

**Gender Equality in the 'Next Stage' of the 'New Age'?
Content and Fan Perceptions of English Media Coverage of
the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup**

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Gender Equality in the ‘Next Stage’ of the ‘New Age’? Content and Fan Perceptions of English Media Coverage of the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup

Abstract

This article offers an original contribution by examining both the quantity and quality of English print media coverage of the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup *and* how fans perceive and respond to this coverage. It is the first longitudinal analysis of media coverage of women’s football in the UK and compares print media coverage between the 2015 and 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cups. We draw on a content analysis of five English national newspapers and 49 semi-structured interviews with fans. We develop new theoretical insights through the development of our framework of the ‘next stage’ of the ‘new age’. Our findings show media coverage of women’s football has substantially increased, with respectful coverage sustained. The new theme of gender equality made visible several types of inequality, but the media industry failed to acknowledge its own role in reinforcing gender inequalities. Interviewees were critical of the time-limited ‘revolution’ whereby coverage was limited to the duration of the World Cup. To advance gender equality, future media coverage must be sustained, meaningful and prominent.

Keywords: Sport fandom, football, gender equality, new age of media coverage, Women’s World Cup

Introduction

Mass media are central to the consumption of sport, but *men’s* sport is assumed to be of most public interest (Pfister, 2015). Decades of research documents that women’s sport is ‘symbolically annihilated’ through its absence from mainstream media and/or poor-quality, trivializing, and demeaning coverage, subsequently helping to sustain a gender order in which men’s sport is valued and rewarded over women’s (Buysse and Embser-Herbert, 2004; Biscomb and Matheson, 2017; Godoy-Pressland and Griggs, 2014). Football (or soccer), specifically, has widely operated as one of the ‘last bastions’ of male domination in many countries across the world (Pitti, 2019). However, the recent professionalization, commercialization, and mediatization of English women’s football has presented new opportunities for fans to engage and connect with this sport, consequently challenging the

gender hierarchy (Allison and Pope, 2022). Other similarly male-dominated sports such as rugby union and American football have been much slower to progress (Bowes and Culvin, 2021). In their analysis of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup, Petty and Pope (2019) found that, perhaps for the first time, there was a shift towards more positive media coverage of women's football in the UK. They argue that there may be an emerging 'new age' of media coverage of women's sport, signalling a more optimistic future direction.

This article builds upon and advances this work through a longitudinal study, analyzing the content of English print media coverage of the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup. In initiating this new line of work, we address calls for replication of Petty and Pope's (2019) original study (Bell and Coche, 2020). Empirically, our findings are significant, as longitudinal analyses of media coverage of women's sport are still relatively rare and existing studies tend to be on U.S. media contexts only (see also Cooky et al., 2021; McConnell et al., 2021; Wolter, 2020). This research is vital to examine wider patterns of stability or change in gender (in)equality over time. We further expand this line of work by adopting a multi-method study design. Existing work has typically addressed media content or its reception (Kane, LaVoi and Fink, 2013), but rarely both. In this article, we examine the quantity and quality of English print media coverage during the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup, in comparison to the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup. Additionally, the current study also includes an examination of England fan perspectives on the media coverage of the women's national team to consider how fans perceive and respond to media coverage of women's football in their everyday lives, whereas the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup study focused solely on print media coverage. Through this rigorous methodological approach, we develop new theoretical insights, through our lens of the 'next stage' of the 'new age' of media coverage of women's football. We define the 'new age' as the positive shift in media representation of women's sport that was first identified in the coverage of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup (Petty and Pope, 2019). The

‘next stage’ refers to our analysis of media and fan perceptions of the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup by allowing us to consider the extent to which the ‘new age’ of greater gender equality first identified in 2015 has been sustained.

While social media have opened-up new opportunities for fans to connect with women’s sport, for women’s sport to grow and be taken seriously, it must also be represented in mainstream, ‘traditional’ forms of media like newspapers. Readership of print newspapers has declined, yet still a quarter of UK adults over 15 consume print news daily and many also access newspapers’ online coverage (Firmstone, 2023). An analysis of newspaper coverage is therefore vital to examine whether women’s sport is becoming more visible. We suggest that visibility, especially through respectful media coverage, is one contribution towards greater gender equality.

Feminist Media Studies of Sport

The conceptual framework for this article draws on a rich history of feminist media studies of sport. As Antunovic and Whiteside (2018: 112) contest, feminist analyses of sports media have been “at the forefront of detecting and interrogating gender hierarchies and gendered expressions of power.” As studies across the past four decades have confirmed, media coverage of sport constructs men’s sport as the ‘pinnacle’ of sporting value, whereas women’s sport continues to be under-represented, considered less ‘newsworthy’ or ‘important’ (Biscomb and Matheson, 2017; Bruce, 2016; Cooky et al., 2021; Wensing and Bruce, 2003). For example, irrespective of country, studies have shown that coverage of women’s sport falls between 5% and 10% of all sports coverage (Daddario, 2021). Women who participate in sports considered to be more ‘feminine-appropriate’ also receive more media exposure than those participating in traditionally ‘masculine’ sports. This suggests that for women to receive sustained media coverage they must conform to prevailing ideals of (hetero) sexually attractive

femininity through the sport in which they participate and/or gender conforming behaviour off the field of play (Pfister, 2015). Where women do feature in media coverage, studies have shown that they are trivialized and sexualized, situating women athletes as 'other' and reinforcing the second-class status of women's sport to men's (Bell and Coche, 2021; Bruce, 2016; Daddario, 2021). The content of mainstream media normalizes men's power and helps to maintain the 'natural' dominance of men in the sporting arena; by highlighting women's (heterosexual) physical attractiveness and roles as partners, women are constructed as mothers (or sex-objects) first and athletes second (Biscomb and Matheson, 2017; Daddario, 2021). These representational practices have been mapped by Bruce's (2016) 'rules' of media coverage of women's sport, including: low media reporting; lower broadcast values in comparison to men's sport; compulsory heterosexuality and appropriate femininity; infantilization (describing adult sportswomen as girls, ladies or by their first name); sexualization; making comparisons to men's sport; and gender marking. 'Ambivalence' is also identified as perhaps the most common 'rule', whereby representations of sportswomen's strength and skill are juxtaposed against traditional femininity, indicating that the status of women as 'legitimate' athletes is simultaneously accepted and rejected (Bruce, 2016; Cooky et al., 2021; Parry et al., 2021).

However, these longstanding patterns are beginning to change. Bruce (2016) suggests that current 'rules' illustrate similarities in the coverage of men and women, including: sportswomen who are represented 'in action' or in competitive settings, women who are depicted as 'serious athletes', and sportswomen as 'model citizens', who are typically represented as national citizens rather than women. This is especially the case during high-profile international events, where the conventional rules for reporting on women's sport can be 'bent' and national identity overrides gender identity (Wensing and Bruce, 2003). In their U.S. study of televised sports news and highlights programmes, Cooky et al., (2021) found that

coverage of the U.S. Women's National Team at the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup temporarily propelled women's sport into the foreground of sports news. Thus, national pride can motivate greater attention to women's sport for a short period, denting the day-to-day routine of male-dominated coverage.

In an era of digital media, Bruce (2016) also identifies two new 'rules.' First, women athletes can use their own voices through social media, offering the potential to transform how women's sport is represented and offering fans new opportunities to contest discourses that devalue women's sports. Second, the 'pretty and powerful' discourse moves away from viewing athleticism and femininity as binary constructions or a 'dual identity' and instead moves towards a third wave sensibility, whereby physical competence and femininity are 'combined into a coherent whole' (2016: 371). For example, women athletes posing nude or semi-nude could be considered a form of sexploitation. Alternatively, another interpretation is that these images are empowering rather than sexually objectifying, with women using their sexuality to boost their profile and benefiting financially (Heywood and Dworkin, 2003; Thorpe, 2008). However, being 'pretty and powerful' is not open to all and still relies on a narrow range of body types that represent 'ideal' femininity, as well normalising whiteness and heterosexuality (Bruce, 2016: 372).

More recently, media coverage of women's sport has arguably moved away from *overt* infantilization or sexualization (Bernstein, 2002; Bruce, 2015; 2016). In fact, Cooky and Antunovic (2022) document the prominence of liberal feminist narratives in recent coverage of women's sport that call attention to and challenge longstanding patterns of gendered media attention. In one of the few examples of extensive longitudinal research, Cooky et al. (2021) examined U.S. TV media between 1989 and 2019 and found different patterns of representation across time. In the 1990s, women were routinely trivialized, insulted and sexualized. In the 2000s, there was a shift towards representing women in less overtly insulting ways,

highlighting women's roles as wives and girlfriends of men or as mothers, which was more 'respectful' in comparison to previous coverage, but also 'ambivalent'. In 2014, there was a further decline in sexualization of women athletes and a decline in the wife-girlfriend-mother newsframe, but despite this attempt to report on women's sports stories 'respectfully', stories on women's sports were delivered in a dull monotone with none of the excitement of men's sport stories. This 'boring' representation of women's sport helps to sustain the gender order; men are assumed to be 'naturally' athletically superior (Allison, 2018), and therefore women's sport is constructed as less exciting and less worthy of attention. This 'gender-bland' sexism continued into coverage in 2019, with men's sports stories involving colourful descriptions by commentators skilled at building up enthusiasm in ways that were rarely apparent in stories on women's sports. Thus, despite some change over time, gendered inequalities remained, albeit in a more subtle format.

The abundance of feminist media studies of sport highlighting the sexualization and trivialization of women athletes has enabled sports advocates to construct straightforward messages about the need for change (Antunovic and Whiteside, 2018). However, we concur with Bruce (2016: 367) that the 'almost obligatory recitation of marginalization, trivialization, ambivalence and sexualization of sportswomen' has limited the 'points of departure in feminist sports media research' (Antunovic and Whiteside, 2018: 113). This focus has meant that despite growing evidence that women's sport is being taken increasingly seriously, equality and change are often lost in research studies in favour of gender differences – even if such differences are minimal (Bruce, 2016). To avoid this pitfall, we draw theoretically upon the notion of a 'new age' of media coverage of women's sport. This term was first coined by Petty and Pope (2019) to explain the positive shift in the media representation of women's football in coverage of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup. We expand this framework to discuss the 'next stage' of this new era. This enables us to locate our findings within wider changes that

are happening in women's sport and women's lives and to be sensitive to the possibility that media coverage has improved in quantity and quality. In addition, we initiate a new line of research which examines how fans respond to media coverage of the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup. While media coverage shapes whether and how the public thinks about women's sport, audience reception is an understudied element of research on women's sport (Kane et al., 2013; Parry et al., 2021).

Entering the 'Next Stage' of the 'New Age' of Women's Sport?

In the UK, Petty and Pope (2019) describe how as recently as 2011, widespread institutional sexism was apparent in broadcast and print sports journalism. For example, key members of the Sky Sports presentation team were sacked for their sexist abuse and there were no women included on the BBC Sports Personality of the Year shortlist. However, in the period since the 2012 London Olympic Games and the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup, UK media coverage of women's sport has moved into a 'new age'. Petty and Pope (2019) suggest that this shift has been aided by a number of interconnected developments, including: the launch of the semi-professional (now fully professional) FA Women's Super League; changing perceptions resulting from the London 2012 Olympic Games, and positive coverage of women's sport more generally. For example, Sky Sports has moved towards more extensive coverage of women's sports, and in 2015, Sport England launched *This Girl Can*, a nationwide media campaign to encourage all women to become more physically active.

Comparing across five national newspapers, Petty and Pope (2019) found that during the 2015 tournament, perhaps for the first time, there was a shift towards positive coverage of women's football, signalling greater gender equality. Their findings showed a substantial amount of coverage, with prominently placed articles and photographs of the England players actively competing. This coverage was also respectful; rather than trivializing players, for

example, through sexualization, coverage was focused upon the skill and achievements of the England national team. The results also showed that there were some examples of women players being compared to men players. However, rather than positioning the women's team as inferior by making comparisons against an established 'male standard' (Black and Fielding-Lloyd, 2017), Petty and Pope (2019) proposed that journalists were using this as a 'quick fix' to address readers' lack of knowledge of the team and players resulting from the invisibility of the England women's team prior to this event. Comparisons enabled readers and potential fans to develop a connection with players. The national importance attached to the success of the England team was also evidenced by comparisons with iconic England men's teams at previous FIFA World Cup competitions. Arguably, this breaks down, rather than reinforces, gendered distinctions which typically present men's football as 'real' sport and women's football as 'inferior': both men's and women's teams were positioned under the united umbrella of England to represent a *collective* national identity.

Clearly, caution needs to be exercised around narratives of progress or claims of a 'boom time' for women's sport, which assume that gender equality is growing closer over time (McLachlan, 2019). Focusing on liberating narratives of progress can mask the ways that expressions of power reinvent themselves and produce new logics for women's oppression (Antunovic and Whiteside, 2018; Cooky and Antunovic, 2022). Indeed, as Cooky et al. (2021) note in their sobering reflection, over the course of three decades there have been several 'watershed moments' of extensive coverage of a high-profile U.S. women's international championship that generated predictions of substantial future media coverage. Yet the reality is that this widespread attention did not spill into the everyday coverage of women's sports. It is not our intention to make claims that a 'utopian moment' has been reached in coverage of women's sport (McLachlan, 2019). However, our framework of the 'next stage' of the 'new age' enables us to examine, through longitudinal work, whether the UK media coverage of the

2015 FIFA Women's World Cup was simply a 'one-off' occurrence, or whether this momentum has been sustained and the ways in which it has evolved. Prior to the 2015 tournament, women's football – even at international events – was virtually invisible in the UK media. We argue that positive coverage of women's sport during a Women's World Cup competition poses a major challenge to the typically male-dominated media coverage of sport in the UK, so coverage of subsequent tournaments warrants further investigation.

Other recent studies lend weight to the notion of a 'new age' of media coverage of women's football. For example, Leflay and Biscomb (2021) analyzed newspaper coverage of 'England's summer of women's sport' in 2017, which included the women's football European Championship, and found that there was substantial and positive coverage that framed women athletes as authentic. In France, Ravel and Gareau (2016) analysed media coverage of the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup and the 2012 Olympic Games. Their findings showed a shift from gendered coverage to more football centred coverage from one tournament to the next, with the team mostly presented as athletes and contributing to national pride in a way usually reserved for men's football. In an analysis of Eurosport's football coverage on its French, English, German and Spanish websites during the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup, Coche (2021: 15) suggested that there is evidence that: 'we are entering a slow transition into a new era'. These findings showed that the Women's World Cup was the most covered current competition on three of the four websites studied. However, men's football is still more widely covered, with men's club football taking precedence over coverage of the Women's World Cup.

In the U.S., Bell and Coche's (2021: 11) content analysis of newspaper front-page stories following the victories of the U.S. women's national team at the 2015 and 2019 FIFA Women's World Cups found 'positive signs for representation'. Overall front-page coverage increased in 2019 and was focused upon players' athletic achievements, indicating a shift away

from ambivalence towards respectful coverage of women's sport. Christopherson et al., (2002) and McConnell et al., (2021) have also undertaken, to our knowledge, the only other longitudinal study of coverage of women's football. Findings from media coverage of the U.S. women's team at the 1999 FIFA World Cup showed that the team's popularity was the result of their contradictory femininity. Players were paradoxically 'nice' and 'feminine' who could also be 'strong' and 'muscular' with heterosexual sex appeal. However, at the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup, rather than being popular because they were 'strong yet soft', the team was popular because of their strength, talent, success and because they were political and used their amplified political voices. Consistent with Petty and Pope's (2019) findings from the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup, coverage reported 'sport as sport'; players were described as athletes and the athletic excellence and skill of the U.S. team was emphasised. Journalists were also supportive of player activism, especially in relation to the team's gender discrimination lawsuit against the U.S. Soccer Federation. This coverage presented the players' claims about equality for the team and for women in society as 'legitimate', further evidencing progress in media coverage of women's sport.

Indeed, the period from 2015 to 2019 has seen greater global attention to gender and racial inequalities in both sport and society, specifically in the advent of the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter social movements. Accordingly, disparities in pay, contract terms, treatment, and training conditions between elite women's and men's teams have received substantial, often critical attention, including during Women's World Cup tournaments. Many athletes, including women in football, have spoken out against injustice, often using social media to do so (Cooky and Antunovic, 2022). Though public opinion on athletes' increasing willingness to publicly advocate for change is by no means uniform, there is evidence of support, especially among existing fans of women's football (Frederick et al., 2022). Recent political activism among

athletes presents an important contextual factor for understanding those working in the sports media, and many have opted to cover such actions directly and respectfully (Schmidt, 2018).

Our research builds upon and extends existing feminist media studies of sport. We draw theoretically upon our framework of the ‘next stage’ of the ‘new age’ to consider if the momentum of a ‘new age’ first identified in 2015 has been sustained in 2019. By examining the quantity and quality of media coverage of the English print media during the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup and fan perceptions of media coverage in their everyday lives, we consider the current ‘state of play’ of media coverage of women’s football.

Methodology

We adopted a multi-method study design, involving qualitative and quantitative content analysis of newspaper articles, along with 49 semi-structured interviews with fans of women’s football. This enabled us to examine the quantity and quality of English print media coverage during the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup *and* how England fans perceive and respond to this media coverage in their everyday lives. We undertook a longitudinal analysis, through a comparison of media coverage of the 2019 and 2015 FIFA Women’s World Cup tournaments.

Our first method was a qualitative and quantitative content analysis of five ‘British/English’ newspapers: *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian* (broadsheets) and *The Sun* and the *Daily Mirror* (tabloids). These newspapers have high circulation figures in the UK national press (Press Gazette, 2023). Sunday newspapers were also included in the analysis; quantitative data presented in tables merges data for weekday and weekend newspapers to allow for easier comparisons across different newspapers. Since our original study, the *Independent* switched to an online-only newspaper, so to ensure consistency in our analysis of hard copies of newspapers, a decision was made to replace this with the broadsheet newspaper *The Telegraph*. This ensured both datasets included three ‘quality’ broadsheets and two

‘popular’ tabloids, as was the case in 2015, and this approach allowed us to analyse areas of interest such as location of articles and pull-outs in a consistent way across all newspapers.

The newspapers were collected in hard copy from 24 May 2019 (two weeks before the tournament commenced) through until 12 August (five weeks after the tournament concluded), allowing for an analysis of coverage before, during and after the tournament. In total, 642 articles were analysed across the five newspapers. As with our previous study, we adopted a directed approach to the qualitative content analysis, using theoretical concepts as initial codes. For consistency, we used the same pre-determined qualitative categories that were developed from an extensive review of the literature for the 2015 study (Petty and Pope, 2019). *Task relevant* categories were skills of the players/team and comparisons of women players/team to men players/team. *Task irrelevant* categories were personal life along with gendered hierarchy of naming and infantilization. However, our inductive approach allowed for potential new themes to be included, which was vital given how rapidly women’s sport is evolving in this new professional era (Bowes and Culvin, 2021). Any data that could not be coded into one of the pre-determined categories was analysed to see if this formed a new theme or if this fit within a subcategory of an existing code. Two new themes emerged in this study: the *task relevant* theme of negative comments on skills/competency and the *task irrelevant* theme of gender equality. Previous studies have shown a move towards some areas of greater gender equality, including media support for player activism and ‘fighting for change’ (Allison and Pope, 2022; McConnell et al., 2021). To allow for direct comparison, we used the same quantitative categories from our 2015 study for our amount of coverage theme. These were: frequency of articles, location of articles and frequency and type of photographs. Drawing on Rintala and Birrell (1984), each photograph was placed in one of the following categories: competitive (player/team was depicted actively competing in football); non-competitive (player/team was not actively participating in football but the uniform or setting made the sport

apparent); or posed (player/team was depicted in a non-sport setting). Data analysis was undertaken manually, with newspapers colour coded before being entered into a word processor.

Our second method involved 49 semi-structured interviews with fans of the England women's team. Likely because we recruited those who attended the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup in person, participants were highly-identified fans of women's football, who described attachments to both the England women's national team and the domestic league. Consequently, while these fans had not seen every article in the news sources we analysed, they were attuned to, and sought out, media coverage of women's football and took part in discussions regarding media quantity and quality with other fans.

Participants were recruited and interviewed between April 2019 and May 2020. We employed purposeful sampling; this involved criterion sampling following criteria for inclusion determined by the researchers and snowball or referral strategies. For criterion sampling, England adults (18+) who attended one or more matches of the 2019 Women's World Cup were eligible to participate. Recruitment materials were posted to social media, shared with football journalists and those working in women's football and disseminated at a fan embassy at the Women's World Cup. Most participants were recruited from social media posts, with a small number through snowball sampling. Interviews lasted between 1-2 hours in duration and took place over phone or video application, with a subset occurring in person. The authors used an interview guide which included questions about a range of topics, including lifetime experiences playing and/or watching sport, experiences attending or watching women's football, and media coverage of women's football. Pseudonyms and limited identifiers are presented to protect confidentiality. All interviews were conducted by the first two authors, along with an English postdoctoral research assistant with expertise in women's football. As white, middle-class women football scholars and fans, those undertaking the

interviews shared similar characteristics to most participants and this ‘insider’ position enabled a quick rapport during interviews and aided our familiarity with participant references. Just under half (48%) of interview participants were 20-29 years of age, while 38% were 30-49 and 14% were 50-69. 74% were cisgender women and 22% were cisgender men, while one participant identified as non-binary. The overwhelming majority (98%) described their race or ethnicity as white. Nearly all were college educated and held professional-class jobs.

The interview guide included questions about participants’ consumption of sports media across media formats, their use of social media as fans, and their perceptions of the quantity and quality of media coverage of women’s football. However, the interview process was also flexible, to include emergent discussion topics and unique probes for detail. Data was analysed collaboratively following Deterding and Waters (2021) “flexible” coding method for in-depth interviews. A first-round index coding organized larger chunks of data based on topics included in the interview schedule as well as emergent topics of importance to participants. The index codes were developed specifically within the interview data and for this article, the focus was on material connected to the topic of “media coverage”. Then the authors conducted a second-round coding of data which produced the following codes: “Amount of Coverage”; “Negative Comments on Skills/Competencies”; “Personal Life”, and “Gender (In)Equality”. These themes were developed as they mapped directly onto themes from the qualitative content analysis but were also a clear fit with the interview data. This stage involved applying analytic codes to relevant data, writing participant and cross-case analytic memos to connect codes into themes and exploring exceptions to patterns, and rounds of discussion to revise, name, and finalize themes. To ensure procedural rigor, both datasets were cross-checked by all authors, as part of a three-way process. Coding for each dataset was led by two of the three authors, with the third adopting the role of “critical friend”. This ensured that there was dialogue at all stages of the analysis, with the role of the “critical friend” also involving acting as a “theoretical

sounding board” and encouraging reflection and exploration of multiple and alternative explanations as these emerged in the data and writing (Smith and McGannon, 2018).

Findings and Discussion

Amount of Coverage

Our quantitative analysis showed a large increase in the amount of coverage of women’s football during the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup in comparison to the 2015 tournament. There was a sixfold increase in the number of articles, from 124 in 2015 to 642 in 2019. Of these, 462 were from broadsheets (72%) and 180 were from tabloids (28%), indicating an increase in the amount of exposure of women’s football in broadsheets (up from 56% in 2015) and therefore a slight tendency for women’s football to receive more coverage in the ‘quality’ or ‘serious’ broadsheets over ‘popular’ tabloids (see also Parry et al., 2021). The huge increase in the number of articles published is evidence that coverage of women’s football for the FIFA Women’s World Cup has continued a positive upwards trajectory and that we have arguably entered the ‘next stage’ of the ‘new age’, with the momentum first identified in Petty and Pope’s (2019) original study being sustained and surpassed.

The location of articles and photographs illustrates the importance attached to the news, with front page placement especially signalling an important news story (Bell and Coche, 2020). As in the 2015 study, we categorized articles by location, drawing upon Godoy-Pressland and Griggs’ classifications (see Table 1). On the front pages of newspapers, 22 articles appeared, a threefold increase in comparison to the seven front page articles in 2015. In addition, the numbers of articles on back pages increased from five in 2015 to 40 in 2019. In the U.S., Bell and Coche (2021) also found overall front-page news stories increased in 2019. Further evidence of this increased coverage was also highlighted through a new finding in our 2019 study: women’s football pull-outs. In the run up to the tournament, every

newspaper included at least one pull-out – a short magazine style booklet including information solely focused on the FIFA Women’s World Cup, including details about players, fixtures and other stories around the World Cup. Whilst this has been a key feature for men’s FIFA World Cup tournaments for decades, this is the first time we have seen this in women’s football in the UK, showing the extent to which media reporting on this mega-event permeated into wider society (Godoy-Pressland and Griggs, 2014).

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A total of 636 photos were analysed across all five newspapers, a four-fold increase from the 159 photographs examined in 2015. Of these, 428 were from broadsheets and 208 were from tabloids. *The Guardian* published the highest number of photographs (180), and *The Sun* published the fewest (68) by some margin, with all other newspapers going over the 100 mark. There was evidence that the quality of reporting on women’s football had improved since 2015 through the *type* of photographic coverage. 557 photographs were competitive – an increase from 69% in 2015 to 88% in 2019. 64 photographs were non-competitive (10%) and only 15 photographs (2%) were posed – a decrease from 20% in 2015.

This article adds a new dimension to the field of gender, media, and sport through an analysis of fan perceptions and interpretations of media coverage. Interview participants noted that the 2019 Women’s World Cup had received substantial mainstream media coverage; over three-quarters (39/49) observed an increase in media coverage of women’s football in recent years, especially during major tournaments. Many interviewees identified the 2015 FIFA Women’s World Cup as the initial catalyst for this coverage; this was described as a “breakthrough moment” (Rachel) in UK media coverage and for some, initiated their interest in becoming a fan of women’s football – both nationally and at the domestic club level. This media interest was aided by televised coverage, as “the first tournament that you could watch

from start to finish and see every game” (Anna), along with the relative success of the England team at this tournament, with a third-place finish. Building on this strong foundation, the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup propelled women’s football into the mainstream news and on a scale that had not been witnessed before:

I can’t necessarily say what the difference was to 2015 but it just felt so much bigger this time, it was the focus of our summer. You’re looking at the national newspapers, they were sending out some of their biggest journalists to the World Cup, who weren’t part of that natural group of women’s football journalists. I don’t remember that ever happening [before], or them even being interested in women’s football, but all of a sudden, all these papers were, women’s football, women’s football, women’s football...I just thought the coverage was immense, across all newspapers, all these in-depth pieces and analyses. (Katherine).

Fans in our study expressed positivity and support for the ‘next stage’ of the ‘new age’, with some discussing how the media played a critical role in making women’s football more “accessible” (Violet) and raising overall “awareness” (Joelle) of the sport, so that the players were more “relatable” (Clare) and the sport became part of wider public consciousness: “I think in general now, a lot more people, like the public, have heard of the players. Know the general happenings and how well England are doing. Maybe have watched a match just because it’s become so much more apparent and visible in the media” (Eve).

Many participants argued that media have a responsibility to do more to promote women’s football, because this has: “such an influence on how people perceive things” (Lucas) and is integral for “growing” the sport (Diane). For Katherine: “the only way you’re going to get people into it [women’s football] is by showing it, by pushing it into their lives”. Increasing and respectful media coverage was therefore argued to challenge sexist attitudes, leading to greater respect and appreciation for women’s football. For example, increased media exposure around the 2019 and 2015 FIFA Women’s World Cup tournaments has, “Changed a lot of people’s opinions” (Pearl) with those watching for the first time finding that they “enjoyed” this (Gaby). Pope et al. (2022) describe how live TV coverage of the Women’s World Cup can

lead to positive attitudinal changes towards women's football. In our study, some respondents similarly described how the increased media coverage shifted perspectives; for example, some men fans of men's football in Emma's workplace moved from performing misogynistic masculinities towards progressive masculinities, with such men becoming fans of women's football. Media coverage therefore goes beyond simply raising awareness of women's football – it can contribute to gender equality.

Task Relevant Coverage

Skills of the Players/Team. Beyond the quantity of media coverage or the placement of photos or articles, its type, or quality, was also assessed. As noted above, respectful coverage is understood by many fans to challenge harmful gender stereotypes and grow appreciation for women's athleticism (Allison and Pope, 2022). As in 2015, we found positive coverage and a respectful tone to be nearly universal across both broadsheet and tabloid outlets. The primary focus of most articles was the athletic excellence of a player or a team. As in 2015, there was a continued departure from the earlier trend of sexual objectification when reporting on women's sport (Bernstein, 2002; Pfister, 2015). Not a single article in 2019 referred to a player's (hetero)sexual appeal. The only reference made to appearance was one article commenting on a Dutch player's "funky leopard print crew cut" hairstyle (*The Sun*, 2 June 2019). Other recent research has similarly noted declining or absent sexual objectification (Cooky et al., 2021; Leflay and Biscomb, 2021; Parry et al., 2021).

Coverage was task relevant, defined as articles related to football, such as information on individual or group competencies. Much of this coverage praised individual women's skills, most often the English national team. For instance, Lucy Bronze was described as "the best defender in the world" (*The Times*, 31 May 2019) and "superb" (*The Daily Mirror*, 28 June 2019), while Ellen White was "a born striker" (*The Guardian*, 10 June 2019) and Steph

Houghton (defender) “is quick, brave, and athletic” (*The Telegraph*, 1 June 2019). It was common for articles to describe player or team achievements using concrete details. One article described moments of play that took place between Bronze and a competitor: “Within minutes she [Bronze] was pushing boldly into the back of Evans, not allowing the Arsenal forward any room to turn or get the ball out of her feet. Whether it be a powerful leg stretched to keep a ball in play or a gut-busting run to force a corner that many others would leave, Bronze demonstrated exactly why she was a Ballon d’Or nominee” (*The Guardian*, 10 June 2019).

In contrast to the decidedly lacklustre commentary of some televised coverage of women’s sport (Cooky et al., 2021), newspaper articles on the 2019 Women’s World Cup emphasized the excitement of the tournament, while simultaneously informing readers as to the stakes of the competition. One article noted that, “The Lionesses have provided at times breathless and exciting football, scoring more goals in France than at any previous World Cup” (*The Guardian*, 6 July 2019), while another read: “This was a display of pace and patience from England as they defeated Argentina to reach the last 16 of the World Cup” (*The Telegraph*, 11 June 2019). Words emphasizing energy and action were present throughout, for example: “England flew out of the blocks to make the perfect start as they pinpointed and ruthlessly exploited Norway’s left-sided weakness” (*The Sun*, 28 June 2019). Articles also frequently included complimentary adjectives to describe play such as “bold,” “excellent,” or “composed.” Our findings show that in the ‘next stage’ of the ‘new age’, newspaper reporting continues to focus upon the skill and high-performance levels of the women players and team, using colourful and animated descriptions of matches to draw in readers and construct women’s football as ‘real’ sport.

Negative Comments on Skills/Competency. Whilst the majority of text in these articles was positive and complimentary of players’ athletic abilities, a second, minor theme, was a critique

of player/s or team skills. Here content remained relevant to athletic performance but was less positive in tone. For example, the England team was perceived to be “disjointed” (*The Times*, 10 June 2019) in some of their play. Individual players were also subject to criticism, for example, “Bright’s (defender) bad error with a back-pass” (*The Times*, 2 July 2019).

This critical assessment is a new finding in 2019, with negative appraisals of skills absent within these same news outlets in 2015. The appearance of criticism should be contextualized within high expectations for England’s performance following hosting of the 2012 London Olympic Games, a third-place finish in the 2015 Women’s World Cup, and the growing strength of the Women’s Super League (Godoy-Pressland and Griggs, 2014; Black and Fielding-Lloyd, 2017). One article in *The Guardian* referred to the team’s victories over key opponents, but still presented the 2019 tournament as a failure to meet the team’s own and others’ expectations: “England have scaled a mountain, but to reach the summit they must traverse one final leap and they do not really look any better equipped to do so than they were two years ago when they were beaten by Holland in the European Championship” (8 July 2019).

Negative evaluations are a routine part of coverage of men’s sport, and thus similar treatment of women may represent a degree of equality, with women subject to respectful, but also honest, evaluations, including attention to poor quality play. This was a point made by team forward Toni Duggan in an article in *The Daily Mirror*, about playing for a Spanish club: “When we’re successful we’re front page of the newspaper - every newspaper - but when we lose we’re slated...It’s the same as the men’s, that’s how we’re treated there” (6 June 2019). Interviewees also perceived criticism as an expected part of media coverage of women’s football. For example, Clare suggested that: “Journalists after the World Cup came under a lot of fire, some of them, I think, for...criticising the England performances. But I think if you want it to grow you have to know that it goes both ways.”

Prior to the 2015 tournament, women's football received limited media coverage and where such coverage did occur the sport was widely trivialized. Many men football fans have also been shown to express sexist and derogatory views of women's sport (Pope et al. 2022). Therefore, men journalists especially may be concerned that any level of criticism could be perceived as reflecting sexist viewpoints that women's football is just 'not very good'. An article in *The Telegraph* (14 June 2019) actively sought to reassure readers that criticism of women's football is not sexist; in many ways this is providing more gender equitable coverage: "To offer criticism of a team's technical ability is not negative and, if expressed in reasoned, objective terms, assuredly not sexist" (*The Telegraph*, 14 June 2019).

Comparison of women players/team to men players/team. Another prominent task relevant theme, and one that also appeared in 2015, was the use of comparisons of women players or teams to men players or teams. In one iteration, women players were likened to well-known men, with a list of shared positive traits intended to compliment women's athletic talents. Steph Houghton was the frequent, but not only, target of these comparisons, described as "a female Wayne Rooney; a menace, tenacious, fully committed and able to score a goal out of nothing" (*The Times*, 9 June 2019) and as a "a carbon-copy of [Alan] Shearer" (*The Telegraph*, 14 June 2019) whose play gave "glimpses of Bobby Moore" (*The Times*, 2 July 2019). When women's teams were compared against men's, it was typically to signal women's excellence or renown, for example: "Right now the players are hardly household names in their own home towns. But if they manage to lift the World Cup in Lyon on July 7 they will be as well-known as the boys of '66" (*The Sun*, 6 June 2019). Nationalism undoubtedly played a role in generating team comparisons, with the women's team presented as something of a "second chance" at national pride and glory following men's tournament losses (Bell and Coche, 2020; Wensing and Bruce, 2003). For instance, one article in *The Daily Mirror* read: "The ladies have now matched the

heroics of the men's squad in last year's Russia World Cup - and England can again dare to dream of an end of years of hurt" (28 June 2019).

The frequent use of gender comparison is challenging to interpret. On the one hand, it may be that comparison serves to reach and educate an audience more accustomed to seeing and reading about men's football (Petty and Pope, 2019). At the same time, these comparisons clearly use men's football as the established standard, positioning women as "outsiders" and inferior footballing citizens (Black and Fielding-Lloyd, 2019; Daddario, 2021). Comparisons may seem positive when praising women, and yet they often reinforce, rather than challenge, dominant ideas about "natural" gender difference that underlie patterns of inequality (Allison, 2018). In fact, a few articles were also critical of comparisons between men and women for their underlying sexism. In mid-June, *The Daily Mirror* concluded that while, "there's been a bit of a debate about the unfair comparison between TV audiences for the English men's and women's games on Sunday," men's viewership figures are an inappropriate benchmark to compare women's football against. Ultimately, higher TV audiences could lead to a legacy of greater gender equality; a future in which we "stop comparing the Ellen Whites with the Harry Kanes and just appreciate excellence in its own right" (13 June 2019).

Task Irrelevant Coverage

Personal Life

Task irrelevant media coverage is often demeaning or trivializing of women's athletic achievements, including by emphasizing off-field roles as a wife, girlfriend, or mother, that establish players as both feminine and heterosexual as compensation for their "masculine" athletic prowess (Bernstein, 2002; Bruce, 2015; Christopherson et al., 2002; Kane, *et al.*, 2013; Pfister, 2015). In 2015, there was some mention of players' partners, including heterosexual and lesbian, gay, or bisexual players. In 2019, only one story referred to partners of women in

the England women's team, but this was the entire focus of the article. Titled "*Forget the WAGS, say Hello to the BAPS [Boyfriends and Partners]*" (*The Sun*, 9 June 2019), this tabloid article introduced the partners of 10 England players with photos and descriptive information. The body of the article continued the comparison with men's sport, reading, "But unlike many WAGS [wives and girlfriends] of the 2006 men's World Cup, such as Victoria Beckham and Coleen Rooney, the BAPS are not famous." Arguably, this article was intended to introduce players as celebrity athletes because it elevated women players to the social status of men peers whose personal lives are well known to the public.

As in 2015, all the other task irrelevant articles told stories of hardship, reflecting a human-interest angle in media coverage. While they performed on football's largest stage, some players were battling challenges with physical or mental health, or the serious illness or death of loved ones. Many of these articles referenced Steph Houghton's husband in the context of his recent diagnosis with a terminal illness. Other articles addressed Karen Carney's (midfielder/forward) struggles with depression and self-harm, the death of Lucy Staniforth's (midfielder) brother, the death of Carly Telford's (goalkeeper) mother, and death of Fran Kirby's (midfielder) mother and her subsequent depression.

These intensely emotional stories humanized players and presented inspirational narratives of overcoming barriers in pursuit of one's (sporting) dreams. Yet positioning the players as inspirational did not extend to the gendered conceptions of women as uniquely "empowering" to girls and women documented in previous research, as players were presented less as role models for others of the same gender and more as examples of struggle (Allison, 2018; Chahardovali and McLeod, 2022). The exclusive attention to adversity over other aspects of players' personal lives, as well as the highly detailed descriptions of suffering, was designed to attract readers through human interest in players' persistence. Consider, for instance, the use of capitalization in the presentation of the story of Jade Moore (midfielder), who, "as a 16-

year-old prospect...was given the news that she had TWO holes in her heart. Had one of them been 0.1mm bigger, she would have had to go through surgery that would have dashed her dreams” (*The Daily Mirror*, 2 June 2019). The commercial logic that likely motivated attention to hardship was also discussed by interviewees in our study. For example, Francesca acknowledged that she found this type of coverage to be meaningful, especially considering women’s persistence in elite football in light of the lack of resources and recognition they received:

We’ve also got the stories about the players, some of them are really interesting, hearing their background...So it’s things that’ll help newspapers sell....You hear their personal struggles....You hear things like Fara Williams (midfielder), she was homeless whilst playing for the national team..... So it feels like they’ve had to make an effort, because a lot of them had to have multiple jobs.

Accepting that commercial imperatives are likely to be a driving force behind these hardship stories, we argue that rather than trivializing women’s athletic accomplishments, such off-field news stories, or this “deeper level of coverage” (Emma), can construct women as ‘serious’ athletes. Indeed, when the men’s England team compete in major tournaments, there are similar human interest stories around “race and mental health and overcoming adversity and leadership” that are brought into “everyday debate” (*The Times*, 31 May 2019). Thus, rather than undermining women’s achievements, this type of coverage can help to present women as ‘serious’ athletes who have shown resilience to get to the top levels of their sport.

Gendered Hierarchy of Naming and Infantilization. Beyond attention to private lives, patterns of language can also refer to and/or solidify gendered hierarchies of value and worth. Previous research suggests that women’s athleticism is undermined by infantilizing terms like “girls” and “ladies” whose counterparts (“boys” and “gentlemen”) are rarely applied to men. Women athletes may also be selectively called by their first names alone, while men are referred to using first and last names or last names alone (Petty and Pope, 2019). Such practices attach

youthfulness, inexperience, and femininity to women footballers, denying them status as “serious competitors” (Wolter, 2020) and downplaying the threats that skilled women athletes pose to the gender order in sport (Connell, 1995).

Table 2 presents the frequency of infantilizing language in 2019 newspaper coverage, as well as the prevalence of “heroines” and “Lionesses,” words associated with womanhood but that are less trivializing of athletic ability. We find minimal appearance of the terms “girls” and “lady/ladies” in 2019, with this language appearing three times in broadsheets and 11 times in tabloid outlets. This represents a notable decrease over time within tabloids, where 28 uses of “girls” were found in 2015. We also find no use of the word “heroines” in 2019, whereas it appeared six times in 2015. In contrast, there were many more usages of the word “Lionesses” in 2019 in both tabloids and broadsheets compared to 2015. Repetition of this term cements ‘Lionesses’ as an identity for the women’s team. This term is certainly “gender marked” (Cooky et al., 2021) in ways that distinguish the women’s from the men’s team, and yet also represents England women symbolically as the embodiments of strength, aggression, and bravery. In some ways, this gender marking can help to promote a sense of national identity for the women’s team. At the 2022 European Championship, there were calls for the ‘England Lionesses’ to have their own emoji in the run up to the Final, as the only emoji available on Twitter was of a male Lion (*The Sun*, 27 July 2022). Unlike successful men’s teams, women’s teams have typically been unable to foster patriotism (Godoy-Pressland and Griggs, 2014) but the embracement of the term ‘Lionesses’ perhaps represents a new direction, one in which the England women’s team is used to construct a sense of national pride and identity.

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The ‘Next Stage’ of the ‘New Age’: Gender (In)Equality and Time for Revolution?

A new theme that was completely absent in the 2015 study was gender (in)equality. In the ‘next stage’ of the ‘new age’, media coverage of women’s football brings issues of gender inequality to the fore and in doing so directly, advocates for change. The 2019 Women’s World Cup was viewed as a “turning point” (*The Guardian*, 27 July 2019) or “tipping point” (*Daily Mirror*, 9 June 2019) for women’s football, that could instigate an “overdue revolution” (*The Telegraph*, 18 June 2019). Revolution was linked to advances in greater gender equality. For example, an article published in *The Telegraph* led with the headline “A Football Tournament? We Could be Looking at a Revolution” and claimed that the tournament had “greater significance than almost any other sporting event” (7 June 2019). It is a significant finding that we have now entered a new era of media reporting on women’s football which advocates for greater gender equality (Cooky and Antunovic, 2022). This shift has been facilitated by social movements such as #MeToo and #Black Lives Matter, as well as by the popularity of feminism (Cooky and Antunovic, 2022; Schmidt, 2018). Yet we caution that this new theme is not entirely or only progressive, particularly when considering how the commercial interests of media may be advanced by highlighting inequality without this attention contributing to real change. There is a need for caution around claims of a ‘boom time’ in women’s sport, as repeated reference to so-called “watershed” moments in women’s sport have not substantially altered balances of power, resources, or representation (Cooky et al., 2021; McLachlan, 2019).

We find that media coverage made visible several types or forms of inequality in women’s football. One sub-theme focused upon the *general treatment of women’s football*. Here, the introduction of VAR (video assistant referees) for the Women’s World Cup, as a trial, not previously used in a men’s World Cup was the focus of much critique, along with a new rule change for goalkeepers that was introduced one week before the tournament began. The concern was that women players were being treated as “guinea pigs” (*The Times*, 22 June 2019) in what was described as a “bad experiment” (*The Guardian*, 13 June 2019). There was

also a sense of injustice at the sports governing body, FIFA, “tinkering” with the laws in “the middle of the most influential World Cup in women’s football history” (*The Observer*, 23 June 2019), following a temporary suspension of a new law stating that goalkeepers would be booked for coming off their line before a penalty.

A second sub-theme focused upon *increasing opportunities to play football*. This included coverage of player Karen Bardsley’s (goalkeeper) calls to introduce mixed-sex academies to develop women’s football at grassroots level. Here it was argued this could “eradicate prejudice” (*The Observer*, 16 June 2019) and “raise standards in the women’s game” – especially women goalkeepers who are often labelled “as far inferior to the men” (*The Daily Mirror*, 16 June 2019). Some articles highlighted the “explosion” of interest in women’s football – including girls and women playing the sport. For example, one girls club increased in size from five to 14 teams, and it was described how this “has even inspired some of the mums to start a local women’s team” (*The Guardian*, 2 July 2019). An article in *The Telegraph* (18 June 2019) described how at a football tournament of 2,400 players, 900 were girls and women, but as recently as 15 years ago there would not have been a single girl playing. Comparisons were also made between the UK set up and the superior infrastructure for women’s football in the U.S. An article in *The Times* (3 July 2019) described how the success of the U.S women’s team is “no accident” and the result of a system where girls and boys have equal opportunities to play, whereas in the England World Cup squad “many players did not even start playing until their early teens, and even fewer had structured training”. *The Guardian* similarly led with the headline “England’s route to catch U.S. must start in schools” and attributed England’s “lower competitive level” to fewer players due to the lack of opportunities to play the sport (5 July 2019). This is supported by statistics which showed that 67 per cent of all schools and 41 per cent of secondary schools offered girls’ football in physical education,

forming the basis for a campaign to create equal school sport opportunities in future that received support from the government in 2023 (BBC, 2023).

A further sub-theme focused upon the *history of women's football*. *The Daily Mirror* (27 May 2019) ran a double page spread on Lily Parr, a prolific goal scorer for the Dick, Kerr Ladies team which rose to prominence during the First World War. Such reporting assumes that readers will be interested in this background; this level of detail on the sport's history was not apparent in 2015. In addition, there was a sense that readers needed to be educated on this history to understand the inequalities in the sport today. For example, some articles referenced the 1921 Football Association ban on women's football. This had a profound impact on women's football, with the game struggling to regain its early popularity (Williams, 2003). There were claims that the lack of support for women's football over time was "an imbalance that deserves rectification" (*The Sun*, 2 July 2019).

Pay inequality is the final sub-theme linked to gender equality. Journalists sought to make direct comparisons in pay between men's and women's international football. For example, an article in *The Telegraph* compared how the tournament's winners would receive £3.1 million, whereas winners at the men's European Championship in 2018 received £29.7 million and noted "embarrassment" expressed by the FIFA President over this pay disparity (6 June 2019). On 8 March 2019, the U.S. Women's National Team Players Association filed a gender discrimination lawsuit against the U.S. Soccer Federation in one of the highest profile challenges to inequitable pay and work conditions in women's professional sport (Culvin et al. 2021) and fans chanted 'Equal Pay' after the U.S. victory at the 2019 World Cup, shining the spotlight on this issue. However, in UK newspaper reporting, whilst there was a sense that the gender pay gap in the sport needed to be improved in the interests of growing women's football, journalists stopped short of arguing for full equality, even at the international level. A commercial case was often made to justify the gender pay gap. For example, an article in *The*

Times suggested that demands for equal pay were “absurd” due to the financial differences in men’s and women’s sport (12 August 2019).

Our findings are encouraging in that in the ‘next stage’ of the ‘new age’ media reporting of women’s football is making visible a number of types of inequality in a way that has not been seen before in previous coverage (see also Cooky and Antunovic, 2022). However, making inequality visible through media coverage may do little to alter that inequality. While negative publicity may put public pressure on organizations such as FIFA and the U.S. Soccer Federation to advance some forms of gender equality, or perhaps to give lip service to it, this type of reporting fails to acknowledge the role of the media industry in *reinforcing* gender inequalities in quantity and quality of attention. Thus, while appearing progressive, such coverage may reflect a commercial strategy co-opting the language and ideas of feminism to connect with readers and deflecting attention away from the media industry (Daddario 2021). Additionally, as Cooky and Antunovic (2022) have argued, liberal feminism has become the predominant form of feminism informing media coverage of women’s sport. Consequently, the focus on “equality” as women’s incorporation into the existing model of professional sport reflects the concerns of white, affluent women and marginalizes the experiences, interests, and activism of women of color.

In the ‘next stage’ of the ‘new age’, the extensive coverage of women’s football continues to be only for the duration of the Women’s World Cup. The interest in women’s football must be a “long-term relationship” or there is a risk that this will just become a popular spectator sport “every four years” (*The Guardian*, 9 July 2019). Research has found fans have become important advocates for women’s sport who creatively advance its visibility (Toffoletti et al., 2021). Similarly, many of our interview participants criticized the short attention span of media when it came to women’s football. Unlike in men’s football, extended media coverage of women’s football in the UK is reserved only for the duration of the World Cup and is also

dependent upon the success of the national team. For example, Emma suggested that women's football becomes "fashionable" when the team reaches the semi-final stages, and this introduces the sport to new audiences. Alexa explained that "World Cup profile, media wise, was huge", but has since "died down". Interviewees expressed frustration at this temporary and short-lived media exposure which disappeared once the England national team was defeated, as Betty explained:

Suddenly, we had an English team, regardless that it was women, we had an English team in a semi-final, now everyone needs to care. I remember at the time I had the radio on, they just kept talking about the semi-final, semi-final, semi-final and then obviously you know what happened after that [England defeated] and boom, it wasn't something they were still talking about.

Many fans were acutely aware of the commercial pressures of the media industry and the need to prioritize, in Gaby's words, "a story that sells". Yet, as Alexa explained: "People say it's not successful [women's football] because it doesn't generate the money, but it can't generate the money until you get the people in and the exposure". This is a familiar situation whereby women's football loses out because it does not have the same media profile and commercial attractions of men's football, but in order to grow it needs a media profile. Therefore, some interviewees argued that the media industry have a "moral responsibility" to promote women's football (Gaby); in the words of Diane: "We've got to get it in the press. We've got to get it in the media", or "we're not going to grow it".

As well as increasing the amount of media coverage, interviewees also suggested that gender equitable coverage also meant providing high quality coverage. Many argued that information provided about women's football more broadly was generally "wrong most of the time...they just don't put in the time and effort to do a bit of research" (Alexa). Inaccuracies in results, player names and goal scorers were reported in contrast to men's football. There were frustrations at journalists not being sent to cover elite women's club matches. For many

of our interviewees, social media was the key media platform (usually Twitter) to follow women's football, because (outside of World Cup tournaments) coverage is minimal in newspapers, websites and on television. As Emma explained, women's football is "not in the national news, you can't find games...it's really hard to find out who is playing when" and so Twitter was used as "the main source of news" (Harriet). This often involved following women's football journalists for information which usually does not make it into mainstream news. The dissatisfaction with media reporting was so strong that some of our respondents actively contributed to disseminating information about women's football on a voluntarily basis; for example, by setting up unofficial club Twitter accounts to share information about women's teams or writing stories about women's teams or football for websites. Diane, for example, was involved in the co-creation of a Twitter account designed to equitably report on news for both the men's and women's Manchester United teams:

One of the things we wanted to do with this Twitter account was basically say, this is all the United news in one place, so people don't have to seek it out...We've got say, the Manchester United App, that will constantly update you on what the boys are doing today... Well it doesn't tell you what the women are doing. So, you don't have to seek it out for the men. You've only got to put Sky Sports News on [UK sports channel] and they'll tell you all the rumours of the [men] players we're going to be signing, who's missed training, who's said what in what press conference. But to get the information on the women's team you've got to actually got to go to the right places and hope they've got it right as well.

Some interviewees explained that when clubs do elect to promote both the men's and women's teams through the same channels, this is more likely to lead to abusive comments. For Alexa, the main issue currently holding back further mainstream coverage of women's football was the sheer scale of resistance that this initiated: "You look at the comments and it's a bunch of people going "We're not interested in that"" or "Go back to the kitchen" and so they're just basically catering to what they [the media industry] think is their core audience". Katherine similarly suggested that any shift towards greater media coverage of women's football will need to take place over a number of years due to sexist and misogynistic attitudes that continue

to permeate across society: “We still have these people that are stuck in the times that women shouldn’t do sport, women shouldn’t play football, they should be in the kitchen, they should be ironing, they should be cooking, and there’s far too much of that still about.” Catering to the “core audience” was clearly perceived to be a ‘traditional’ male audience who lacked interest in women’s football. These kinds of responses lend weight to Pope et al.’s (2022) study that even small steps towards showing more media coverage of women’s football can lead to a backlash and prompt resistance and anger from some men. These misogynistic attitudes, combined with commercial pressures, mean that, in Gaby’s words: “It would take a really ballsy decision for newspaper outlets to prioritise the women’s story” or to have a back page that is typically equally split between men’s and women’s sport.

Conclusion

This article makes an important contribution as the first longitudinal analysis of media coverage of women’s football in the UK, through a comparison of media coverage of the 2019 and 2015 FIFA Women’s World Cup competitions. In doing so, this is one of the few longitudinal analyses of media coverage of women’s sport (Cooky et al., 2021; McConnell et al., 2021; Wolter, 2020). Theoretically, we draw on our framework of the ‘next stage’ of the ‘new age’. This enables us to locate our findings within wider changes that are happening in women’s sport and women’s lives and to examine patterns of stability or change in gender (in)equality over time. Our work makes a significant contribution to the sociology of sport and media studies by analysing the quantity and quality of print media coverage during the 2019 World Cup and how people perceive and respond to this media coverage. Existing work has typically addressed media content or its reception, but rarely both.

Through this rich dataset, we develop new insights into the ‘next stage’ of the ‘new age’ of media coverage of women’s football. UK media coverage of women’s football has seen

a substantial increase over time, with a sixfold increase for the 2019 Women's World Cup in comparison to 2015, which was discussed favourably by our interviewees. In addition, respectful coverage was sustained and to some extent improved for the 2019 World Cup. Coverage was task relevant; there were no articles that sexualized women players and articles instead focused upon the skill and competence of players. Where players or team skills were criticized, this is more in line with the typical reporting of men's sport and arguably represented a shift towards greater equality. Task irrelevant coverage also reflected the 'human interest' approach that typically surrounds men's football. We also found that there was a reduction in the use of infantilizing language.

The theme of gender equality was a new theme for coverage of the 2019 World Cup tournament. Media coverage partly made visible several types or forms of inequality in women's football, including the general treatment of women's football, disparities in opportunities to play football, and pay inequality. From one perspective, this is a positive development in putting public pressure on organizations such as FIFA, the Football Association and U.S. Soccer Federation to advance gender equality. However, locating the 'problem' of gender inequality with sports organizations neglects the role of the media industry in reinforcing gender inequalities. Media reporting suggested that the 2019 World Cup could be a "revolution" for women's football; yet there were clear boundaries for this. For example, this "revolution" in newspaper reporting, did not extend to equal pay for women players, or in fact anything close to this. As was the case in the 2015 World Cup, coverage of women's football was time-limited; media coverage of women's football in the UK is reserved for the duration of the World Cup and dependent upon the success of the national team.

To advance gender equality and promote social justice there is a need for future media coverage to be sustained, meaningful and prominent. Our findings show the challenges for the media industry in advancing greater gender equality in media coverage, given commercial

pressures and ongoing negative attitudes towards women's involvement in traditionally male-defined sports. Yet, it is also clear that media coverage is essential if women's football is to continue to develop in the new professional era (Bowes and Culvin, 2021) and media coverage of women's football can lead to positive shifts in attitudes towards women's sport. The media industry has the power to create real change through more coverage of women's sport and through the quality of such coverage. Based on our findings, to further advance the 'next stage' of the 'new age' of media coverage of women's football, we recommend:

- Coverage of women's football should be sustainable, beyond the life-cycle of mega-events such as World Cup competitions. This means comparable coverage for domestic leagues and in the pre-season build-up. Print media could set targets to commit to consistent coverage all year round.
- Media coverage needs to have the same high-quality knowledgeable coverage as for men's sport. As fans in our research have identified, inaccuracies in reporting undermine the 'product' of women's sport and construct hierarchies between men's and women's sport.
- Task relevant coverage can involve respectful, but also honest evaluations, including attention to exceptional athleticism as well as poor quality play.
- Coverage can also promote off-the-field stories to help build player profiles, as is the case for the coverage of men's football.
- Media coverage should continue to tackle the 'thorny' issues around gender inequality as this helps to lobby for change amongst organizations with potential to improve conditions for women in sport. This is a clear difference in reporting on men's and women's sport, but we argue that drawing attention to (and potentially reducing) the gendered inequalities in the sport is vital.

At the same time, we recognize that these suggestions reflect a feminist perspective within which equality is understood largely as women's incorporation into existing social systems. This has been one prominent approach to defining 'equality,' yet one which has downsides, including the disproportionate advancement of racially and socioeconomically privileged women and a failure to critically assess sports media (Cooky and Antunovic, 2022). While encouraging further "next steps" of the "new age" of substantial, positive newspaper coverage for women's football, provocative questions remain about alternative feminist visions for relationships between media and women's sport. Excluded from 'mainstream' outlets such as newspapers or televised broadcasts, women athletes and the fans who support them have long innovated in approaches to media, becoming early adopters of social media and creating unique spaces for player and fan voices (Toffoletti et al., 2021). When alternatives may provide flexibility outside of typical reporting routines or enable creative work to connect to audiences, women's sport may not need 'traditional' media to thrive. Beyond access to existing 'mainstream' media - which remain owned and managed by white men and whose norms and practices often replicate hegemonically masculine understandings of sport - new media that are woman-created or owned might highlight the value of women's sport without reference to men's sport or advance more inclusive feminisms than the liberal feminism that circulates in media today. We acknowledge these potentials and the necessity of these projects, as well as the importance of these broader questions, while also recognizing value in longitudinal studies of 'mainstream' media that rely on gender comparisons as one barometer of progress. Further longitudinal work is therefore necessary to examine media coverage of the 2023 World Cup and beyond – and indeed, to consider potential changes in media coverage of women's football in other cultural contexts. Our study has shown the value of combining media analysis with audience reception, so further research could build on this article to examine fan responses to changes in the media coverage of women's sport.

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Data Access Statement:

Our supporting dataset will not be published because it contains sensitive data.

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Table 1
Number of Articles in Each Newspaper by Location

Newspaper	Front Page	Inside Pages	Front Page of Sports Section	Inside Pages of Sports Section	Back Pages	TOTAL
Broadsheets						
<i>The Times</i>	1	12	5	105	8	131
<i>The Telegraph</i>	8	13	15	142	1	179
<i>The Guardian</i>	6	18	4	112	12	152
2019 Total For Broadsheets	15	43	24	359	21	462
2015 Total For Broadsheets	5	6	6	50	3	70
Tabloids						
<i>The Sun</i>	4	5	0	63	9	81
<i>The Daily Mirror</i>	3	15	1	70	10	99
2019 Total For Tabloids	7	20	1	133	19	180
2015 Total For Tabloids	2	8	0	42	2	54

Table 2*Frequency of Infantilization in Each Newspaper*

Newspaper	‘Girls’	‘Lady/Ladies’	‘Lionesses’	‘Heroines’
Broadsheets				
<i>The Times</i>	1	0	41	0
<i>The Telegraph</i>	1	0	71	0
<i>The Guardian</i>	1	0	111	0
2019 Total For Broadsheets	3	0	223	0
2015 Total For Broadsheets	4	3	24	3
Tabloids				
<i>The Sun</i>	4	0	97	0
<i>The Daily Mirror</i>	4	3	190	0
2019 Total For Tabloids	8	3	287	0
2015 Total For Tabloids	28	3	82	3