commonality across the various women’s sport at UT.” Pierce echoed the warning that removing the *Lady Vols* logo would destroy the legacy and tradition, “With the removal of the Lady Vol logo, you are not unifying a brand; you are destroying part of a culture that has a history of perseverance, academic and athletic excellence, tradition, and pride.”

Not only did the writers share reactions to losing the logo and the brand but they also described that the removal of the *Lady Vols* logo was detrimental to furthering the mission of equality for women’s athletics. Rolfs wrote, “The Lady Volunteer logo is a symbol of courage and strength; a constant reminder of the struggle for women’s sports.” Hatcher expressed that taking way the Lady Vol logo meant taking away their voice and

importance; “By taking away a title steeped in history and tradition you are essentially saying that we don’t matter.” Anna Newell criticized the athletic department for their lack of equality, “The decision to remove the title clearly shows that the athletic director values the marketing of the school over the legacy of the Lady Volunteers, which shows that we have made little progress in the equality of female athletics.” Lastly, Stewart reiterated that by removing the logo, UT’s athletic department was forcing the female athletes to give up their identity and assimilate:

Forcing the women to take on what has clearly been deemed as the men’s logo, asks them to give up their identity as proud female athletes, and again to fall into the male-centered structure that the rest of the world continues to hand to them.

The letter writers also commented on the fact that the nickname was not removed from the women’s basketball team. Many of the participants felt the nickname should be kept for all women’s sports teams. Burchell voiced, “The ‘Lady Vol’ identity is what distinguishes all of the women’s athletic programs from the rest of the country- and now only the basketball program is allowed to continue this tradition?” Burchell also discussed that all of the female athletes deserved the logo and name sharing,

No one will dispute that nor dare take it away from them, but to take that away from the rest of the women’s sports who have worked hard to retain the “Lady Vol” identity as something of prestige and honor does not seem fair at all.

Curran argued that the value of tradition at the University of Tennessee does not coincide with removing the *Lady Vols* moniker from all but one team. She stated, “I have a hard time understanding how removing the Lady Vols logo from the women athletic teams (except basketball) aligns with UT’s values, the athletic department’s values, or the value of Tradition.” Finally, Mahony urged the athletic department to think how the other former and current athletes would feel stating, “To take away this symbol for all sports except basketball is extremely disrespectful and sends a message that the university does not care about its alums who helped to build the rest of its women’s programs.” All of the letters asked for support to reinstate the *Lady Vols* logo and name. The authors of the letters felt a strong tie to their personal and athletic identity associated with being a female athlete and *Lady Vol*. They felt removing the logo would destroy a tradition, legacy, possible sisterhood, and impair women’s collegiate sports.

Discussion

In summary, the (former) athletes in this study publicly defended the use of the *Lady Vols* moniker based on their shared pride in a perceived tradition of excellence, as well as a feeling of empowerment and community that was

symbolized by the *Lady Vols* nickname and logo, which for them represented family and sisterhood, rather than a mere brand. Thus, these women experienced a significant sense of loss of identity when the university decided to remove the *Lady Vols* nickname. We will begin to make sense of these findings—and compare and contrast them with previous scholarly perspectives—by starting with the notion of tradition.

The fact that proponents of the *Lady Vols* nickname call upon “tradition” as a rationale seemingly confirms previous scholarship. Eitzen (2006) noted that schools tend to passionately resist changing racist or sexist names because of the perceived threat to the institution’s tradition. He emphasized, “tradition, above all, is always a barrier to change. Students, alumni, faculty, and athletes become used to a particular name for their university and its athletic teams, and this seems ‘natural’” (p. 44). Eitzen might counter the *Lady Vols* supporters as follows:

Even if a school name has the force of tradition, is it justified to continue using it if it is racist or sexist? If a sexist team name reinforces and socializes sexist thinking, however subtly, then it must be changed. If not, then the institution is publicly sexist. (p. 44)

In discussing resistance to linguistic changes, Miller and Swift (2000) noted that the use of sexist language is so habitual in English because

every language reflects the prejudices of the society in which it evolved, and English evolved through most of its history in a male-centered, patriarchal society. We shouldn’t be surprised, therefore, that its vocabulary and grammar reflect attitudes that exclude or demean women. But we are surprised, for until recently few people thought much about what English...was saying on a subliminal level. (p. 4)

As we demonstrated in our brief history of gender-marking women’s sport at UT, nicknames like *Volettes* and *Lady Vols* also evolved in a male-centered, patriarchal context. The same, of course, applies to the language of sport overall and modern sport as a whole (Cahn, 1994).

The sense of loss expressed by the women in this study is clearly tied to their strong identities as athletes, specifically female athletes. In describing what it meant for them to be *Lady Vols* they chose powerful words like “family” and “sisterhood.” For them, changing that identity should not have been a sheer strategic rebranding decision. Here again, Miller and Swift’s (2000) discussion of language and socialization can help us understand the athletes’ resistance:

At a deep level, changes in a language are threatening because they signal widespread changes in social mores. At a level closer to the surface they are exasperating. We learn certain rules of grammar and usage in school, and when they are challenged it is as though we are also being challenged. Our native language is like a second skin, so much a part of

us we resist the idea that it is constantly changing, constantly being renewed. (p. 4)

For the women in this study being an athlete and a *Lady Vol* is indeed part of their native language and a second skin. As they consider themselves “*Lady Vols* for life,” it is part of their own personal grammar of sport. Thus, removing the nickname means loss of honor, family, and sisterhood for some of these (former) athletes. In the context of rebranding of schools that abandoned Native American mascots, Wahlberg (2010) also touched on the personal impact of the process as he discussed strategies for making team identity changes. He noted that the process

can begin by understanding why such a large gap exists in the perspectives of those who support making a change and those who wish to maintain existing team identities. One means to understand that gap is to understand that, to many university stakeholders, the debate over sports identities is deeply personal. (p. 118)

Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Wahlberg (2010) further noted the importance of membership in social groups for an individual’s self-esteem: “The more elite the group, the greater the personal satisfaction a member feels he or she receives through the association” (pp. 118–119). The women in this study clearly perceived the *Lady Vols* as an elite group, as illustrated in the theme of “tradition, legacy, and excellence.” Their responses can thus be read as defensive reactions as their group is threatened by outsiders. Applying the concept of cognitive dissonance, Wahlberg further noted that outsiders’ “assertions that the team nickname is racist can be met with disbelief and discomfort if in-group members do not perceive the groups norms and individual beliefs as racist” (p. 119). Arguably, the same could be said about the women in this study, who do not perceive their team name to be sexist, especially given that the change was made by mostly male administrators who are perceived to be outsiders. AJ Newell clearly articulated this when she wrote, “As a male, I don’t think you can comprehend what it means to be a *Lady Vol*.”

Thus far then, it appears that the (former) athletes in this study were exhibiting well-known patterns in defending a nickname that many scholars would regard as sexist. Since the university did not frame the removal of the *Lady Vols* nickname in terms of eliminating sexist language, proponents for the continued use, for the most part, have not employed other classic modes of resisting changing sexist language, including claims that “sexist language is not sexist language” or such nicknames are trivial concerns (Blaubergs, 1980, p. 135). In fact, for supporters of the *Lady Vols* identity, the name is clearly not a trivial matter. As noted, for them it “is more than a brand that’s worn for games and meets. It’s a signature of excellence.”

It is here where the voices of the women in this study interrupt the scholarly discourse about sexist nicknames. Where scholars might invoke socialization into traditional and hegemonic beliefs about gender, false consciousness, social identity theory, or cognitive dissonance as possible explanations, supporters of the *Lady Vols* nickname maintained that female athletes, coaches, and administrators at UT had redefined what it means to be a lady in sports. For many of them, being a lady and a “real” athlete was not contradictory, but synonymous. A sense of empowerment from being a *Lady Vol* was a common theme in the letters of the supporters. As the former UT golfer Anna Newell wrote in her letter: “Lady Volunteers do not feel like the name is condescending, but empowering.” A sign at one of the campus rallies to bring back the nickname and logo appeared to confirm this twist on conventional associations with what it means to be a lady. It simply stated: “Lady Strong.” As one reviewer of this manuscript pointed out, “While the feminist critique of gendered naming practices has become something of an orthodoxy in the sociology of sport, it is very interesting to hear the sentiments of young women...who appear to lay claim to a feminist standpoint as well as hold respect for and desire to retain a gendered team name.”

Polysemic Ladies

A question that arises from the previous juxtapositions is how we make sense of these opposing viewpoints. In response, we argue reading the *Lady Vol* nickname as polysemic text with historically situated origins helps us to understand the coexistence of several contested and competing meanings and cultural interpretations. Discussing the ideological and political functions of Olympic mascots, Magdalinski (2004) noted, “mascots are polysemic texts, upon which a series of meanings can be inscribed....[They] communicate a range of social, cultural, and political ideologies” (p. 75). Magdalinski added, “mascots are essentially intertextual, referring to, and requiring knowledge of a range of established cultural meanings and stereotypes in order for them to resonate with audiences” (p. 75). We argue that Magdalinski’s assessments of mascots can also be applied to nicknames, as she noted that sport teams, mascots, and nicknames are expressions of community and collective identity. This perspective allows us to explore various interpretive possibilities and the role of the *Lady Vols* in this study in the production of meaning (Preston, 1994).

Compared with most scholars, the female athletes who made their voices heard on *bringbacktheladyvols.com* provided oppositional readings of the nickname *Lady Vols*. They reject the reading of *Lady Vols* as sexist, which appears to be the single, preferred reading of academics. Underscoring her belief that the nickname is empowering rather than demeaning, Anna Newell wrote,

Those in favor of the Lady Volunteer name being removed have called out that the title “Lady” is derogatory towards female athletes and they believe

in this modern age we should move past sexist titles The problem with this argument is that the majority of Lady Volunteer athletes wear the label with pride and embrace the history of the name.

Proponents of reader-response theory have long argued that active audiences do not simply accept media messages homogeneously and uncritically (Ang, 1985; Radway, 1984). Examining how women interpret images of women in advertising, Sandikci (1998) concluded,

whether an ad will be regarded as sexist or not depends not only on its formal characteristics but is an outcome of the interaction between the ad, the product, the audience and the discursive context... sexism is a dynamic concept that exists in a web of cultural meanings, and cannot simply be read off from the manifest content of the images. (p. 76)

Applied to nicknames and logos, this argument could lead to the rejection of the textual determinacy of reading *Lady Vols* as simply sexist.

Related to this interpretation, Palek (2008) considered resistive meanings brought to the use of *Lady* in team names. Finding that the classification as a historically Black college and university (HBCU) was positively related to the use of *Lady* as a qualifier for nicknames of women’s basketball teams, Palek (2008) argued that use of the term, “may be used as a strategy of middle-class black women in the southern United States to resist controlling images of the black woman as hypersexual and immoral” (p. 205). She further theorized,

Given the historical support for black women in sports from the black community...it is likely that the use of the term *lady* at HPCUs takes on different meanings than it does at historically white colleges and universities in the South. The legacy and continuing practice of institutionalized racism means that marking black women athletes as ladies may be understood not as sexist but, rather, as a part of a racial uplift project for African American women. (p. 205)

Related to the concept of feminine apologetic, Palek (2008) similarly stated, “If one recognizes women’s agency in the naming process, the historical use of the feminine qualifier *lady*...may be seen as a practical political strategy to negotiate an institutional context in which women are largely excluded (p. 206).” She questioned, however, the continued use of such strategies, as they may no longer be necessary and possibly help to maintain inequality.

In this context, it is worth reiterating that the resistance to the name change at UT came at a moment when many *Lady Vols* supporters perceived a threat to the progress made under Title IX. The retirement of Pat Summitt, the loss of the women’s athletic department, and controversies about job losses all contributed to the fight for *Lady Vols* as a collective identity and thus might be

interpreted as “practical political strategy” (Palek, 2008, p. 206). The current and former athletes who posted to the site can be understood as an interpretative community, whose members produce meaning in shared and specific social, cultural, historical, and discursive contexts (Fish, 1980; Jensen, 1987). For many of these women, the *Lady Vols* legacy includes strides made by women in the Title IX era. In this sense, it is important to note that the merger of UT’s athletic departments coincided with the end of the Pat Summitt era.

Herself an iconic figure symbolic of Title IX, Summitt announced that she was suffering from early-onset Alzheimer’s disease in August 2011. In April 2012, she officially resigned as head coach having won 1,098 games, eight national championships, and “a 100 percent graduation rate for all Lady Vols who completed their eligibility at Tennessee” (Tennessee Athletics, 2015, para. 18). Arguably, for many *Lady Vols* supporters the perceived tradition, legacy, and excellence of the *Lady Vols* are intricately tied to Coach Summitt and the experienced sense of loss. Pamela Hanson (swimming, 1997–2001) expressed the connection between women’s self-determination, Summitt, Title IX, and the *Lady Vols* as follows:

When Coach Summitt brought the change from the Volettes to the Lady Volunteers in 1976, it marked a point in women’s athletics that legitimized Title IX. This also spoke that Title IX is not just about equal opportunity for women in sport, but also for women in sport to define the terms in which and how we play determined by females, not males.

A sign held up at one of the “bring back the Lady Vols” rallies on campus, lends further support for this interpretation. The rally took place at the Pat Summitt Plaza and Statue opened in 2013 outside of the basketball arena. The sign read “Keep Pat Summitt’s legacy alive in all women’s sports.” As we have seen, the themes of legacy and tradition were also present in the voices of the women in this study who defended the *Lady Vols* moniker. Reading the *Lady Vols* nickname as empowering rather than sexist is based on the notion of intertextuality of meaning (Allen, 2000). In this particular case, the meaning of the text *Lady Vols* is diachronically and synchronically related to other cultural texts, including Title IX, Pat Summitt, and the merger of women’s and men’s athletic departments at UT. Thus, the reading of *Lady Vols* as “empowerment through tradition,” is socially and historically situated (Fiske, 1989).

Conclusion

We examined how and why some female athletes defend the use of the *Lady Vols* nickname and logo. For current and former *Lady Vols*, who called for the reinstatement of the moniker, the nickname stood for family and sisterhood, empowerment, and tradition. Scholars critical of sexism pointed out that attachment to tradition has been

a common theme among those who resist the removal of sexist language (Blaubergs, 1980; Eitzen, 2006). Together, these perspectives suggest that *Lady Vols* can be understood as polysemic text with coexisting and competing cultural interpretations.

We argued that the discourse of *Lady Vols* proponents can be read in the context of the merger of UT’s women’s and men’s athletic departments and the retirement of Coach Summitt. The symbolism, legend, and folklore of Summitt are pivotal for understanding why some people in Tennessee and beyond are so attached to being a *Lady*. For some, taking away the *Lady Vols* name appears to be akin to tearing down a living legend—a coach for whom they have already built a larger-than-life statue outside the basketball arena—and for some it symbolizes the reversal of Title IX. For proponents of the rebranding, it means a long-overdue correction of sexist practice.

A common critique of emphasizing polysemy is the potential to overestimate the interpretive ability of audiences (Philo, 2008). While the findings of this study show that the women are able to resist the preferred reading of academics (i.e., *Lady Vols* as sexist), it could be argued that they fail to resist other powerful ideological messages. Future research could further examine the interpretation of *Lady* nicknames as polysemic text by employing a number of qualitative methods including phenomenology, ethnography, focus groups, and case studies involving former and current players, as well as fans and donors (Mackey-Kallis, 2012). Using oral and archival histories, we will further examine historical developments in a future paper. Expanding on Palek’s (2008) observations, such research should further examine race as a cultural context of the *Volettes* and *Lady Vol* nicknames. Of note, for example, is the fact that there was only one African-American player on the 1976–77 roster of 11 athletes who decided on the adoption of the *Lady Vols* moniker. In closing, we encourage proponents and challengers of *Lady* nicknames to further engage with alternative readings. Such discourse will be difficult, as Miller and Swift (2000) found that “what many people find hardest to accept is that a word which used to mean one thing now means another” (p. 7).

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