

**‘More than just a game’: family and spectacle in marketing the England Women’s Super League**

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**TITLE: “More than just a game”: Family and spectacle in marketing the England Women’s Super League**

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The Women's Super League (WSL) is the first semi-professional women's football league in England and the Football Association (FA) is central to reproducing its values and practices. This study employed observation at WSL matches and interviews with personnel involved in the League to identify how the FA conceptualised the WSL as a product in its first three years. The study found that the elite club game's existing audience was alienated by the FA's articulation of a heteronormative family target audience of young girls and their fathers. An overriding concern also appeared to be providing a commercialised matchday experience that goes beyond the game itself, situating the match at the periphery of broader entertainment. We argue that in positioning the WSL as a niche and new entertainment product, thereby eradicating the pre-WSL history of the elite club game, the FA has constructed women's football as inherently distinct from, and inferior to, men's football, negating any perceived threat to the wider gender order within the sport.

Keywords: women's football; gender; spectacle; Women's Super League; Football Association;

As the sport's regulatory body in England, the Football Association has had a turbulent relationship with women's football, from the 1921 ban preventing women's football being played on FA-affiliated pitches to their assuming control of women's football in 1993. Whilst participation levels in women's football have significantly increased since the takeover, from 10,400 registered players in 1993 to 147,000 in 2016, the growth in female football participation peaked in the mid-2000s and regular participation rates fell contributing to football as a whole missing its Sport England growth targets<sup>1</sup>. Both the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the FA identified the creation of a semi-professional league as central to the sport's development<sup>2</sup>. The Football Association Women's Super League (FA WSL) was subsequently launched in 2011, initially with one league of 9 teams, and an additional league of ten teams, WSL 2, being added in 2013<sup>3</sup>.

Prevailing discourses of women's football have positioned the game as culturally distinct from the men's, as a fairer form played in a more sporting manner<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, Williams<sup>5</sup> identifies how women's football is:

'normalised' through its multiple femininities as an aspirational, committedly athletic, attractive, fun, approachable version of the game ... there is a narrative about females bringing only good moral values to sport that risks essentialising women's football as a story of 'sugar and spice and all things nice' .'

Further, women's teams are often relegated to a 'worthy' charitable role which maintains their position as outsiders in a sport that is recognised as a predominantly masculine pursuit, structurally, institutionally, culturally and socially<sup>6</sup>. Sport is seen not only to perpetuate inequalities but does so in a way that is often accepted and legitimised. The way the elite structure of women's football has been designed and operationalised by the FA must be located within these narratives.

Financial viability and commercial sustainability were at the heart of the tendering process which aimed to ensure that clubs accepted into the WSL were those with the best business model. As the FA stated, "the budgets and business plans the clubs and The FA are working to are modest and flexible ... the goal is to work closely with clubs so that ... they can become small, sustainable businesses in their own right"<sup>7</sup>. Tendering guidance stated that the four criteria clubs had to meet were 'Financial and Business Management', 'Commercial and Marketing', 'Facilities' and 'Players and Support Staff'. As part of 'Financial and Business Management' clubs must provide "detailed financial forecasts for two years demonstrating solvency ... clear proof of income or comprehensive evidence of plans to generate income"<sup>8</sup>.

The focus on financial criteria in the FA's introduction of the WSL mirrors commercial narratives relating to consumption, profit and financial viability which abound within sport<sup>9</sup>. As the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation identifies, "women's sport represents a persuasive commercial opportunity. It is in demand with an audience that's highly attractive to commercial sponsors and advertisers"<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, to have a future the FA required women's football to be part of the commercialised and commodified reality already identifiable within men's football. Whilst the financial opportunities of the men's game have been exploited, its huge profits are generally shared between the EPL and clubs; new markets needed to be explored and as the organisation responsible for women's game the FA had within its remit an area for development in the sport market.

Discourses of football, particularly in its elite forms, are centred on the sport being a spectacle with the priority being the consumption of it as a product and within such discourses, attracting and entertaining large crowds is paramount<sup>11</sup>. In a spectacularised vision "success and failure is measured according to mass participation and public acclamation for being a great event can be obtained"<sup>12</sup>. It was within this environment that the FA sought to develop a market for elite women's football which had previously existed outside such spectacularised and commodified narratives.

In its desire to attract larger crowds, the WSL originally ran through the summer months as it was assumed that competing alongside the men's season would hinder its ability to attract supporters, sponsors and media coverage. Further, it was anticipated that a summer league would be more 'family friendly' and would overcome the problem of constant postponements during winter, due to the substandard facilities that women's football has historically been played in<sup>13</sup>. However, the existence of a summer free from sport into which the WSL could fit to create its own identity away from the crowded winter calendar, has proven to be wishful thinking as the WSL has had to take breaks to accommodate both the Olympics and the Women's World Cup which led to the same fixture congestion experienced in previous years<sup>14</sup>. Further, it could be argued that efforts to promote the commercial viability of the WSL have been contradicted by some scheduling decisions that appear to reify perceptions of its inferiority to men's professional football. For example, in 2016 a match between Arsenal and Chelsea had its kick-off time brought forward to 6pm to allow spectators to get home to watch Arsenal's men's team play a televised game away from home<sup>15</sup>.

The introduction of England's semi-professional women's football league provides a unique opportunity to situate and investigate contemporary discourses relating to football in that its introduction cannot be taken as evidence that women are now accepted into dominant football discourses. Below we provide a critical examination of the introduction of the WSL, including an analysis of the FA vision which underpinned its target audience and marketing strategy.

## **Methodology**

As part of a larger study, thirty-nine games were attended by one of the authors over a three year period, including visits to all grounds of the original eight WSL teams. Gold<sup>19</sup> identifies four roles which field researchers adopt; complete participant, complete observer, participant as observer and observer as participant<sup>16</sup>. However, Walsh<sup>20</sup> speaks of movement between these categories, with his 'marginal native' position providing a better description of the observations carried out for this study in the author's efforts to achieve "a poise between a strangeness that avoids over rapport and a familiarity that grasps the perspectives of people in the situation"<sup>17</sup>.

In addition to observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key figures working with or at a range of WSL clubs. These interviews were conducted via snowball sampling and allowed us to more fully understand how those working within the WSL at club level experienced the new league in terms of its purpose and position in relation to football narratives as a whole. These interviews enabled us to give voice to the experiences of those affected by the FA's decisions, including those enacting FA policy, rather than the 'official narratives' of the WSL that may have been provided by more senior FA staff.

Nine participants were male and eight female. Interviews were transcribed verbatim to accompany detailed observation notes and were inductively coded to identify emergent themes. Brief biographical information is provided alongside the interview data below to provide context. We acknowledge that due to the relatively small number of people working in elite women's club football in England it is difficult to guarantee participants their anonymity and this was explained in detail to the interviewees at the beginning of the study.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

Through the observations and interviews, two key themes emerged to explain how the WSL was conceptualised as a product by the FA in its first three years. Firstly, the WSL was conceived and marketed as a niche product that was inherently different and separate from male professional club football. Its target audience, and concurrent media strategy, were chosen to present women's football as distinct and, ultimately, unthreatening to the gendered order of sport. Secondly, the FA prioritised a spectacularised vision of the League which led to narrow definitions of success

and risked the credibility of professional women's football in England from the outset. These themes will now be considered.

### **Marketing difference for a niche product**

The FA's tendering guide exemplified the presentation of women's football as intrinsically different and separate from men's when it stated that the new League needed to "enable the development of a niche product"<sup>18</sup>. This narrative was supported by one respondent who clearly positioned the women's game as a distinct form in accordance with traditional ideals of femininity.

*"[it] can offer a high level of entertainment and no nastiness. I think not only will you see more women and children going to football you will see more men going to football. I think that in itself will help to bring an ethical perspective and a new morality that people understand is needed ... taking the tribalism out of the game. When you see a woman tackle another woman you see them use the same venom but not the hatred" (Ex-FA Council Member)*

This respondent's view has also been mirrored by some players, including Kelly Smith, England's record goal scorer, who stated "women's football is a prettier game to watch than men's football because there is no cheating going on. There is no diving or play acting...no falling over, intimidation of referees or trying to get players sent off"<sup>19</sup>. The use of the term 'prettier' and the idea that it is an ethical and morally superior version of the game sustains gendered narratives that attempt to simultaneously sell women's football as worthy of expansion yet female appropriate in ways that do not threaten the commercial superiority of men's football<sup>20</sup>. This is a process often seen when women make inroads into traditionally masculine arenas and has been identified in women's soccer in the US<sup>21</sup>. However, respondents in this study questioned whether this compulsion to differentiate between the men's and women's product was more pronounced in football:

*"it's peculiar to football because in other sports they don't seem to do it. It must be so infused in our thinking that we can't think of women's football without comparing it to men's football, whereas with other sports it doesn't seem to be that much of an issue" (Journalist)*

Indeed, the feminising and conservative identity which appeared to underpin the introduction of the WSL was echoed in the target market, which the FA identified as

central to the League's success<sup>22</sup>. With few examples of professionalised women's elite team sports and the existing FA WPL having very low attendances, the FA had few restrictions in determining the potential fan base. The FA's commercial overview which accompanied the initial tendering process, stressed that the target audience was the 1.2 million fathers in England, with 10 to 15 year old children, who already watch live football and the 263,000, 10 to 15 year old, girls who played in schools and clubs<sup>23</sup>. As the FA's Group Director for Marketing and Communications stated, "the FA explored numerous names and branding routes, all based on solid research around the women's game. The main aim in this brand research was to find something that the key target audience, 9-15 year old girls, identified with"<sup>24</sup>.

The vision of a family friendly game espoused by the FA was defined in terms of fathers, with little mention of mothers. Female fans are often overlooked in narratives relating to football<sup>25</sup> and are frequently assumed in the literature to be less authentic and less committed<sup>26</sup>. Yet the respondents in this study routinely claimed that the defined WSL target audience overlooked the existing audience for women's football. For example:

*"the biggest target market is the women that play. My argument is we [the elite league] play at the same time as they do. For me it should be a mid-week league, I know there are problems travelling mid-week but if they are not playing they will come" (Chair of WSL club A)*

The focus on young people and families also meant other groups were overlooked when decisions were made regarding merchandise:

*"we launched our club shop, well I say shop I mean a tent, ....at first I was stocking kids ones but I have had so many requests from middle aged men for like XXL, that's great I just wasn't expecting it ... we've got a supporters club here now as well ... it's a real random bunch, a lot of middle aged men ... when it first started I was thinking we would be attracting the kids, put on stuff for kids, but no, it has been mostly middle aged people" (Head of Football at WSL club C)*

The FA, therefore, envisioned a narrowly defined target audience for the WSL based on traditionally gendered narratives which in the experience of participants was misleading and risked alienating its existing audience of adult female players and older men. However, because there are only marginal increases to be made in spectator levels and interest in traditional versions of the sport, football has already diversified into futsal and beach formats. Similarly, cricket's governing bodies have,



in acknowledging that five day Tests are out of step with contemporary lifestyles and employment patterns, introduced T20 cricket<sup>27</sup>. The decision to legitimise women's football on the grounds of it being a family, fun and friendly game is, therefore, an attempt to provide a distinct product for the game, enabling it to compete in a crowded commercialised sporting market.

An effective social media strategy can increase access to sports that are struggling to compete and are marginalised by mainstream outlets as it will provide a "challenge to the hegemony of television, which can be alternatively bypassed, undercut and complemented"<sup>28</sup>. Thus, it appears that social media was seen by the FA as key to providing increased visibility for the WSL, proclaiming that "the lack of profile of women's football is driving fans to social networks for their news and causing them to be up to seven times as interactive as fans of the men's game ... [the WSL aim is] ... ultimately to transform the player-fan relationship by making it the most interactive league in the world"<sup>29</sup>.

The respondents interviewed for this study confirmed this strategy as a key aspect of their WSL experience to date:

*"The big thing at the moment is the social media side and I understand the value because I think it has a reach beyond what you put in financially ... one of the main reasons they go for the social media is due to the lack of interest in the mainstream media " (Head of football at WSL club A)*

Social media not only provided a practical solution to the near absence of national media attention, it was also central to the FA's vision of constructing an identity for women's football that was explicitly distinct from the men's game in that recent rhetoric has espoused an increased distance between fans and those who make decisions about men's football<sup>30</sup>. The introduction of the WSL could, therefore, provide a redefinition of the spectator and sport relationship, giving fans greater ownership of the game and bringing them closer to decisions about the League in ways that are not commonly attempted at the men's elite level. For example, observations at WSL games revealed that social media campaigns were undertaken to allow supporters to choose the name of the WSL mascot, the music played at games and the food offered at grounds. However, whilst our observations found that fans present at games appeared to enjoy their interaction with the matchday experience in this way, their participation was centred on relatively trivial issues and

did not provide fans with any power to shape the development of the sport in any meaningful way.

Participants for this study saw social media being positioned by the FA as central in providing fans, and potential fans, with information about the WSL by connecting them directly to clubs and players. For example, the launch of the second season was dominated by the focus on the new Digital Ambassador initiative, whereby each club assigned a player to represent it on Twitter. As one respondent explained

*"The FA sets the targets for them [the Digital Ambassadors] ... Ours must have 400 followers or something like that and that is driven by the FA .... The idea is to get more people at games, basically it is part of their strategy to increase attendances, basically everything is driven around attendances" (Head of football at WSL club C)*

Twitter provides increasing interactivity between players and fans, allowing people to gain insights into athletes as people as social media increasingly provides more accessible forms of communication<sup>31</sup>. This principle is supported by Tomlinson's articulation of telepresence, which he defines as "the possibility, and increasingly for many, the preference, of "keeping in touch" without actually, literally, being in touch"<sup>32</sup>. Fans are increasingly able to feel connected with players without actually meeting them or even the necessity to have dialogue with them.

The aim to increase connectivity between WSL fans and players was driven by the goal to improve match attendances. However, questions were raised by the respondents as to whether relying on social media to increase visibility would produce significant results. As one respondent identified:

*"when you are in women's football you see it so I know where to look ... if I am nothing to do with women's football I don't know how much I know about it, that's the hard part ... the digital stuff its great and it really is good as there is a real interaction between the players and the fans and the clubs and the fans but we have got to break outside the bubble and I think the only way to do that is to spend your money on a 30 second advert in Big Brother or something" (Head of football at WSL club A)*

Key to the respondents' concerns was that information about the WSL on social media is accessible only to those who are regular users of such social networks and those who are consciously looking for that information, which is arguably problematic for a sport looking to actively expand its fanbase<sup>33</sup>. Social media, especially Twitter,

is used extensively by male footballers and commentators on the men's game to communicate with fans. However, comparisons with men's football are erroneous as, given its dominance in sports news coverage in the UK, sport audiences are already knowledgeable about the men's game and do not rely on feeds to find information<sup>34</sup>. Indeed, Twitter is commonly perceived as a channel for conveying inane, inconsequential information rather than an avenue to base a marketing strategy on<sup>35</sup>. Therefore its central position in promoting elite women's football, a sport which has historically been delegitimised in a range of ways, presents problems.

Indeed, participants for this study appeared apathetic as to the value of the WSL's social media strategy and were concerned that it exemplified the alienation of its existing fan base as it was perceived to trivialise and delegitimise women's football. As one respondent identified:

*"I don't really understand Twitter, I don't get it, am I supposed to tweet that I am going for a coffee now" (Ex-CFA Women's and Girls' Development Officer)*

Twitter feeds by individual players, including the League's eight Digital Ambassadors, do typically contain information about the WSL which is hard to access elsewhere. However, much of the content revolves around the players' everyday and personal lives and is not specifically related to the League or the players as athletes, thereby following the trend of much traditional media in marginalising the women's sporting endeavours<sup>36</sup>.

It is interesting to note that, even with the increased visibility on Twitter and the media coverage that the introduction of Digital Ambassadors received, attendances in the second season varied little to those seen in the first. As Hutchins and Rowe state:

the 'digital revolution' is so far proving less than revolutionary in the context of sport. Hierarchies of popularity and media coverage which have seen elite men's sport occupy a disproportionate amount of time and space compared with women's, disabled and lower tier sports for several decades, have not dismantled online so far."<sup>37</sup>

Social media has been placed at the centre of the FA's vision for the WSL, a decision partly forced on it by the limited interest paid by traditional media outlets. The extent to which it can transform the profile of the game and help clubs increase their attendances, however, is open to question.

## **The WSL as spectacle**

The role of spectacle is considered central to contemporary life and the way in which commercialisation has come to dominate means that everything has had to become more extravagant, luminous and bright<sup>38</sup>. Abercrombie and Longhurst identify that "contemporary society makes the world into spectacle because it is organised by capitalism which has commodified everything"<sup>39</sup>. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the leisure environment where the advent of television and mass multinational telecommunications has transformed sports into entertainment events<sup>40</sup>.

Observation of the first game of the inaugural season exemplified such a spectacularised vision within the WSL. Chelsea Ladies v Arsenal Ladies on the 13th April 2011 was played in front of a crowd of 2,510, considerably more than attendances in previous years. The matchday events included a football festival with opportunities for girls teams to develop their skills, entertainment such as face painting and bouncy castles and opportunities to meet the official WSL mascots. Before kick-off there was a performance from the official ambassadors for the League, a girl band called 'Parade', a female football tricks expert performed on the pitch, balloons were released and at half time WSL T-shirts were fired into the crowd. As Lomas describes:

the stands were awash with face paint as a family-oriented atmosphere made a refreshing change from the aggressive aura that men's football matches tend to exude. Supporters of both sides mingled and the large contingent of children helped the evening seem more a festival of football than just a fixture<sup>41</sup>

The game exemplified the target market articulated by the FA and, although this level of entertainment was not routinely repeated, elements were apparent at other observed games. Some clubs organised girl's football tournaments before the main event, whilst others provided additional entertainment such as bouncy castles, face painting and shooting practice games. Bands played at some matches and T-shirts, and club or WSL merchandise was distributed at others. However, the provision of entertainment prior to and during matches varied between clubs with some having no additional entertainment while others had a plethora. For example, for their

opening game of the 2013 season, Doncaster Belles provided a rock band to play pitch side, a gospel choir, face painting, cheerleaders, a guest appearance from a retired male English football international, free entry, free T-shirts and free miniature bells to ring. Variability of experience has been seen as an outcome in other sports, especially those which have introduced a structure whereby individual clubs are licensed to operate. As Mansfield and Killick<sup>48</sup> noted in relation to the Netball Super League, "freedom to manage does not always create a consistent product particularly in relation to match day experience ... the creation of a netball spectacle on match day is also variable with some franchises providing a pre-match, interval and post-match entertainment of higher quality than others."<sup>42</sup>

It was consistently evident through matchday observations and interviews that the spectacularised vision was a priority for the WSL and clubs were urged by the FA to provide additional entertainment on match day:

*"you see [pointing at the ground] it's quite open and the kids will come and they're not watching the game, they're kicking a ball around or chasing the mascot, eating sweets, but it is a very safe environment here so the parents can come and let their kids play and know their fine. I do think that is how we are pulling the families in by advertising that it is a safe environment ... it's that match day experience again that's what the FA are pushing because as I said when the kids come they are not just watching the football, we have got to put on a whole experience and the football match just isn't enough. The food and drink, the sweets, the half time entertainment, the mascot it has to be something more than just the game" (Head of football at WSL club C)*

The perceived need to market WSL matches as "more than just the game" of football appeared central to the promotion of the League. This perception has parallels in many commercialised elite sport leagues which are considered to be unimaginable without "such spectacles and commodified relations of cultural production, involving a focus on celebrity players; branded mascots ...event-related merchandise; and entertainment"<sup>43</sup>. Therefore, this approach is not peculiar to the WSL as it is recognised that contemporary sport in general embraces the use of additional entertainment to capture fan attention<sup>44</sup>. Indeed, half time entertainment, mascots and spectator challenges have long been part of the experience at men's elite football in England<sup>45</sup>. However, within men's football such activities supplement the game itself. In contrast, this study found that the intensity with which these activities were deployed at certain WSL games almost overshadowed the football being played.

Observations at matches identified that attempts to create a spectacle could distract from the game, making the football a peripheral part of the experience. For example, at one Doncaster Rovers Belles match complimentary T-shirts and bells were distributed while the match was being played which meant that attention was drawn away from the game. Supporters, especially younger ones, were focussed on watching where the people distributing the merchandise were entering the stadium from to ensure they ran to the front to meet them and claim a T-shirt or bell before the supply was exhausted. This was repeated throughout the game as those distributing merchandise would leave the stadium and return with their stock replenished.

The FA's enthusiasm for peripheral entertainment can be contextualised within wider discourses relating to sport as spectacle. It can also be understood as a ploy to ensure an enjoyable experience, without having to rely on the standard of the game itself. As Smith and Stewart<sup>52</sup> suggest "to compensate for the variable quality of the core on-field sport product sport organisations also offer a range of supplementary products and services like merchandise and hospitality that can be more easily controlled for quality"<sup>46</sup>. In requiring previously amateur clubs to become part of a spectacularised commercial environment, the FA may have had similar concerns in detracting spectators' attention from the on-field competition.

These concerns notwithstanding, the intensity with which additional entertainment was provided at WSL games could play a role in delegitimising women's football as a sport in its own right before the League has been given ample time to develop. From observations at WSL matches it was concluded that missing from the matchday experiences were promotions of the history and rivalries of the teams, the profiles of individual players or team's strengths and weaknesses, discourses that are central to men's football.

The incorporation of supporters as active parts of the product, not mere voyeurs watching a game, is common in football. As Ben-Porat identifies, in "commercialised football the 'ideal' image of the fan is that of a customer fan who is responsible for the atmosphere in the stadium, which is crucial to the game and to television broadcasts"<sup>47</sup>. Fans are increasingly part of what Bakhtin<sup>54</sup> described as carnivalesque, "a pageant without footlights and without a division into performer and

spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act ... its participants live in it"<sup>48</sup>. This concept is central to a sport's commercial viability in contemporary society and "the football carnival itself becomes the draw for thousands of people who do not come to see the games but just to be part of the party"<sup>49</sup>.

In terms of attracting more fans, the run up to the new League saw an increased media focus on the highest level of women's club football. Visibility was mentioned by respondents as a key concern and they identified that the introduction of the new League had gone some way to address this. As one participant explained:

*"when you talked about the elite league, the WPL National Division, people were falling asleep in the first sentence so at least now you can say the Super League and it has got eight teams and they say "can you watch it" ... yes yes you can, so just to get it across to the person who maybe previously hasn't had an interest, it's now got a brand and a logo" (Journalist)*

Attendances grew and television viewing figures increased with live matches broadcast in the WSL's first season approximately equal to those of the men's Scottish Premier League<sup>50</sup>. Kelly Simmons, Participation and Development Director for the FA, also claimed that the new WSL had been "a really exciting competitive league with some excellent spectator and viewing figures ... The WSL has definitely helped raise the profile and credibility of the women's game"<sup>51</sup>.

This apparent success relied on supporters creating a carnival atmosphere and contributing to the development of a spectacle. A consistent, high quality product was essential to entice people to become involved in the event and to this end, a respondent noted how the FA monitors this match day experience:

*"a WSL delegate, it might be someone who is high up in a CFA or someone from London, [look at] was there food and drink available, was there a room for drug testing, was there a physio room, were there signs, was there parking, was the PA announcer right, did they kick off on time, does it have a VIP area. They feed that back to you ... [also] the FA have this thing called the Mystery Shopper, so they will send a family to all the different grounds and we have no idea who this family are and they will be doing a checklist, how was the half time entertainment and give it a mark, could you find where the tickets were on sale, how was the parking, was it free, was it far away from the ground, so we are going to be judged on all these things" (Head of football at WSL club C)*

The FA sent representatives to all matches and undercover spectators attended all grounds during a season to ensure that clubs were creating the spectacular carnival

that was apparently central to the WSL. Such a level of scrutiny by the FA to ensure that spectacular, carnivalesque experiences are being provided consistently is indicative of the individualism and accordant accountability that appears to dominate the WSL in its early years and reflects contemporary social structures<sup>52</sup>. As Davies states "surveillance becomes a key element of neo liberal systems necessitated by the heightened emphasis on individual responsibility ... reporting mechanisms for monitoring and producing appropriate behaviour are mandated ... [which are] very costly and devour enormous proportion of shrinking funds"<sup>53</sup>.

Accordingly, the respondents in this study articulated frustration that attendances were seen by the FA as an objective measure of success that individual clubs were accountable for. Perceived by the governing body as a symbol of progress, and indicative of the neo liberal ethos of quantification and continual monitoring, clubs found attendance increases difficult to achieve and such efforts placed a strain on scant resources. At the time of writing, the two most recent Women's FA Cup finals have seen increased crowd sizes and are considered to be the showpiece event of the club game<sup>54</sup>. However, this is most likely attributable to the 'Wembley effect'; that is the hosting of the fixture at the national stadium enabling significant numbers of neutral fans to attend a game at an Olympic venue, in the capital, and enjoy the other leisure opportunities that entails. Prior to this, Cup final crowds had dwindled yet attendances continued to be seen by the FA as a demonstrable indicator that the provision of a carnivalesque spectacle central to contemporary commercialised sport was working in the women's game.

To meet the FA's targets and attempt to increase interest in the elite game most clubs had to allow free entry to games:

*"we still give away probably about half of our tickets. The Centre of Excellence and the Skills Centre [players] get two tickets each every match, if you go to the college you get free tickets ..., the players have complimentary tickets so they get about 5 each and the staff get free tickets ... There are VIP's, 25 of them, and the away team get about 25 and then there is player mascots, the kids and one parent get in free so we are up to 3-400." (Head of football at WSL club C)*

Complimentary tickets are often seen as a vital tool in attempts to increase attendances at sports events. For instance, rugby league has made frequent use of



free tickets to increase supporter engagement<sup>55</sup>. Whannel has directly related the use of free tickets at the Seoul Olympics to Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque in identifying that sports event attendances are a "form of performance rather than an artefact ...[they] represent the temporary triumph of process over product ... [due to] the tendency of capitalist commodity production to transform all such cultural processes into calculated packaged objects for consumption"<sup>56</sup>. Where there is an absence of supporters free tickets provide a solution to empty seats and the resultant lack of carnival atmosphere.

The FA identified four significant benefits of the WSL, "a rise in domestic playing standards, improvement in playing and other career opportunities for talented players, growth in the profile of the game, including increased TV and media coverage and an uplift in commercial investment"<sup>57</sup>. All four are laudable long term aims, however, the first is hard to quantify, while the latter three are hard to accomplish in the short term due to the unaddressed structural, social and organisational disadvantages women's football has faced. As clubs struggle to identify the market they need to access, to increase attendances in the short term time scales set by the FA, complimentary tickets provided a solution. As Crouch identifies "neo liberalism and its stark message of the commercialisation of as many aspects of life as possible ... [has a] ... maximum emphasis on short term decision making without respect to long term commitments"<sup>58</sup>. Decisions within sport are often focussed on short, fixed length contracts and funding criteria' meaning that the ability of sport organisations to implement initiatives that focus on long term aims are hindered<sup>59</sup>.

Respondents identified that the FA's strategy to increase attendances involved a reliance on the success of the international women's team and Team GB at the 2012 Olympics:

*"I think they are disappointed, post-Olympics, about fan numbers ... at the Olympics 70,000 turned up at Wembley and they [the FA] keep quoting that but where are those 70,000 watching women's football? ... I think post Olympics it's not kicked on fan wise. I think the quality has definitely improved and as a product it is getting better. I've seen it [before] when we had the Euros in 2005 and they said this is going to be the big push on and that is when they were going to start the Super League. It never started and they never got that kick on and then they started the Super League and to*

*get the fans in they spent a lot of money for the first game and just got 2,000 people there and it never really kicked on and then the Olympics" (CFA official previously involved in a WSL club)*

The anticipated increase in attendances after the Olympics did not materialise. As the chairman of Doncaster Rovers Belles stated in programme notes after the Olympics, "nationally WSL crowds are a concern, sadly the tremendous crowds for the USA v Canada and Team GB v Brazil games at Old Trafford and Wembley respectively have not inspired those supporters to support the WSL game"<sup>60</sup>. It would seem therefore that spectator enthusiasm for women's soccer at London 2012 was attributable to people's eagerness to be involved in the Olympics irrespective of what sport they attended<sup>61</sup>. It was not indicative of any significant upsurge of interest in the women's game more generally meaning that the FA's belief that large Olympic crowds would transfer to the domestic game proved simplistic and misguided.

## **Conclusion**

The FA presented the WSL as a niche product that was inherently different and separate from male professional football. Traditional gendered assumptions of sporting conduct served to initially conceptualise the WSL as a morally superior version of football but that, in reality, posed no threat to the superiority of men's football. In its efforts to find a space in the competitive sport marketplace, the heteronormative target audience of young girls (and their fathers) risks alienating the pre-WSL women's football audience. Similarly, the concurrent social media strategy employed by the FA and WSL clubs serves to present a distinct football product but is an unproven method of attracting new fans to any sport and risks connotations of triviality which are problematic for a League working to enhance its credibility within a sport that has a long history of delegitimising women's participation.

A spectacularised vision of the League also appeared to be a priority for the FA. The drive to market matches as being about 'more than just the game' shifted football itself to the periphery of the matchday experience. This decision suggested institutional anxiety about the quality of the product on offer, thereby risking the credibility of professional women's football in England from the outset. Such a vision

led to success being primarily defined by match attendances, a superficial measure which clubs found difficult to achieve.

Whilst there have been numerous critiques of the FA's relationship with the female game, this study specifically focuses on how the organisation conceptualised a game that was previously largely hidden, partly due to the governing body's own actions and inactions. It demonstrates an incongruous strategy on the part of the FA which, on the one hand has attempted to mimic the increasingly spectacular nature of the male professional game whilst on the other attempting to portray the female game as qualitatively different. The research demonstrates that the setting of the criteria for WSL entry and the targeting of a specific audience erases the pre FA history of the sport, indicating that whilst its power wanes in the men's game, the FA retains the power to control elite women's football.

In identifying how the WSL was conceptualised within its first three years, it is evident that the League has experienced issues in being positioned as a product that is intrinsically different to men's football, partly evidenced by its scheduling as a 'summer sport'. However, in August 2017 it was announced that from the 2017/18 season onwards, the WSL would be played between September and May, parallel to the men's leagues. The extent to which this change provides opportunities for English women's football to be marketed in accordance with traditional sport narratives that have worked for men's football, rather than being presented as a niche alternative, is intriguing and warrants further research.

## Notes

1. Football Association, *Women and Girls Football*; Sport England, *Active People Survey Football*.
2. House of Commons, *Special report: Women's football*; Football Association, *Women Girls' Football Strategy*.
3. Football Association, *Women's Super League*.
4. Topping, *Women's football join big leagues*.
5. Williams, *Women's football, Europe and professionalization*, 77, 87
6. Woodward, *On off the pitch*; Guilianotti, *Sociology of global game*; Bell and Blakey, *Women's football social marketing*.

7. Football Association, *Frequently asked questions on The FA WSL*.
8. Football Association, *Club development plan*, 5.
9. Wenner, *Reading sport and narrative*.
10. Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation, *Commercial investment in women's sport*, 3.
11. Guilianotti, *Spectators and consequences of commodification*.
12. Manzenreiter and Spitaler, *Governance, citizenship and European spectacle*, 704
13. Football Association, *Response to Culture, Media and Sport*, 10
14. Sequerra, *Framing developments in WSL*
15. Arsenal Football Club, *Chelsea kick-off changed*.
16. Gold, *Roles in sociological field observations*, 30-39.
17. Walsh, *Doing ethnography*, 254
18. FA, *Women's Super League launching*, 9.
19. Winter, *England's Kelly Smith*.
20. Williams, *Gender Inequality in football*.
21. Ross and Shinew, *Perspectives of women college athletes*; Coche, *Promoting soccer through social media*.
22. See note 21 above
23. FA, *Commercial overview*.
24. FCBusiness, *FA unveil new Women's league*.
25. Pope and Kirk, *Physical education and female football fans*.
26. Jones, *Female fandom*.
27. Subhani et al, *Will T20 sweep other formats?*
28. Clavio and Kian, *Uses and gratifications of Twitter*; Hutchins and Rowe, *Sport beyond television*, 5
29. FA, *Game changer*.
30. Brown, *Fan communities at FC United*.

31. Kassing and Sanderson, *Fan-athlete interaction on Twitter*.
32. Tomlinson, *The culture of speed*, 111
33. Hambrick et al, *Athletes' use of Twitter*.
34. Fielding-Lloyd and Meân, *Narratives of gender in BBC news*.
35. See note 33.
36. Hardin et al, *Gender war in US sport*; Eagleman, Pedersen and Wharton, *Coverage of gender in ESPN*.
37. Hutchins and Rowe, *Sport beyond television*, 46
38. Debord, *Society of the spectacle*.
39. Abercrombie and Longhurst, *Audiences: A sociological theory*, 82
40. Kellner, *Media spectacle and media events*; Smart, *Modern sport and consumer culture*.
41. Lomas, *New day for women's football*.
42. Mansfield and Killick, *Franchising in women's sports organisations*, 561
43. Horne, *Cricket in consumer culture*, 1557
44. Rein, Kotler and Shields, *Reinventing sports*.
45. Giulianotti, *Taxonomy of spectator identities*.
46. Smith and Stewart, *Special features of sport*, 7
47. Ben-Porat, *From community to commodity*, 454-455
48. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, 122
49. Selmer and Sulzle, *Women and gender at EURO 2008*, 810
50. McVeigh, *Women footballers score with Twitter*.
51. She Kicks, *Year one report card*, 17
52. Clarke, *Dissolving the public realm*.
53. Davies, *Intellectual work in neoliberal regimes*, 10
54. The 2016 and 2017 attendances at Women's FA Cup Finals was 33,000 and 35,000 respectively. Fielding-Lloyd and Meân (2013) make a similar argument when discussing the high attendances at England Women's matches at the 2012 London Olympics.

55. Dale et al, *Service improvement in a sports environment*
56. Whannel, *Sport and popular culture*, 341
57. FA, *Game changer*, 6
58. Crouch, *Terms of neo-liberal consensus*, 354
59. Grix, *Governance debate and sport policy*.
60. Doncaster Rovers Belles, *Letter from the Chair*, 4
61. Fielding-Lloyd and Meân, *Soccer and Team GB*.

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