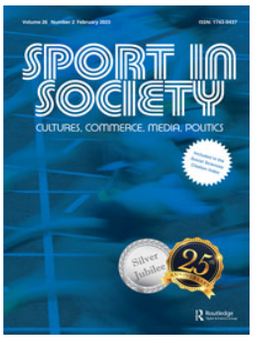

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'Genuinely in love with the game' football fan experiences and perceptions of women's football in England

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ABSTRACT

Women's sport, and perhaps especially women's football, in England has enjoyed much greater media visibility and support over the past decade. But we still know relatively little about the response of fans of men's football to the rise of the women's game and their views on attending it. This paper highlights responses from 2,347 fans of the men's game in Britain to BBC terrestrial coverage of the FIFA Women's World Cup of 2015. It also investigates general views on women's football, experiences of attending matches and the perceived barriers to match attendance. It argues that there remains residual resistance to the women's game, but also increasing reflexivity about its performance and prospects. Concerns over the financial excesses of the men's game and about the values expressed in its elite versions additionally contribute to more positive attitudes and expectations in our sample about the future of elite women's football.

KEYWORDS

Women' football; fans; attendance; Women's World Cup; love of the game

Introduction

The public profile of women's sport in the UK has increased considerably in recent years (Women's Sport Trust 2021). This has been prompted by a number of interconnected developments, including extensive live UK media coverage of female athletes at the London 2012 Olympic Games and of the 2015 and 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup finals, and also the impact of the 2017 England women's so-called 'summer of sport' (Leflay and Biscomb 2021). The live coverage of all matches at the Women's World Cup in 2015 was the first time a UK national broadcaster, the BBC, had covered an international women's sporting event on this scale. The question remains whether this represents a 'sea-change' in the attitudes of UK television companies to women's sport, or a response to the dearth of live men's sport available to the BBC, or a combination of both. However, we can say that, despite the sport's growing commercial profile and mediatization which has clearly opened up new opportunities for following the women's game, there remains a lack of research on audience response to women's football in the UK.

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As women's football grows in popularity in the UK, both at the international level and more slowly at elite clubs, there will be increasing scope for research on active fans of women's football, to follow analyses which have begun to be undertaken in the USA (see Guest and Luijten 2018). We argue that the attitudes of men and women who are fans of the established *men's* game are likely to have a major impact on the wider acceptance of women's football. Accordingly, this article draws on an analysis of 2,347 online survey responses of fans of UK men's football to the televising of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup, but with an extended focus on those who have also attended women's games in the UK. We examine here if the World Cup coverage impacted attitudes to the women's game, as well as addressing how fans of the men's game experience attending women's matches, and what barriers they may face in doing so. Understanding these issues will have wider policy implications for the image of the women's game and for continuing to grow the attendances at women's football matches in the new Women's Super League era (Fielding-Lloyd, Woodhouse, and Sequerra 2020). We begin by briefly discussing some developments in UK women's sport since 2012.

Background: developments in women's sport in the UK post-2012

There has been a recent uplift in the UK in the prominence of the involvement of women and girls in sport, and in their media coverage, though there is an important debate still to be had, of course, about the relative *style* of media treatment of such developments (see below). In 2015 it was estimated that women's sport still made up only 7% of all sports media coverage in the UK, but it has been argued that from around 2012 women's sport was beginning to be taken rather more seriously by the mainstream media in the UK (Petty and Pope 2019). Twenty-twelve was the year London hosted the Olympic Games for the first time since the so-called 'Austerity Games' of 1948, the media coverage of which confirmed the ritualistic and ceremonial aspects of sport for national identity construction as part of the UK public broadcaster BBC's future entertainment policy (Haynes 2010). Research suggests that the brief period in the build-up to and the hosting of an Olympic Games is one of those very few occasions when men and women in elite sport achieve near equal billing in terms of media coverage. During the short span of the Olympics, *national* identity often trumps gender in sport by 'bending' the normative gender rules, especially for host nations (Wensing and Bruce 2003). Women, as well as men, can briefly become national sporting heroes, and on a close to equal footing. In the UK the number of GB women competitors involved in recent Olympics now outnumbers men (Ingle 2021), and the increasing emphasis in the UK on 'human interest' narratives around elite level sport also invites more coverage of women in sporting contexts (Johansson 2008).

This 2012 'spike' in the public focus on women's sport in the UK might have been a temporary blip, but in September 2012 the Minister for Media, Culture & Sport, Maria Miller, wrote to mainstream UK broadcasters urging them *not* to cut their coverage of women's sport just because London 2012 was over. This might have been simple expediency, or even a form of PR political grandstanding on the back of favourable international exposure for women's sport in an era when sporting rights for elite men's sport had largely been annexed to commercial channels (Boyle and Haynes 2004). However, it was expected to have a very real impact on the BBC which, as part of its public service remit, regularly has to make a funding settlement with UK Government about the size and nature of the

annual public licence fee, income which pays for its main channels and other output (Milne 2016).

Unsurprisingly, this intervention meant that British TV licence holders would now hear and see from 2012 onwards, much more coverage of women's sport on free-to-view BBC outlets, though rising costs and competition for elite men's sport between satellite TV providers also meant increased coverage of women's cricket, rugby union, hockey, and netball on these commercial pay-to-view networks in the UK. Interviewed five years later, in 2017, the BBC's newly-appointed first female head of sport, Barbara Slater, argued that coverage of women's sport had been 'transformed' on the BBC since 2012, claiming that close to 30% of all live sport on the channel now involved women as competitors. Moreover, she reported that of the 12.4 million aggregate audience who had watched BBC's live coverage of the FIFA Women's World Cup in Canada in 2015 (more than double the TV audience for the 2011 women's finals), 48% had previously watched no women's sport at all (Martinson 2017). Public awareness and demand for women's sport had been intensely stimulated in the period 2012–2017, Slater claimed, though this did not always protect broadcasters from wider criticism of their sports coverage.

Contradictions in the increased visibility of women's sport

Traditionally, women's sport has been enacted in an arena and culture characterized by hegemonic masculinity, 'compulsory heterosexuality' and an accompanying stigma for lesbian sporting women (Wright and Clarke 1999; Sartore and Cunningham 2009; Connell 1995). These corporeal and sexuality tensions may be relaxing somewhat today, but they remain relevant for revealing just how many girls and women in sport are faced with challenging heterosexual discourses that still shape mainstream sport's imaging, talk, and access. The relative fluidity of contemporary identity construction may offer opportunities for a wider range of gender performances by women (and some men) in different contexts today and also increasingly allows for the routine performance of 'bi-gendered embodiment' in sport and elsewhere – 'manly' women and 'feminine' men (Wedgewood 2004). In this sense, traditionally dominant hegemonic forms of masculinity – and conventional femininities, too – are more challenged today, not only, for example, by footballers such as the USA's iconic Megan Rapinoe, but also by more horizontally structured, more inclusive and more progressive, masculinities (see Brookes 2019). These 'new' masculinities can 'open up space' for accepting a much wider variety of gendered behaviours, even in the traditionally hetero-masculine setting of sport (Dashper 2012; Anderson and McGuire 2010).

So, how much has really changed in terms of dominant assumptions around sport, gender and sexuality and the possible greater public acceptance of women's sport? How is women's involvement in sport treated in different parts of the world? Evidence here is by no means conclusive and some international studies seem to point in a different direction (see, e.g. Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015). Michaela Musto and her colleagues (2017) offer a nuanced and critical perspective. They examined changes in women's sports TV coverage in the USA from 1989 to 2014 and argue that it has indeed shifted from being overtly denigrating about women's sport and associated issues around sexuality, to being ostensibly 'respectful' of women's elite-level participation. But these authors also see this development as one of promoting a form of 'gender-bland sexism': a guiding

framework used by men sports commentators to superficially extend the principles of merit to *some* women in sport, while managing and making sense of the fact that more talented and more competitive women are now moving into this previously closely guarded masculine realm.

The use of such language and idioms effectively reinforces and normalizes a hierarchy between men's and women's sports, while simultaneously avoiding charges of overt sexism. Gone are some of the overtly homophobic and sexist tropes of the past but, simultaneously, the dominant *style* of coverage is designed to perpetuate widely-held and deep-rooted beliefs about men's inherent athletic superiority. By symbolically positioning men's sports as 'naturally' more interesting and exciting, their higher production values help legitimize the exclusion of women from sports TV news, albeit in a subtler manner than before (Musto, Cooky, and Messner 2017, 583). In fact, this often painfully 'respectful' coverage of female athletes and sport on US TV today, these authors argue, is simply a convenient new lens through which the male-dominated media continues to normalize deeply-rooted beliefs that 'real' sport is still played by men.

In the UK, Black and Fielding-Lloyd (2019, 282) have similarly argued that the discursive positioning of the England women's team as 'outsiders' in press accounts of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup, served to (re)establish men's football as superior, culturally salient and 'better' than the women's team/game. However, UK sports sociologists Kate Petty and Stacey Pope (2019) are more convinced that real change has occurred in media responses to women's sport, especially since 2012. They argue for a 'transformation' in its typically gendered treatment, for example, by focussing mainly on press coverage of the England team and its players during the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup finals. Public awareness of the finals may have been slight in Canada (Dunn 2016) but England's exploits were widely covered back home, on BBC TV and via press articles and images and even, in some newspapers, regularly making it onto the front page. Because of its truncated history, women's football in England lacks the legacy of memories of the pivotal moments, record breaking displays, and the construction of heroes ever-present in public narratives about the men's game – which also means that today's women players are often compared, negatively, to their male equivalents from the past (Woodward 2017; Black and Fielding-Lloyd 2019). But in their content analysis, Petty and Pope (2019) argue that it was the skill of women players, rather than familiar tropes around power, sexualisation and gender difference, which were among the most prevalent themes in UK press reports of 2015, suggesting a radical move away from the media tendency to reduce women athletes to little more than the subject of the male gaze, or as thinly veiled sex objects. Here was more evidence for the emergence of, 'a potentially new form of femininity that refuses to cede physical strength and sporting excellence to men and thus represents an important rupture in the articulation of sport and masculinity' (Bruce 2016, 372)

Recent evidence from parts of South America, where responses to women's football have also tended, historically, to coincide with an ongoing eroticization of the female body framed within a deeply heterosexual male gaze, also suggests a changing approach to the women's game. While Messner's (1988) portrayal of the female athletic body as a highly contested ideological terrain continues to hold sway in much of twenty-first century Latin America, respectful and more extended media coverage of women's football in countries such as Brazil and Argentina, has also been seen as an increasingly normalized feature of the

domestic print and electronic media, especially since the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup (Wood 2018).

A more detailed critical discourse analysis of public attitudes and the way such coverage has proceeded may support Musto, Cooky, and Messner (2017) in their interpretation of how far things have really moved on for women in sport – or stayed broadly the same. Eroticised images of elite sporting women for self-branding and promotion purposes may suggest third wave feminist forms of empowerment, for example, but do they also risk the 're-sexualisation' of the female body through sport (King 2013)? Clearly, some caution needs to be exercised here around claims about 'liberation' or a 'boom time' for women's sport, one which assumes that gender equality is becoming inexorably closer over time (McLachlan 2019; Bruce 2016). However, in the UK, something really did seem to be changing, at least regarding public and media responses to women's team sport, especially because pay-tv channels were now struggling over scarce and expensive rights to live men's sport and could cover women's sport much more cheaply (or even for free). They also had plenty of air-time to fill, with live coverage increasingly at a premium, no matter the sport or the gender of those involved.

All this has prompted, we would contend, a general increase in the visibility of women's sport in the UK, including women's football. We also agree with many academics (Rowe 1998; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messner 2007; Wedgewood 2004; Pope and Williams 2011; Bruce 2016) that complex, plural masculinities and femininities now operate both inside and outside sport and that, while such contexts remain a gender construction site policed by hegemonic masculinity, they can differ according to relations in specific sports settings. In contrast to sexualization, where a female athlete's body is valued at the expense of her sporting achievements, third wave feminism has had some success in promoting a more empowering discourse of 'pretty and powerful' which values both, thus reflecting some of the messiness and complexities of women's late-modern lives (Bruce 2016, 369). This theoretical approach allows us to explore the very real ambiguities and contradictions – and potential for change – of lived sporting experiences today. Elsewhere, Cleland, Pope, and Williams (2020) have examined the exclusionary practices of sexism and subordination aimed at women in men's football, the extent to which women are regarded as 'authentic' fans, and highlighted how progressive masculinities can co-exist with misogynist versions in making such judgements. Elsewhere, we have examined men's attitudes towards women in the sports nexus and men's performances of masculinities (Pope et al. forthcoming). In this paper, we conduct a more detailed analysis of how attitudes among football's main gatekeepers of 'gender policing' in the sport - men and women fans of men's UK football clubs – have responded in light of this recent media blitz, changing approaches to gender identity construction in UK sport, and their own 'live' *experience* of women's football. We set out to address the following, more specific, research questions, in part by analyzing these fans' existing contacts with the women's game:

1. Have attitudes in Britain towards women's football changed among fans of the men's game, at a time of the former's increased media visibility and profile?
2. Do fans of men's football follow women's football and what are their experiences of watching the women's game live?
3. What are the perceived barriers for fans of men's football to attending more women's matches?

Methodology

The picture outlined above makes for a complex and nuanced narrative around the developing popularity of women's sport in the UK. Women's football has not yet captured the nation's attention quite like the men's game does – at least not in terms of attendances and viewing figures (Haddad 2019) – but audiences are growing and we have argued that this is contributing to slowly changing conventional views in the UK about the 'natural' synergies long established between most team sports and the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity performed by men (Pope, forthcoming). The England women's team finished a creditable third in the FIFA Women's World Cup tournament in 2015, and their semi-final defeat versus Japan was watched by a reported peak audience of 2.4 m viewers in the early hours of the morning in the UK. Given this spike in viewing figures, we have assessed the football public's response to the women's game via an online survey, which ran from September 2015 to January 2016. This approach is a familiar one and it has proved highly successful for others in covering a wide range of issues in sport (Cleland and Cashmore 2016; Cleland 2018; Cleland, Pope, and Williams 2020). One of the authors had previously developed relationships with editors at UK football fan message boards, who allow the use of their sites for collecting football-related data for academic purposes. Where possible, opening posts promoting the research study were located in the 'off topic' section of the respective club message board, as this is often viewed by message board editors as less disruptive to discussions around the club first team (which is the reason why the majority of fans engage in message boards in the first place).

In carrying out the survey, we followed the ethical guidelines established by The Association of Internet Researchers concerning potential harm, privacy, consent, and deception. The introductory paragraph on fan message boards provided an overview of the research aims and confidentiality assurances, and it also contained a link taking the participants directly to the survey, where the emphasis on anonymity and privacy was repeated in the participant information sheet. Those fans who did complete the survey were reminded that by clicking 'finish', they were giving their consent for their views to be used as part of a research project.

The survey consisted of a range of closed questions that included requests for some demographic details on the respondents' gender and age. We then asked a series of closed and open questions about their views and experiences of women's sport in the UK and women's football. Of the fans who eventually completed the survey (n = 2,347), 83.4% were men – slightly higher than the estimated ratio for live attendances at professional men's matches in England (Pope 2017). Just 1% of our respondents were aged 17 or under, 12% were aged 18–25, 18% were aged 26–35, 20% were aged 36–45, 26% were aged 46–55, and 23% were aged over 56 years. We were well aware, of course, of self-selection issues in relation to online surveys of this kind, but our aim was to generate as large a sample as possible, so we felt that, despite its drawbacks, a survey of this type was the most appropriate method with which to proceed. Although we managed to achieve a sizeable response, we make no claim that our results are representative of all fans interested in UK football. But we would claim they do offer a deeper insight into men and women fans' views on fandom and gender issues in the women's game.

In order to analyze the qualitative data as percentages through descriptive statistics, we went through a process of open coding across a number of phases to thematically identify

emerging patterns and commonalities, as well as any significant differences within the 2,347 responses (Bryman 2012). A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the key research questions, a patterned response or a clear meaning or route revealed within the data set. The thorny question of what counts as a pattern/theme, or what 'size' does a theme need to be is one of prevalence, in terms both of space within each data item and of prevalence across the entire data set (Braun and Clarke 2006). This approach allows for the flexible identification, interpretation and reporting of patterns or themes within transcribed sub-sets, but it does so by following a series of six established phases of activity and analysis, ranging from familiarizing oneself with the data, through generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, naming those themes, and producing the output (Braun and Clarke 2006). By using this approach, involving re-reading the data and searching for patterns in response to the analytic interests of the researcher, a 'theme' does not simply 'emerge' passively from the data. Instead, it must capture something important or revealing in relation to the overall research questions, but must be more than a simple cherry-picking 'anecdotalism' (Bryman, 1988). Thus, the 'keyness' of an identified theme does not depend simply on the use of quantifiable measures. Instead, it must capture something of defining importance in relation to the overall research agenda. We examine three such themes in what follows.

Discussion

Changing public attitudes towards the women's game?

Table 1 shows that most male and female respondents watched at least some matches during the FIFA Women's World Cup tournament in 2015, even though matches were televised live into the early morning hours. Women watched a little more intensively and a little more widely than men, but both groups demonstrated substantial TV contact with the finals.

But did our respondents believe that watching the finals changed attitudes? A number of key themes and sub-themes emerged here. The first was one of clear-eyed positivity: that this coverage was indeed seen by many as something of a 'breakthrough' moment for women's football in England and probably in Britain, too. As a male (36–45) Queens Park Rangers fan explained: 'Yes, there is a realization that women can play the game very well and, indeed, women's football can be more entertaining and technical than men's', whilst a male (56+) Swindon Town fan stated: 'I have the deepest respect for top women athletes in soccer.' This sort of position was expressed by some men, but more regularly by women respondents:

> The women's game is different to the men's game and on many levels much more enjoyable. The WWC 2015 showcased the high standards of football being played and the technical abilities of the players. (Female, 56+, Manchester United)

Table 1. How closely did you follow the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup finals? % (N).

	Male	Female
Not at all	27.6 (535)	23.3 (90)
I watched all the England matches only	4.6 (89)	3.9 (15)
I watched most of the England matches only	11.6 (225)	9.0 (35)
I watched one or two England matches only	23.2 (451)	20.4 (79)
I watched England and other matches during the tournament	30.5 (592)	41.3 (160)
I did not watch England but watched other teams in the tournament	2.5 (48)	2.1 (8)
TOTALS	100 (1940)	100 (387)

A strong sub-theme around these positive views was a comparison drawn between England's women international players and their male equivalents. Elite women players were argued to play more respectfully, and with more enjoyment, compared to highly-rewarded, elite male players, whose conduct on the field was often criticized. 'There is a general sense of respect and humility for the England ladies' internationals', argued a male Stoke City fan (22–25). 'The fact that they get paid a living wage, if they're lucky, to do what every sportsperson wants to do (compete in their chosen sport for a living) as opposed to their male counterparts who get paid extortionate amounts of money for, oftentimes, achieving much, much less.'

The launch of the semi-professional Women's Super League in 2011 was a first step towards full professionalization for elite women players in England, which would follow in 2018. However, women players' salaries remain a long way behind those of men (Wrack 2019a; Taylor 2020). In addition, even elite women players today can experience highly precarious working conditions, in terms of access to facilities, resource allocation, economic remuneration and medical care, yet they are expected to be 'grateful' for the opportunity to play (Culvin 2021). These inequalities in pay were taken by our respondents to be something of a positive: excessive salaries were seen as the root of more deceit and cheating in the top level of the men's game. By contrast: 'It [women's football] seemed to me to represent something found in lower league men's football: honesty and a purity, just a love of the game, which fans can relate to, as most of us aren't millionaires' (Male, 46–55, Newcastle United). Elite women's football in England is also consciously promoted by The FA as a 'cleaner', more wholesome, and morally superior, version of the sport (Fielding-Lloyd, Woodhouse, and Sequerra 2020). For some respondents, this approach was having a wider impact on the women's game:

> One of the main things I have noticed in the woman's game is the lack of diving and the higher level of respect and sportsmanship. This is even evident in the junior football I watch where the girls are lot more respectful to the ref and other players than in the boys' junior game. (Male, 36–45, Liverpool)

Whilst on the surface this perception may appear to be appreciative it could also be seen, of course, as reaffirming hegemonic masculinity, a subtle form of gendered othering, something that helps to reinforce gender hierarchies and stereotypical notions of gender in sport (Fink, LaVoi, and Newhall 2016; Kane 1995). Predictably, too, a substantial proportion of men in our sample – and a minority of women – were simply unimpressed by the Women's World Cup and they remained strongly opposed to women's football in general, citing mainly its perceived athletic and competitive failings, always in relation to the men's game. The main focus here was not, however, on the sexualization of women players (Cox and Thompson 2000), but on alleged differences in the intensity, physicality and basic technique of women's football. By pitting elite men against elite women this, invariably and 'naturally', demonstrated the latter's inferiority (Black and Fielding-Lloyd 2019). 'Perhaps the women's team should play the England men's under 16s', suggested a male Exeter City fan (46–55). 'You then will understand the huge gulf between the male and female games.' A Sheffield United male fan (26–35) agreed: 'If the two tournaments ran parallel [on TV], the viewers for the men's game would render the women's game almost ignored.'

This idea, that women's football inevitably fails the 'market test' and that the media – especially a 'woke' BBC – is ultimately behind its alleged over promotion, was a view widely

shared among critics of the coverage of the 2015 World Cup finals (see Pope et al. forthcoming). Male fans of less exposed, smaller men's clubs, especially, resented the new public focus on the women's game. An AFC Barrow male fan (22–25), for example, was presumably unaware of the impressive UK viewing figures for the event in Canada in 2015 when arguing that: 'The increased media coverage far surpasses the demand and interest.' As for 'changing attitudes', another male respondent commented:

> I doubt it will have that much of an impact at all, long-term, despite the apparent insistence on the part of the BBC that a) we must now take women's football just as seriously as men's football, and b) that only an appallingly unreconstructed neanderthal could possibly have something negative or critical to say about women's football. (36–45, no club identified)

This was part of a wider male view, rooted in hegemonic masculinity, that a 'politically-correct lobby' ensured that women's sport was beyond critique. Other men contended, however, that residual and ingrained prejudice remained the key barrier to greater acceptance for women players: 'Many football fans remain misogynistic,' affirmed a male Birmingham City fan (36–45), whilst a Gillingham fan (male, 46–55) was similarly pessimistic, claiming that: 'There is still the lingering "Stone Age" thinking from some men regarding women in football, which is so entrenched that you will never change them.' Indeed, even as the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup concluded with some England success, some female respondents were angrily reporting on the routine and casual public expression of anti-women sentiments about the finals on social media: 'Not just sexism, downright misogyny. Some of the comments I saw on Twitter during the Women's World Cup were a disgrace' (female, 46–55, Norwich City). Even those who generally identified a new positivity in attitudes, claimed that change could be glacial in its progress. 'I have been attending football matches for thirty years', said a female Leicester City fan (46–55): 'From Premier League to local park football, absolutely nothing has changed as regards sexism in football… Treatment of women is, at times, still derisory and my opinions get ignored – because I am a woman.'

Experiences of following and attending women's football

Despite an extensive body of work on fans of men's football, to date little work has examined fandom in the women's game (see Pope 2018). To address this, we asked our respondents if they had attended a women's game and to comment on the experience if they had. The first thing to note here is the extent to which *older* fans – especially men – *had* attended a women's match, compared to fans in the middle age ranges (see Table 2).

Table 2. Have you ever been to a women's football match? 'Yes', by age and gender. % (N).

	All	Men	Women
17 and under	32.1 (9)	17.4 (4)	100.0 (5)
18–21 years	28.5 (33)	24.4 (22)	42.3 (11)
22–25 years	28.9 (50)	25.7 (36)	43.8 (14)
26–35 years	26.8 (114)	23.6 (87)	48.1 (27)
36–45 years	26.9 (127)	34.9 (98)	32.6 (29)
46–55 years	37.0 (220)	35.5 (173)	47.0 (47)
56 and over	36.5 (194)	34.9 (158)	45.7 (37)
ALL	31.9 (748)	29.6 (578)	43.7 (170)

It has often been observed that older male fans might enjoy the slower pace and greater intimacy of the women's game and may have easier and preferred access to elite women's football compared, for example, to attending elite professional men's matches, because of price, stadium atmosphere, player and fan behaviour (see, e.g. Lopez 1997; Pope 2018). We were also interested in the extent to which our respondents might 'follow' a women's team and its results, a slightly different question from that of attendance (see Table 3). Here, just under half of all women (47.8%) said they followed a women's team, compared to around one-third (32.9%) of all men. Most women fans followed their clubs via social media (25.1%) and the majority of these women's sides were linked to men's clubs. Given that around one-quarter of the total sample did not watch the FIFA Women's World Cup on TV, these figures are perhaps not that surprising. We do not know the level of fixtures being reported on below, and that will have some impact on fans' recounted experiences.

But many respondents – both men and women – who had attended women's matches reflected very positively on the activity and its impact: 'I found the experience enjoyable and enlightening', said a male Chester FC fan (26–35). 'And [It] made me re-evaluate some of the preconceived ideas I had beforehand about women's football.' Again, the 'grassroots romanticism' (male, 26–35, Portsmouth) of the female game was mentioned by some. 'I enjoyed it', stated a male Newcastle United fan (36–45). 'It felt more real and grassroots than the empty men's Premier League experience. I was also able to enjoy it as almost a different sport to the men's game.' A younger female Bolton Wanderers (22–25) agreed that the women's game was *different*, not inferior, to the men's equivalent: 'I have watched football my whole life and the stereotype [that] women's football is slow and boring is rubbish! Different styles of football occur all over the world; you still want your team to win and it's still exciting!'

However, the so-called 'family atmosphere' argued to be typically generated at women's football in the UK (Fielding-Lloyd, Woodhouse, and Sequerra 2020) was clearly anathema for many men, and also for some women fans of the men's game. For this older female Glasgow Rangers fan (56+), for example, 'Compared to male football I found the experience to be rather flat, and I put that down to the crowd. The atmosphere was poor, and it was mainly families who was there.' But this 'family' emphasis was also highlighted positively by both men and women, though for some regular attenders of the men's game the more 'relaxed' and more carnival-like climate of the women's game clearly took some getting used to. The experience was initially deemed 'a bit strange' by this Birmingham City fan (Male, 36–45), but there were clearly perceived benefits:

> It's a lot less partisan - no segregation, lots of families watching, loads of kids running around, and the players are more friendly towards the fans, signing autographs and having photos, etc. The Women's Super League are putting a lot of effort into creating a match 'experience'; things for kids to do outside, mascots and gift bags, free mini balls etc. It's got to be a good thing, and far, far cheaper than a Premier League or a Championship men's game.

Table 3. Do you follow the performances of the women's team at your own club? % (N).

	Men	Women
Yes	30.5 (593)	43.4 (167)
No	47.7 (925)	39.2 (151)
My club does not have a women's team	19.4 (377)	13.0 (50)
I follow an independent women's club	2.4 (47)	4.4 (17)

Similar points were made, but even more approvingly, by women fans. 'The clubs seem to encourage families and children to attend by having mascots and fun fairs before the game' said a female Wrexham fan (22–25). She went on: 'The atmosphere was great and no need for segregation. It was nice to sit and watch a game of football without bad language too.' For a Manchester City female fan (26–35) attending women's football was:

> Thoroughly enjoyable! The atmosphere was fabulous: supportive of all of the players (no nasty chants) and very family-friendly. Impressive. I think the lack of crowd segregation (as also happens in rugby) vastly improves behaviour.

A minority of women respondents exhibited a general lack of interest in women's football, though in some cases this was argued to be the result of a lack of marketing, or poor TV coverage of the women's game, as well as a general sense (as expressed in low attendances, poorer facilities, etc.) that women's football still lacked the glamour, professionalism and glossy entertainment values of men's football (Pope 2018). Some men who had attended (possibly junior) women's matches were highly negative about the quality of play, regularly invoking comparisons with very low-level versions of male football. 'Terrible,' began a male York City fan (46–55). 'The standard is so poor it was hard to watch. I left before half-time.' A male Bristol Rovers fan (26–35), like many men, agreed with him: 'Awful. The standard was abysmal; it basically resembled a schools match.'

Often adding to this perceived disincentive was the lack of personal investment in women's clubs of the sort that had been built up over many years supporting men's football. A male Queens Park Rangers fan (26–35), for example, said he was, 'Bored rigid […] Without emotional involvement I was left thinking why am I bothering watching when there is better available?' This view was often linked to the authenticity issue; men implying that masculinities *defined* sporting praxis and that 'serious' sport could not occur if the protagonists, and most of the crowd, was female. This wider point – that football support is somehow 'naturally' rooted in a temporal and place nexus *for men*, and thus was about much more than mere 'entertainment' – was widely made, and was best expressed by a young Blackburn Rovers fan (Male, 22–25):

> Sport is different to other types of entertainment, so I'd struggle to be motivated to watch any match live which doesn't involve my team or a team that we have some sort of history with. Which basically means that going to watch a women's team never occurs to me.

There are good reasons, of course, why investing emotionally over time in the women's game has been particularly problematic in England (Woodward 2017). Women's football was effectively banned there for almost 50 years from 1921, following the success of charitable women's munitions' teams during the First World War (Williams 2003, 2019; Lopez 1997). Women's clubs have simply not had the same opportunities to build relationships with a fan base in the way that even very small men's professional clubs have been able to, stretching right back to the latter part of the nineteenth century (Taylor 2005).

Barriers to match attendance

A key aspect of the FA's strategy for women and girls' football is to grow a fanbase for the women's game in order to increase its profile and ensure long-term financial stability (The FA 2021). We have outlined above some reasons why many fans of the men's game refused

to countenance attending women's football: lack of time (given a prior commitment to the men's game); the perceived inferior quality of the women's product; a lack of 'atmosphere' at women's matches; and the absence of strong emotional attachments to women's clubs. Of these, time and resource constraints were an especially powerful disincentive. Here, the widely-held view was that, unless already an organic feature of a men's club, women's football probably needed to establish an entirely new fan base to succeed. 'I already commit enough time and money to following Charlton [Athletic]' said a male fan (26–35), typical of this position. 'In my opinion, women's football will only succeed by appealing to female supporters and neutral fans. It's unfair to expect committed fans of men's teams to also form the basis of supporters for female club sides.' Adding to this were complaints about difficulties in accessing basic information about when and where women's matches were staged – and in some cases exactly *how* they were being advertised: 'I would go to Norwich ones [women's matches], but they are not widely publicised so I don't know they are on' (Female, 46–55, Norwich City).

Very often here, too, men couched their possible interest in attending a women's match only within the context of having a female to attend with (usually a family member). This company of women or girls somehow seemed to act to 'legitimise' the presence of male fans and their interest in the spectacle of the women's game. This older Woking FC male fan (56+) was typical of many when he complained about: 'Lack of knowledge of where/when. I have no affiliation to any women's team in particular. I might go to an England match if I could find a female interested in coming with me (possibly daughter)!' As Allison's (2018, 93) research on women's football in the US concluded, heterosexual men's fandom for women's football without such companions was often, 'positioned as inherently and inappropriately sexualized'. The FA's key plan in launching the Women's Super League was to target, 'the 1.2 million fathers in England with 10- to 15-year-old children … and the 263,000, 10- to 15- year-old girls, who played in schools and clubs' (Fielding-Lloyd, Woodhouse, and Sequerra 2020, 169). Certainly, the idea that resistant UK men might decide to attend women's matches *without* children, and especially without female companionship, seemed largely off-limits. Women were expected to initiate interest for men to follow, sometimes out of obligation to the family: 'There is so much football on offer' said a Manchester United male fan (46–55). 'If my daughter or wife wanted to go to a women's match, I'd go with them.' This suggests that the 'family friendly' approach to marketing women's football in the UK may be effective in appealing to some women fans or new fans, but it is less likely to be successful with male fans who are already committed to the existing culture of the men's game.

The precise *location* of the small number of women's elite clubs in England also worked against many of our respondents who were interested in 'experimenting' with a women's game. Women's clubs in England have tended to be located in smaller suburban venues in more remote locations and certainly beyond a familiar network of those stadia hosting men's matches (Whyatt 2019). Lack of services was an issue for some respondents: 'Too often women's football is seen at poor grounds with no facilities. If they could share league stadia it would help considerably' (male, Bristol City, 56+). More ground sharing with the women's game occurs today, but top clubs are scattered and still play in smaller, less accessible and less well-appointed, venues. As a Welling United fan (male, 26–35) outlined: 'A three-hour round trip late on Sunday isn't appealing.' Moreover, even men who professed

to want to support the women's game and were positive about its recent development, often expressed feelings of being effectively 'locked out' from access to it, as this Leicester City fan (46–55) commented:

> Leicester has a ladies' side…I've no idea where, or when, they play. I buy the matchday programme at Leicester [City] home games and see there are articles about their last game. I tend to look at the scores and maybe skim the report, but little else.

Conclusion

So, what does our research tell us about changing attitudes towards the women's game in the UK in the early decades of the twenty-first century, and about fans of the men's game who attend women's football? Four key issues emerge from our data:

Firstly, notwithstanding the championing by third wave feminism of a set of 'new rules' for the media coverage of women in sport (Bruce 2016), there remains a view, held among mainly male fans in the UK, that the media – especially the BBC – is behind a campaign to promote opportunities for elite women's sport in male domains that it does not deserve, and that this is part of a wider equality agenda that penalizes men and 'their' sport and has little to do with sporting excellence or the market demand for women's sports coverage. For these men (and some women) women athletes and their clubs remain 'naturally' inferior in their sporting practices to men, a 'fact' which is still best laid bare by comparing directly and measuring gender performances in team sports such as football. Attempts to rediscover the history of women's football in the UK may help to challenge established cultural representations of the game that draw exclusively (and often negatively for women) only on narratives about elite men's football (Black and Fielding-Lloyd 2019, 296).

Secondly, against a background of a rump of continued male opposition to the women's game, there are also signs of a greater reflexivity among some of our male respondents about women's football. Part of this increased accommodation and respect is connected to greater knowledge and experience of the women's game, the recent success of the England women's national team, and to more recent general improvements in the athleticism, quality, and technique of women players. But, also at work here were simmering, negative views held about aspects of elite *men's* football, where wages have exponentially increased and cheating is perceived to have become much more commonplace than it is so far in the women's game. Elite women players were often admired by our respondents because they are seen to play more for sporting reasons rather than the financial incentives involved. Indeed, women's football in England is strongly marketed along these lines (Fielding-Lloyd, Woodhouse, and Sequerra 2020). Women were also deemed to play with a greater sense of 'fairness' than occurs in top level men's football. Resistant men insisted, however, that this aspect of the women's game is little more than a signifier that elite women's football lacks the seriousness and the intense physicality and competitiveness of the men's equivalent.

Thirdly, actively promoting the women's game as a very different kind of matchday experience, one that is less partisan and less 'masculine' and tribal, but also less threatening than the men's game, and which invokes a 'family ethos' and a sense of diverting 'spectacle' (see Fielding-Lloyd, Woodhouse, and Sequerra 2020, 172), may appeal to some fans of the men's game, but it alienates others. In its worst case it can serve to confirm the marginal status of the women's game as liminal, playful entertainment – an ersatz 'carnival' - more than serious sport (Bakhtin 1984). So, too, does the fact that empathetic male fans often

see female companions as a necessary condition for their own attendance and acceptance at women's fixtures. The more general debate about the preferred 'atmosphere' at English football matches is also tied up with a deeply masculinized understanding of sporting authenticity and fandom, based largely on the emotional investment already made in the intense culture of established *men's* clubs. Such feelings will necessarily take some time to develop, and perhaps metamorphize, in relation to women's football clubs.

Finally, and in summary, attendance at Women's Super League matches in England is growing, but is still quite limited today, at least in part because of a basic lack of information on where and when matches are staged, a crowded sporting calendar, a deep, prior commitment to men's football, and residual concerns about facilities, 'atmosphere' and playing quality. Our findings also suggest a mixed response, at best, among fans of the men's game, and an implacable hegemonic resistance among a hard core of mainly male fans to growing and supporting women's football. Ironically, as we have pointed out, increasing television coverage of the women's game in the UK often acts to further provoke and embed such sentiments. Nevertheless, on 2 July 2019, a record 11.7 m TV viewers in the UK saw England's FIFA World Cup defeat to the USA women in France, the most watched British TV broadcast of the year (see Wrack 2019b). And on 22 March 2021 it was announced that the Women's Super League in England had signed a 'landmark' broadcasting deal with Sky and the BBC, two of the biggest television broadcasters in the UK. The new deal is worth up to £24 million over three seasons. At last, domestic women's football had a paid, regular slot on established mainstream and sports TV, albeit one that compared abjectly with the £5 billion global media deal for men's Premier League football. And the women's game was still faced with considerable popular public resistance from within the established men's game, a signal that stern challenges remain for generating wider changes in attitudes towards women's football of a sort linked to the landmark BBC coverage of the FIFA Women's World Cup in Canada in 2015, and which we have started to unpack in this research.

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