# Sports Organisations' Responses to Social Media Abuse Against Professional Sportswomen in UK Team Sports

WILLIAMS, Amberlie <http://orcid.org/0009-0008-2661-0559>, FIELDING-LLOYD, Beth, NEWMAN, James and DELLER, Ruth <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4935-980X>

# Sports organisations' responses to social media abuse against professional sportswomen in UK team sports.


## ABSTRACT

While the popularity and growth of women's professional sport have increased alongside recent advances in its professionalisation, online abuse has also risen. This is particularly evident in traditionally masculine sports such as rugby, cricket, and football. This study provides a novel insight into how UK football, rugby, and cricket organisations address the social media abuse faced by female athletes online, through a critical discourse analysis of 52 policies from sports clubs, governing bodies, and organisations. Using Foucault's (1982) Governmentality framework, we demonstrate that the dominant discourses in policies are centred on Control, Power, and Responsibility. We conclude that female athletes do not receive adequate, tailored protection from online abuse. Current strategies to safeguard athlete welfare are outdated in the online space, and disparities exist across clubs and sports. The reliance on widespread campaigns is criticised, and recommendations are proposed for future research.



KEYWORDS: Women's sports, safeguarding, social media, abuse, policy analysis


The rapid professionalisation of women's sports has led to increased attention towards professional female athletes (Bowes & Culvin, 2021). This shift has led to an increase in online abuse and offensive comments in virtual workplaces (Hardy, 2015; Kavanagh et al., 2016). Online abuse, or virtual violence, is defined as "abusive interactions enabled by social media platforms as direct or non-direct online communication that is stated in an aggressive, exploitative, manipulative, threatening or lewd manner and is designed to elicit fear, emotional or psychological upset, distress, alarm or feelings of inferiority" (Kavanagh et al., 2016, pp. 75–88), and encompasses comments on personal traits, physical appearance, and sexuality (Burch et al., 2018; Cavalier & Newhall, 2018). This is most commonly observed in traditionally masculine sports, such as rugby, cricket, and football [soccer] (McDowell & Schaffner, 2011; Scraton et al., 1999).

Social media provides a new platform for consumer interaction with athletes and broadcasters, enabling direct communication between athletes and fans (Achen et al., 2017). However, it has also led to unwanted private communications and public comments in an unregulated environment, encouraging online abuse (Kavanagh et al., 2022; Kilvington & Price, 2018; Lumsden & Morgan, 2017; Mahony, 2019). The talent of female athletes is often undermined by discriminatory views, which have increased by 44% year-on-year, 2023-2024 (Kick It Out, 2024), including gendered representations, abusive comments, sexism, and body shaming (Burroughs, 1995; Kavanagh et al.,

2019). AP Soccer (2023) reported that female players were 19% more likely to face online abuse than males in their tournaments, and 29% more during the 2022 Women's World Cup.

Women participating in sports traditionally dominated by men, which reinforce stereotypes of masculinity such as strength and aggression (Channon et al., 2016; Smith & McCarthy, 2022), face resistance and online abuse; this is less common in sports that emphasise femininity (Koivula, 2001). For instance, female rugby union player Jaz Joyce-Butchers was abused on X after a defeat in The Six Nations (The Guardian, 2025); Lioness Jess Carter faced online abuse during Euro 2025 (BBC, 2025); male former players turned pundits described football as a "man's game" (McLaughlin, 2022); and female journalists encountered misogynistic remarks on social media (Burch et al., 2023). For these reasons, it is vital to examine how organisations involved in traditionally male-dominated and recently professionalised women's sports are responding to the threat of social media abuse towards players. In the UK, these sports include football, rugby union, and cricket - football being the most watched sport (Sky Sports, 2025), cricket ranking second (Hyndman & Cruickshank, 2024), and rugby described as the 'Nation's Favourite' (Ashcroft, 2024).

Social media is a growing area of research in sport management and communication (Litchfield et al., 2016). Women's sport studies focus on representation, coverage (Bernstein, 2002; Petty & Pope, 2019), and marketing strategies, including motivations and engagement (Doyle et al., 2022; Gibbs et al., 2014; Vale & Fernandes, 2018). Stakeholders primarily aim to promote women's sport by utilising social media to increase visibility, serve as role models, generate revenue, and enhance representation. Greater online visibility through rising social media accounts (e.g., Lioness Chloe Kelly's Instagram followers increased by over 400k in two years (Kelly, n.d.)), and televised tournaments, makes female athletes more vulnerable to abuse (Geurin, 2016).

Research found that 71% of female athletes witnessed gendered abuse, and nearly half were targeted, affecting their well-being and performance (Toffoletti et al., 2024). Despite online abuse threatening athletes' well-being and increasing social media traffic (Signify, 2021a), little attention has been given to how sports organisations understand abuse, protect female athletes, and assign responsibilities. Current understanding relies on data from tweets and conversations (Abeza et al., 2015; Burch et al., 2024), analysing online abuse directed at athletes (Kearns et al., 2022). While it examines social media's communicative role and fan behaviour, it does not recognise athletes as victims of abuse.

Building on the above arguments, this article will critically examine existing social media policies by analysing open-access policies from clubs and organisations across cricket, rugby, and football in the UK. The study will explore how female athletes, who are positioned in a particular, unique

vulnerability in three recently professionalised, traditionally masculine women's team sports, are being protected.

## Female Athletes' Unique Vulnerability in Traditionally Masculine Sports

Traditionally, male clubs, structures, and contexts have paid little attention to the specific needs and challenges faced by female athletes (Taylor et al., 2020). Applying traditional policies designed for male athletes to women in their new professional divisions, along with inadequate workplace conditions (Culvin et al., 2022; Gledhill & Harwood, 2015), has consequences that should be examined from cultural and ethical perspectives regarding gender equity (Edelman & Harrison, 2008). The unequal pay in women's sports results in a reliance on social media for sponsorships and makes hiring a personal social media manager impossible (Gainor, 2017; Geurin, 2017), which creates a unique vulnerability for female athletes, as they consequently face online abuse firsthand and have to manage all communication through their channels.

## Sports Policies and Practices

Flaws in the development and implementation of women's sports policy create challenges in identifying and labelling issues faced by female athletes (Anderson, 2009; Bryan et al., 2021; Stirling & Kerr, 2008). For example, conflicting definitions of 'professionalism', inadequate workplaces in women's sport, and contractual complexities for female players (Bowes & Culvin, 2021; Davenport et al., 2022; Emmonds et al., 2019) have limited the protections offered to female athletes through policies (Burstein, 1991; Vail, 1995). In the context of social media, an inability to conceptualise what constitutes social media abuse for a female athlete could result in a breakdown of support for sportswomen.

Existing research has revealed a lack of consensus on how English Football is addressing racism on social media. Kilvington and Price (2019) report that ineffective collaborations between key stakeholders and a lack of clear guidelines and policies compromise the ability to address online abuse and support players. However, this research focuses only on racism and men's football and cannot be applied to female athletes playing in newly professionalised leagues who are targeted by misogynistic online abuse.

Third-party organisations, such as Signify, identify and remove abuse using moderation tools (Signify, 2024b). However, these tools are not a solution as abusive posts, including homophobic content—which accounts for over half of the abuse female athletes face (Signify, 2021a)—often go undetected and unremoved because of difficulties in identifying them (FIFA: Signify, 2022). These difficulties include the use of backup accounts, live content (The Professional Football Association, n.d.), and emojis. The 'weaponisation' of emojis to incite hatred, violence, and insults online has risen

sharply, and their ability to evade platform rules and openness to individual interpretation makes them difficult to detect (Alhendi et al., 2024; World Athletics, 2024). Moderation tools are often reserved for major events (FIFA: Signify, 2022), which means they do not eliminate the problem or prevent abuse from reaching victims, thus failing to address the scale of the issue (Crisp, 2023).

## Theoretical framework

Foucault's (1982) Governmentality considers how power controls, or influences the behaviour [conduct] of individuals. Rather than focusing exclusively on overt disciplinarian forms of power, governmentality considers those being governed, including their consent or willingness to participate, as well as how norms and structures are imposed to shape behaviour (Huff, 2020). Power is viewed systemically, rather than as deriving from individuals with "excessive power" (Iwaniec et al., 2006, p. 74), and is exercised through masculinity (Newman et al., 2021).

Adopting a Governmentality perspective when analysing organisational policies reveals how individuals' self-conduct and subjectivities are shaped (Hoffmann & Verweijen, 2019) beyond simplistic power dynamics (Joseph, 2010). Therefore, when examining sports policy, we can consider how behaviour is shaped. Indeed, Bretherton, Piggin, and Bodet (2016) employed governmentality to explore the policy targets of the London 2012 Olympics, crediting it for providing insights beyond their face value. These insights included a better analysis of processes such as the transfer of responsibility and the power to exercise it. Furthermore, they draw parallels between Foucault's traditional work and a more contemporary perspective presented in sports and exercise literature. They note the:

> The distinction between 'government' – the official structures which set formal policy – and 'governing'/ 'governmentality' – which refers to a more abstract set of 'tactics' … and 'techniques' … that may be used to shape individual conduct in relation to wider objectives. (Bretherton et al., 2016, p. 613)

Consequently, this suggests a nuanced understanding of power dynamics in sport. Whereby the visions of organisations are ruling strategies, which in turn control behaviour, thus shaping conduct for a broader objective (Dean, 2009).

This research will examine how sports organisations—defined as clubs that serve their members for a common purpose and those that host competitions (Ruihley & Li, 2021)—care for their female players as employees. The recent professionalisation of women's leagues in the UK, which operate in

traditionally masculine sports, makes this research vital during this pivotal time. The research questions are:

1. What safeguarding policies and/ or practices, concerning social media, exist for professional female athletes in traditionally masculine sports?

2. How do policies concerning social media abuse explain the current relationship between professional female athletes and dominant organisations in recently professionalised, traditionally masculine sports?

By analysing publicly available policies from leading sports organisations and clubs, the current research will evaluate existing policies regarding social media use, identify any gaps in social media policies tailored to female athletes (i.e., whether their needs are considered), and reveal insights about the current position of female athletes within the professional sport landscape. The analysis aims to assist organisations and relevant stakeholders in improving or developing policies that support their professional female athletes.

## METHODOLOGY

To interpret power interactions, how power and dominance are constructed, and how inequalities are reproduced through discourse within this social context (Sveinson et al., 2021; Van Dijk, 2017), policy documentation from sports organisations was collected between June 2023 and August 2023 and prepared for examination through the lens of Foucault's Governmentality (1982).

### Data Collection

Locating policies and regulations from sports organisations and clubs proved challenging due to inconsistencies in accessibility, format, and limited references to social media and online abuse. Online sources (Google, BBC Sport, Sky Sports, and the Women's Professional League UK) were used to identify UK professional women's leagues in football (Women's Super League, hereafter WSL); rugby union (Women's Allianz Premier, hereafter WAP); and cricket (The Hundred Women hereafter HW, and the Women's T20); along with the clubs in each. Data on league standings, game access, social media presence, and professional status helped map the current professional landscape, in which not all formally contracted female athletes meet FIFA's criteria for professionalism (i.e., being paid more than their expenses incurred) (FIFA, n.d.).

The organisations analysed are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Clubs without publicly available policies on their websites were excluded from the analysis. At the time of publication, women's rugby union websites were limited, and women's cricket team websites were non-existent. Seven out of nine rugby

teams in the premiership and seven out of eight cricket teams from Tier 1 (based on the 2025 restructuring of the professional league) were not included. Kent Cricket was included despite restructuring, which relocated them to Tier 2 in 2025, due to their longstanding success (Kent Women, 2024). All football teams had public policies, but there were inconsistencies in their scope and application.

Given the interchangeable use of 'policy' and 'regulation', the term 'policy' included any relevant text, such as legislation, frameworks, training, or campaigns. Following Abeza's (2023) review, policies needed to address social media, abuse, safeguarding, welfare, or well-being. No policies explicitly targeted female athletes; therefore, the policies selected for analysis did not specify whether they applied to male or female athletes. Policies [screenshots from web pages, downloadable PDFS, and presentations from webinars] were collected from websites - 53 were selected for analysis from a total of 28 clubs and organisations. The collected policies were uploaded to NVivo 12 and organised by sport, then classified by document format (i.e., webpage or document) and policy type (e.g., campaign, safeguarding, training, etc.).

**Data Analysis**

Complementing governmentality as a theoretical framework, Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), with its three-dimensional framework of description, interpretation, and explanation (as shown in Figure 1), was chosen as the analytical approach (Fairclough, 1989). It can effectively study how power and dominance are constructed through discourse (Van Dijk, 2017), considering "how dominance, power, and inequality are enacted, re/produced, and challenged through all forms of language" (Sveinson et al., 2021, p. 465). The current body of academic literature within sport has employed CDA to analyse discursive and rhetoric features found in various discourses, including interviews (Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2011), sponsorship media content (Powis & Velija, 2021), policy (Açıkgöz et al., 2019; Dowling, 2024; Moustakas, 2023; Piggin, 2013), and multimethod approaches (Hu & Henry, 2017) to investigate gender inequalities, social responsibility and exploitation, cohesion, and power, respectively. This demonstrates CDA's versatility and its research benefits by revealing conflicting discourses in governance, policy, management, and marketing, highlighting the need for social change. Moreover, CDA considers unique contexts such as abuse, bullying, commercialisation, and professionalism in organisational successes and failures (Sveinson et al., 2021).

***FIGURE 1 HERE***

Beginning with text analysis, a line-by-line examination was undertaken on all policy documents. In this stage, the text itself served as the object of analysis (Ilyas & Afzal, 2021). Subsequently, processing analysis was carried out, which involved interpreting the relationship between the text and power, including the context in which it is produced and consumed (Alasiri, 2024). The third stage of social analysis then examined power relations within their social context, recognising that the documents, within their social environment, highlighted organisational power dynamics through the lens of governmentality (Foucault, 2002). Some quantitative data were also recorded to present frequency distributions in the data, allowing the researchers to identify similarities and differences across clubs and organisations and to pinpoint unique approaches or gaps in knowledge (Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We present the following findings in answer to research questions:

1. What safeguarding policies and/ or practices, concerning social media, exist for professional female athletes in traditionally masculine sports?
2. How do policies concerning social media abuse explain the current relationship between professional female athletes and dominant organisations in recently professionalised, traditionally masculine sports?

Initial analysis revealed commonalities across documents. The most frequently mentioned words, sentences, and topics included anti-discrimination (55 references in 26 documents); equality, diversity, and inclusion (39 references in 22 documents); and reporting (38 references in 20 documents). In many cases, clubs would signpost victims or witnesses of abuse to the reporting procedures of larger organisations. No clubs or organisations differentiated the support or protection of social media policies for women's sports, and female athletes were only explicitly mentioned in the FA's Game Changer Objectives (found in the FA's Game for All Strategy, 2ab) for the women's game. This suggests an absence of consideration for the unique needs of female athletes, as no tailored approach exists for their particular context. Figure 2 illustrates the variety of documents mentioning social media, showing an inconsistent approach. For example, Chelsea FC provided a specific social media policy for fans (2i), while another football club offered only a brief, one-sentence guidance on social media within a 30-page document (Brighton and Hove Albion, 2f). Only 9 of the 28 clubs and organisations sampled referred to social media in the context of abuse, highlighting the outdated nature of these strategies.

***FIGURE 2 HERE***

Three top-level discourses (Control, Power, and Responsibility) were identified along with four sub-discourses, as presented in Figure 3.

***FIGURE 3 HERE***

### 1 Control and an organisation's objectives

This discourse demonstrates how organisations control and guide female players' behaviour through discourse to promote their objectives (Dean, 2009). Organisations used policies to silence athletes about online abuse by organising a sport-wide social media boycott, with athletes abstaining for 81 hours over a weekend to support those experiencing online abuse. However, it is essential to consider the autonomy of players, especially female athletes who depend on social media for income. For example:

> Leicester City … unite for a social media boycott … in response to the ongoing and sustained discriminatory abuse received online by players and many others connected to football. This has been scheduled to take place across a full fixture programme in the men's and women's professional game and will see clubs across the Premier League, EFL, WSL and Women's Championship switch off their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts... We are calling on organisations and individuals across the game to join us in a temporary boycott of these social media platforms, to show solidarity and unite in the message that English football will not tolerate discrimination in any form. (Leicester City, 2q)

This extract describes how, in 2021, football, rugby, and cricket organisations boycotted social media. Our interpretation is that using language such as 'all' and 'solidarity' functions as a technology of governmentality, subtly guiding athletes' behaviour by encouraging them to internalise group norms. This reflects the powerful role of group dynamics and normative expectations in sport, and how this shapes individual conduct (Carron, Burke, & Prapavessis, 2004). Within this framework, those who consider opting out of the movement face the threat of social exclusion, illustrating how behaviour is governed not through direct coercion but through the regulation of conduct via shared discourses and expectations (Foucault, 1991; Dean, 2009). We question players' ability to consent to 'stand up' against online abuse, as they may participate out of fear for their future careers, particularly in the context of a newly professionalised sport, where job insecurity is common (Bowes & Culvin, 2021). The fear of public shaming for not joining the boycott adds pressure, as female athletes depend on social media for revenue through sponsorships (Geurin, 2017) and relationship-building with fans (Pocock & Skey, 2024). The combined pressures to participate in the boycott and the repercussions of

going offline risk harming relationships with fans, showcasing how players are expected to self-govern their behaviour in response to online abuse.

Clubs emphasising solidarity highlights the value of social media in increasing the visibility of sports and engaging with fans. “As a collective, the game recognises the considerable reach and value of social media to our sport.” (Leicester City, 2q); “As a collective, we recognise the considerable reach and value of social media to both our sport and our business, particularly with the connectivity and access it gives to all of our supporters and customers on a daily basis” (Exeter Chiefs, 3b). This demonstration of a united front offers hope for the future protection of athletes; however, female athletes have criticised such strategies, as it is unhelpful to advise women to remove themselves from this space (Toffoletti et al., 2024). Our interpretation is that these boycotts primarily aim to protect club reputations (Fertik & Thompson, 2010), have a limited impact, and divert time away from supporting athletes.

In the context of female athletes in an online environment, discursively controlling behaviours functions as a technology of governmentality, subtly shaping how these athletes conduct themselves in public digital spaces. Instead of encouraging genuine self-expression, such mechanisms operate through internalising norms and expectations, replacing autonomy with either silence (e.g., athletes withdrawing from online engagement) or compelled alignment with their clubs' branding and objectives. Within a sporting culture marked by structural inequalities and discrimination, this form of governance is hazardous, as it fosters self-monitoring subjects and creates barriers to reporting abuse (Hakkarainen, 2022). These acts are superficial and performative, lacking genuine care and protection, yet organisations are commended for them. As Foucault (1991) argues, governmentality operates not through overt coercion, but through the organisation of conduct - in this case, positioning conformity and silence as the conditions for belonging in these traditionally masculine sports.

The clubs’ and organisations' values, aims, and objectives were documented in policies. Discussions of wider objectives revealed the roles of female athletes in pursuing the club's future visions. For example, the FA introduced ‘six-game changer objectives’ to create a game free from discrimination. Examples include:

> Deliver a game free from discrimination to make sure it is A Game for All with EDI at the heart of everything we do … Maximise the appeal and revenues of the FA Cups and Barclays FA WSL (The FA, 2ab)

The latter objective illustrates the FA's focus on revenue within the Women’s Super League. In another document, they emphasise the importance of public perception of the game: “Discrimination

does not just affect the recipient of the abuse and ultimately it has a significant negative impact on the integrity of football, and the public's perception of the game as a whole" (The FA, 2ac). Meanwhile, the Professional Football Association Player Services outline the role of social media, "players using their [online] profiles to promote their club and commercial interests" (2af). We interpret this as an example of how managing public perception becomes a primary concern when addressing online discrimination. Through the lens of governmentality, this shifts focus away from the individual qualities of female athletes, positioning their revenue-generating potential as their most valued trait. In this way, social media functions simultaneously as a tool of visibility and a mechanism of control—objectifying athletes through market logic and normative expectations (Foucault, 1991).

Another example comes from Chelsea FC, "we believe social media is an important means of connecting with our fans and communities all over the world. We use our channels on social media platforms to inform and entertain, to share our stories and make you as fans feel welcome, valued, and included as a part of this club." (2i). Here, Chelsea FC communicate to their fans the importance of social media in facilitating relationships and connections with the fans themselves. Liverpool FC followed a similar discourse and noted "LFC invest heavily … to keep supporters entertained and informed about the latest news at LFC." (2u). These extracts appeared at the beginning of 'guidance for fans' and 'brand protection' policies. We interpret this as setting an expectation for what fans can expect to gain from clubs' social media channels and their players, while also reinforcing earlier points concerning reputation. Taking a governmentality perspective, this discourse has multiple consequences for female athletes. On one hand, it may encourage self-disclosure, as athletes recognise that sharing personal 'stories' can enhance parasocial interactions and audience engagement (Kim & Song, 2016). On the other hand, it also generates increased traffic to their profiles from fans who expect to form a perceived connection—one that is shaped by the norms embedded in the discourse itself. This subtly shapes the behaviour of female athletes by constructing social media as an additional 'invisible' labour (Sveinson et al., 2022; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018) with implicit expectations for athletes to govern their self-presentation accordingly [i.e. online activities, connecting with fans, acting as role models] to meet consumer demands and promote the women's game (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2018).

Our analysis revealed that clubs and organisations recognised difficulties in managing the volume of online abuse that athletes are receiving. For instance, Chelsea FC issued the following statement:

> We will do everything reasonably practical to protect the Club, its players, staff and its fans from discriminatory online abuse. The sheer volume of posts and content on our social media

> channels means that it is not possible or realistic for the Club to intervene in every situation. (Chelsea 2i)

In this extract, Chelsea admit their limited ability to protect athletes online due to the volume of posts and content on their social media. Some organisations admitted their challenges with protecting players against online abuse due to the nature of the platforms, "the anonymity of social media networks and a lack of proper protocol makes it very difficult to identify, sanction and eradicate perpetrators who choose to abuse players…" (The PFA, (2af). Our interpretation is that this indicates clubs lack adequate protection against social media and are failing to manage the increased attention on female athletes. Given that female athletes face three times more online abuse than their male counterparts and are gaining more online visibility, this is especially concerning (Silva, 2019).

Several clubs and organisations threatened to take local action, mentioning how they would protect those "in [their] stadium" (Bristol City, 2g). This was consistent across Brighton and Hove Albion, Bristol City, Chelsea FC, Leicester City, and the FA. As Bristol City's statement appears in the 'supporter guides' section of their website, we interpret this as clubs trying to control the behaviour of sports consumers by using the threat of access to matches. In the FA's 'game changer objectives,' they specifically mention enhancing training for reporting and addressing abuse in the women's game: "Develop a training programme to assist employees and stewards at women's clubs to deal with and report abuse" (FA, 2ab), thus recognising the need for a specialised approach to abuse in women's football.

Efforts to improve online protection remain limited. For example, "any supporter committing any of the prohibited offences or behaviours … via online media or any other media, the Club shall be entitled to impose such sanctions on the supporter as it considers appropriate in the circumstances, which may include (by way of example) match bans, of tickets and/or memberships, without reimbursement, and/or the removal of any Club" (Leicester, 2s). This does not shield against online abuse in leagues with significant overseas markets, such as Cricket's WPL in India (Forbes, 2025). This highlights how inequalities in women's sport are being reproduced, i.e. those clubs and players more targeted online being less protected than those experiencing abuse in stadiums.

### 2 Power, authority, and community

This discourse demonstrates how public-facing documents (e.g., press releases) highlight the collective strength of organisations and the importance of all organisations uniting. Meanwhile, internal policy documents reveal how power is constructed. In the condensed example below, the FA warns athletes. The full extract can be found in the 'Essential Information for Players' document on the FA's website (The Football Association, 2024):

ALL MEDIA COMMENTS AND POSTINGS ON SOCIAL MEDIA SITES SUCH AS TWITTER, FACEBOOK, TIKTOK, TWITCH, SNAPCHAT AND INSTAGRAM MAY BE SUBJECT TO THE FA'S DISCIPLINARY JURISDICTION.

DO NOT: …

These are examples of where charges may be brought.

Charges may be brought in respect of any comments or postings that may cause damage to the wider interests of football or bring the game into disrepute.

Remember:

- Your comments and posts may affect your future career.

SANCTIONS FOR THESE OFFENCES MAY BE FINANCIAL AND/OR MATCH SUSPENSIONS. (FA, 2l)

The FA controls players by establishing social media rules and threatening consequences for violations. This was echoed in The FA's 'Running Websites and Social Media Platforms' document (FA, 2ae). We interpret this, along with another example from the same document, "even if shared in a 'private' message – For example, via text, email, private social media account or WhatsApp message" (FA, 2l), as a demonstration of their authority to regulate athletes. Using threatening language and capitalised text can create fear in players, shaping their online behaviour or prompting them to delegate social media management to agents. In the context of a newly contracted professional female athlete, this signifies a form of governmentality, where the organisation subtly governs athlete behaviour through disciplinary mechanisms and internalised fears of jeopardising their emerging career. As a result, athletes might modify their behaviour and avoid presenting their 'authentic' selves online due to fear, which contradicts female athletes forming more personal relationships with fans online (Pegoraro, 2010). Furthermore, withdrawing from social media or having an agent manage their accounts could have significant financial consequences for female athletes, considering the gender pay gap in professional sport (Gainor, 2017).

Similar sanctions are also seen in cricket: "Kent Cricket reserves the right to discipline its employees and any other individuals under its direct control" (Kent Cricket, 1c). We interpret that the clubs' use of discourse, such as 'action' and 'direct control', shows how power and dominance are built and demonstrated through policy discourse. Within the context of new professional contracts, this projects the athletes' vulnerability by threatening their professional status and emphasising the short, insecure, and precarious nature of a female athlete's career (Bowes & Culvin, 2021). Ultimately, their career remains under the control of their club, which also governs their behaviour. Additionally, Kent Cricket refer to those in their 'direct' control. We consider how this suggests the perpetrators are

outside of their control and, therefore - according to technologies of governmentality - they are encouraged to self-monitor online.

Among policies advising on 'how to run social media pages' (England Rugby, 3a; The FA, 2ae), there were references to platform functions and technology, and guidance on where to report abuse across all three sports. However, these were disproportionate and missed opportunities to support vulnerable female athletes, who, unlike male athletes, have not grown up in youth teams with exposure to and experience of social media. Given what we know about the organisational structures of traditionally masculine sports being predominantly male-governed, we interpret that the inequality female athletes face in terms of resources and experience is reproduced through this particular vulnerability.

The analysis uncovered a second form of power where organisations promote solidarity, a diverse community, and collective strength. For example:

> We are united with all of football in our abhorrence of any racist abuse… We will continue to work with the rest of the game, the government, and social media platforms to remove this — and all elements of— discrimination from our sport. (England Football, 2j).

Although England Football describes a collaborative relationship united in tackling discrimination, we interpret that the format and wording may discourage female professional athletes from feeling supported, as only racism is explicitly addressed, neglecting other forms of abuse such as homophobic slurs and misogyny. This omission is reflected in other policy documents: "We are also committed to fighting racism, and all forms of discrimination wherever we find it" (Chelsea Football Club, 2i), where discrimination that disproportionately affects female athletes—such as sexism, misogyny, homophobia, and sexualisation (Fenton et al., 2023)—remains unnamed. Campaigns often focus on racism while underrepresenting other forms of discrimination primarily targeting female players. For instance, in January 2021, a racist incident involving a Chelsea FC male player receiving social media abuse prompted the development of specific social media policies (Chelsea Football Club, 2i) and the launch of the 'No to Hate' campaign (Media, 2021). However, no similar updates were made to protect female athletes after a female player faced gendered harassment following a yellow card (Media, 2023; Ramsay, 2023). Our interpretation suggests that the organisation's understanding of abuse is largely limited to racism, overlooking the wider range of harms experienced by female professional athletes (Signify, 2024a). Within a governmentality framework, this selective recognition of abuse may silence female athletes, as they internalise the organisation's priorities and regulate their own expression to align with what is considered legitimate based on the organisation's actions.

The latter examples depict the inequalities present in UK sports, where the discourse within policy documents prioritises male professional athletes and considers their experiences over those of female athletes. Meanwhile, the actions of clubs and organisations reveal that subtle methods of power are being exercised through governance (Joseph, 2010).

### 3 Responsibility

The third discourse reveals how clubs and organisations shift the responsibility of protecting players from online abuse onto others. They display care in their policy discourse by citing their 'commitment' and 'aim'. For example, "committed to avoiding and eliminating discrimination of any kind … under no circumstances condone unlawful discriminatory practices" (Aston Villa 2c); "committed to tackling discrimination in all its forms across the game, from grassroots to professional football." (The FA, 2ab); "committed to the principle of equality and equal opportunities in employment" (West Ham, 2ah); "committed to developing a culture where it is safe and acceptable for everyone involved in rugby union to raise concerns about any unacceptable practice, behaviour, wrongdoing or misconduct." (Rugby Football Union, 3f). Here, the RFU diffuses responsibility to the whistleblower but disregards the consequences of doing so. Interpreting this through a governmentality perspective, we are reminded that the authoritarian and intimidating nature of professional sports can deter players from reporting due to the suppression of power and conformity to expectations and social norms (Newman et al., 2022). This issue is worsened for female athletes given the hierarchical, masculine nature of traditionally masculine professional sports. For example, Chelsea FC maintained their focus on racism.

> We will petition social media companies to strengthen their means, capacity and tools for dealing with racist behaviour on their platforms…We will brief our players on safety and security online and provide them with the tools to protect themselves on social media. (Chelsea F, 2h)

The focus on racism downplays the positive actions taken to protect athletes. This illustrates the lack of specificity regarding the protection of female athletes. Furthermore, it demonstrates how organisations and clubs are shirking their duty of care, shifting the responsibility onto athletes to safeguard themselves. From a governmentality perspective, this transforms the relationship from a partnership to one of disciplinary power. As women's professional sports are still evolving, organisations exploit the vulnerability of inexperienced athletes, fostering a passive and unstable workforce through discourses, norms, and standards.

Similar statements are made by social media companies: “The boycott shows English football coming together to emphasise that social media companies must do more to eradicate online hate, while highlighting the importance of educating people in the ongoing fight against discrimination” (Leicester City, 2q), and “the scheduled boycott will … emphasise that social media companies must do more to eradicate online hate” (Exeter Chiefs, 3b). As well as addressing the government:

> English football outlined its requests of social media companies, urging filtering, blocking and swift takedowns of offensive posts, an improved verification process and re-registration prevention, plus active assistance for law enforcement agencies to identify and prosecute originators of illegal content…we urge the UK Government to ensure its Online Safety Bill will bring in strong legislation to make social media companies more accountable for what happens on their platforms. (Leicester City, 2q)

Based on the policies and documents analysed in the current study and considered through a governmentality framework, we interpret that the allocation of responsibility varies depending on the sport and club. Clubs depend on larger organisations, and these organisations, in turn, rely on institutions such as social media companies, the government, and the police to manage online abuse. With women’s sports gaining more attention, we see these actions as indicators of organisational uncertainty in tackling social media abuse. This shifts responsibility to those with greater resources and ultimately to the social media platforms themselves, as the perpetrators, to police their own behaviour or face potential prosecution. Meanwhile, larger organisations provide support through reporting procedures, training materials, and webinars. However, these measures require players to passively adhere to rules and to suppress or remain silent about online abuse, leaving no space for resistance or subjectivity.

In an online course, Kick It Out presents the following picture of women’s football:

> The development and popularity of social media platforms and online forums has allowed for the dissemination of hateful, misogynistic and sexist comments and ideologies by some users. These comments appear in the form of generalisations around the inferiority and poor standard of women's football, as well as stereotypical and derogatory remarks around women as a collective. Hateful, misogynistic or sexist comments can also be directly aimed at figures working within women's football, including players and pundits. At present, the landscape of social media allows for anonymity and freedom of negative expression, with very few consequences for users. Victims of online hate are often left with detrimental psychological consequences. (Kick It Out, 2n).

This was the only documentation that distinguished female athletes. No clubs or governing bodies addressed their unique vulnerability; therefore, this recognition of online misogyny is not reflected in policy documents. We see this as an indication of how current policies perpetuate inequalities against female players in professional sports. As a result, female players do not have enough protection from the dangers of online abuse.

## SUMMARY

This research enhances our understanding of the policy landscape for female professional athletes in UK cricket, rugby, and football. At publication, UK clubs in these sports lacked sufficient tailored protection against the challenges of online abuse faced by female athletes, failing to meet principles of equality and equity. As interest in professional women's sports increases, organisations must improve protections and adapt to new demands.

In the emerging industry of professionalised team sports, using Foucault's (1982) ideas of Governmentality, we examined how organisations attempt to *control* female athletes' behaviours through policy discourse to enhance the appeal and profitability of women's sport. By directing players' actions and supporting the commercial aims of organisations, these athletes were silenced, and their conduct was regulated by policy discourses and norms, contradicting the diversity, equity, and inclusion values that organisations claim to promote. Given the fragility of professional female athletes and the persistent underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions within traditionally male-dominated sports (Anderson, 2009), we examined how this marginalisation affects behaviour through organisational practices. Our discussion raises questions about whether organisations prioritise protecting the athlete or safeguarding their reputation, as policies indicated a focus on utilising social media as a commercial means of visibility and as a mechanism of control that works to govern athletes' behaviour.

By analysing organisational power using the concept of Governmentality, we identified a conflict regarding the value and status of players. This conflict marginalises groups such as female athletes by exercising disciplinary power within discourse. For example, internal policy discourse uses threatening language to shape the behaviour of female athletes online by potentially inciting fear. In contrast, external campaigns present a united front aimed at tackling discrimination. However, as we discuss, the selective recognition of abuse and discrimination risks these biases being internalised by female athletes, thereby governing their self-expression. The focus on racism in policy documents, driven by notable cases in men's sports, overlooks the sexist, homophobic, and misogynistic abuse faced by many female athletes (AP Soccer, 2023). This reflected how organisations were found to draw from the experiences of male athletes as the norm in the traditionally masculine sports of

football, rugby union and cricket, consequently interpreting online abuse through a lens of male dominance (Joseph, 2010). The neglect of specifically gendered abuse, alongside rising gender-based violence (Fenton et al., 2023), leaves female players vulnerable and puts their mental health and well-being at risk, as well as compromising available support. The female athletes' apparent need for social media engagement, managing profiles, role model pressures, criticism for not conforming to feminine standards, and increased online abuse exacerbates vulnerabilities (FIFA/FIFPRO, 2023; Gainor, 2017).

Our findings reveal that organisations shift *responsibility* to others, including athletes, who must report their abuse. While promoting reporting might reduce the stigma of online abuse, it places victims in vulnerable positions by forcing them to focus on their experiences (Signify, 2021b). From a governmentality perspective, this approach dismisses the role of social norms as a deterrent to reporting. Additionally, policy discourse that offers 'guidelines' exploits the vulnerability of inexperienced female athletes by undermining their autonomy and decision-making power. Larger organisations and select clubs monitor social media, but filtering abusive comments is less effective for female athletes, as these are harder to detect (FIFA: Signify, 2022; Signify, 2021a). Consequently, policies have not progressed in pace with the developments in women's professional leagues or the growing visibility of women's sports. Other priorities, such as increasing revenue and protecting the sport's image, seem to be favoured despite rising abuse against athletes involved in pre-tournament media campaigns (Signify, 2021b). Our findings underscore the challenges of managing social media in emerging professional women's sports, raising questions about the duty of care organisations owe to female athletes.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Current research is constrained by reliance on secondary data, as qualitative documents risk becoming outdated (Sherif, 2018) or inaccessible due to ambiguous policy language and locations. Gathering policy documentation proved challenging due to inconsistencies in policy locations and formats, reflecting the incoherence of the policy development process.

The extent of online presence and abuse directed at football, compared to rugby union and cricket in the UK, is considerable and clearly reflected in policies addressing social media (Women's Sport Trust, 2023). These inconsistencies may indicate limited resources to address the increased visibility and vulnerability to online abuse (Signify, 2024a), particularly given the early stage of women's sports professionalisation. Achieving equitable protection in UK sports requires a coherent approach and understanding across sports and organisations.

This research advocates for further investigation into how clubs safeguard professional female athletes through stakeholder interviews. Some organisations provide players with "tools," but it remains crucial to examine communication and daily practices within women's professional sports. This will also help identify best practices from experienced organisations in managing online abuse, aiding newer clubs in recognising challenges from increased online attention and in developing proactive policies to address them.

Moreover, future research should explore how athletes modify their behaviour due to current policies, whether athletes passively accept these policies or possess the agency to resist them, and how effectively these policies are communicated and perceived. Such research could have a profoundly positive impact on female athletes at a critical point in their careers, ultimately leading to more effective policies that are necessary for ensuring a safe future for women's professional sports.

## REFERENCES


Abeza, G. (2023). Social Media and Sport Studies (2014–2023): A Critical Review. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, *16*(3), 251–261. https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.2023-0182

Abeza, G., O'Reilly, N., Seguin, B., & Nzindukiyimana, O. (2015). Social Media Scholarship in Sport Management Research: A Critical Review. *Journal of Sport Management*, *29*. https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2014-0296

Achen, R. M., Lebel, K., & Clavio, G. (2017). *What Customers Want: Defining Engagement on Social Media in Sport*. *5*(3), 21.

Açıkgöz, S., Haudenhuyse, R., & Aşçı, H. (2019). Social inclusion for whom and towards what end? A critical discourse analysis of youth and sport policies in Turkey. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *22*(3), 330–345. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2018.1506571

Alhendi, N., Baniamer ,Asem, Alsalamat ,Nader, Salameh ,Muamar, & and Alanazi, H. (2024). Emoji crimes on social media applications. *Cogent Social Sciences*, *10*(1), 2374421. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2374421

Anderson, E. D. (2009). The Maintenance of Masculinity Among the Stakeholders of Sport. *Sport Management Review*, *12*(1), 3.

AP Soccer. (2023, December 11). *FIFA says*. AP News. https://apnews.com/article/womens-world-cup-online-abuse-fifa-792d096b3eb3e251dcd36d57be634bdf

Ashcroft, M. (2024, November 8). How Rugby Has Become a UK Favourite. *National League Rugby*. https://nationalleaguerugby.com/bespoke/how-rugby-has-become-a-uk-favourite/

BBC Sport. (2024). *Kent Women: Club describe Tier 2 place as 'difficult to swallow'*. https://www.bbc.com/sport/cricket/articles/c4g2z1206wzo

Bernstein, Alina. (2002). Is It Time for a Victory Lap?: Changes in the Media Coverage of Women in Sport. International Review for The Sociology of Sport - INT REV SOCIOL SPORT. 37. 415-428. 10.1177/1012690202037004022.

Bowes, Ali & Culvin, Alexandra. (2021). Introduction: Issues and Debates in the Professionalisation of Women's Sport. 10.1108/978-1-80043-196-620211001.

Bretherton, P., Piggin, J., & Bodet, G. (2016). Olympic sport and physical activity promotion: The rise and fall of the London 2012 pre-event mass participation 'legacy'. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, *8*(4), 609–624. https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2016.1229686

Bryan, A., Pope, S., & Rankin-Wright, A. J. (2021). On the Periphery: Examining Women's Exclusion From Core Leadership Roles in the "Extremely Gendered" Organization of Men's Club Football in England. *Gender & Society*, *35*(6), 940–970. https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432211046318

Burch, L., Hayday, E., Geurin, A., Smith, A., & Hushon, B. (2024). Discriminatory virtual maltreatment and online abuse in digital sporting spaces: an examination of the experiences of six Olympic athletes (Version 1). Loughborough University. https://hdl.handle.net/2134/25968016.v1

Burch, L. M., Billings, A. C., & Zimmerman, M. H. (2018). Comparing American soccer dialogues: Social media commentary Surrounding the 2014 US men's and 2015 US women's World Cup teams. *Sport in Society*, *21*(7), 1047–1062. https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2017.1284811

Burch, L., Fielding-Lloyd, B., & Hayday, E. (2023). 'Get back to the kitchen, cos u talk s*** on tv': gendered online abuse and trigger events in sport (Version 1). Loughborough University. https://hdl.handle.net/2134/24135000.v1

Burroughs, A. (1995). 'Add sex and stir': Homophobic coverage of women's cricket in Australia. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, *19*(3), S. 266-284.

Burstein, P. (1991). Policy Domains: Organization, Culture, and Policy Outcomes. Annual Review of Sociology, 17(1), 327–350. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.17.080191.001551

Carron, A. V., Burke, S. M., & Prapavessis, H. (2004). Self-presentation and group influence. Small Group Research, 35(1), 70–91. https://doi.org/10.1177/1046496403259751

Cavalier, E. S., & Newhall, K. E. (2018). 'Stick to Soccer:' fan reaction and inclusion rhetoric on social media. Sport in Society, 21(7), 1078–1095. https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2017.1329824

Channon, A., Dashper, K., Fletcher, T., & Lake, R. J. (2016). The promises and pitfalls of sex integration in sport and physical culture. *Sport in Society*, *19*(8–9), 1111–1124. https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2016.1116167

Crisp. (2023). *Case Study—Premier League football club | Crisp*. Crisp, a Kroll Business. https://www.crispthinking.com/case-studies/premier-league-football-club-to-tackle-online-abuse

Culvin, A., Bowes, A., Carrick, S., & Pope, S. (2022). The price of success: Equal Pay and the US Women's National Soccer Team. *Soccer & Society*, *23*(8), 920–931. https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2021.1977280

Davenport, M. H., Nesdoly, A., Ray, L., Thornton, J. S., Khurana, R., & McHugh, T.-L. F. (2022). Pushing for change: A qualitative study of the experiences of elite athletes during pregnancy. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, *56*(8), 452–457. https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2021-104755

Dean, M. (2009). Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society. *Governmentality*, 1–304.

Dowling, F. (2024). Is sport's 'gateway for inclusion' on the latch for ethnic minorities? A discourse analysis of sport policy for inclusion and integration. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *59*(2), 239–257. https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902231198864

Doyle, J. P., Su, Y., & Kunkel, T. (2022). Athlete branding via social media: Examining the factors influencing consumer engagement on Instagram. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, *22*(4), 506–526. https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2020.1806897

Edelman, M., & Harrison, K. (2008). *Analyzing the WNBA's Mandatory Age/Education Policy from a Legal, Cultural, and Ethical Perspective: Women, Men, and the Professional Sports Landscape*. *3*(8), 1–28.

Emmonds, S., Heyward, O., & Jones, B. (2019). The Challenge of Applying and Undertaking Research in Female Sport. *Sports Medicine - Open*, *5*(1), 51. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40798-019-0224-x

Fenton, A., Ahmed, W., Hardey, M., Boardman, R., & Kavanagh, E. (2023). Women's football subculture of misogyny: The escalation to online gender-based violence. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, *0*(0), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2023.2270566

Fertik, M., & Thompson, D. (2010). *Wild West 2.0: How to Protect and Restore Your Online Reputation on the Untamed Social Frontier*. https://www.oreilly.com/library/view/wild-west-20/9780814415092/

Fielding-Lloyd, B., & Meân, L. (2011). 'I don't think I can catch it': Women, confidence and responsibility in footbal coach education. *Soccer & Society*, *12*(3), 345–364. https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2011.568102

Fielding-Lloyd, B., Woodhouse, D., & Sequerra, R. (2018). *'More than just a game': Family and spectacle in marketing the England Women's Super League*.

FIFA. (n.d.). *Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players*.

FIFA: Signify. (2022). *AI Monitoring: Protecting Professional Players EURO 2020 Final + AFCON 2022 Final Study*. https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/58e4c303ca2197f5/original/FIFA-Threat-Matrix-Report.pdf

FIFA/FIFPRO. (2023). *FIFA and FIFPRO release report on the Social Media Protection Service at the FIFA Women's World Cup 2023™*. https://www.fifa.com/social-impact/campaigns/no-discrimination/media-releases/origin1904-p.cxm.fifa.com/fifa-and-fifpro-release-report-on-the-social-media-protection-service-at-the

Forbes. (2025). *Cricket's Lucrative Women's Premier League In India Continues To Dazzle*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/tristanlavalette/2025/03/16/crickets-lucrative-womens-premier-league-in-india-continues-to-dazzle/

Foucault, M. (1982). The Subject and Power. *Critical Inquiry*, *8*(4), (pp 777–795).

Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality* (pp. 87–104). University of Chicago Press.

Foucault, M. (2020). *Power: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*. Penguin Classics.

Gainor, K. (2017). *Self-Presentation of Male and Female Athletes on Instagram: A continuation of gender roles found in advertisements?*

Geurin, A. (2016). *Developing a Social Media Strategy Guide for Elite Athletes*.

Geurin, A. (2017). Elite female athletes' perceptions of new media use relating to their careers: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of Sport Management*, *31*(4). https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2016-0157

Gibbs, C., O'Reilly, N., & Brunette, M. (2014). Professional Team Sport and Twitter: Gratifications Sought and Obtained by Followers. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, *7*(2), 188–213. https://doi.org/10.1123/IJSC.2014-0005

Gledhill, A., & Harwood, C. (2015). A holistic perspective on career development in UK female soccer players: A negative case analysis. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *21*, 65–77. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2015.04.003

Hakkarainen, S. (2022). *Harassing, Silencing and Dismissive Attitudes Women's and Professionals' Experiences of Online Violence Against Women and the Help-Seeking Process in Finland*. https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/73445

Hardy, E. (2015). The female 'apologetic' behaviour within Canadian women's rugby: Athlete perceptions and media influences. *Sport in Society*, *18*(2), 155–167. https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2013.854515

Hoffmann, K., & Verweijen, J. (2019). Rebel rule: A governmentality perspective. *African Affairs*, *118*(471), 352–374. https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/ady039

Hu, X. (Richard), & Henry, I. (2017). Reform and maintenance of Juguo Tizhi: Governmental management discourse of Chinese elite sport. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, *17*(4), 531–553. https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2017.1304433

Huff, R. (2020, May). *Governmentality*. https://www.britannica.com/topic/governmentality

Hyndman, B., & Cruickshank, V. (2024, November 20). *Why is cricket so popular on the Indian sub-continent?* The Conversation. http://theconversation.com/why-is-cricket-so-popular-on-the-indian-sub-continent-240440

Iwaniec, D., Larkin, E., & Higgins, S. (2006). Research Review: Risk and resilience in cases of emotional abuse. *Child & Family Social Work*, *11*(1), 73–82. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2006.00398.x

Joseph, J. (2010). The limits of governmentality: Social theory and the international. *European Journal of International Relations*, *16*(2), 223–246. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066109346886

Kavanagh, E., Jones, I., & Sheppard-Marks, L. (2016). Towards typologies of virtual maltreatment: Sport, digital cultures & dark leisure. *Leisure Studies*, *35*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2016.1216581

Kavanagh, E., Litchfield, C., & Jaquelyn Osborne. (2022). Social Media, Digital Technology and Athlete Abuse. In J. Sanderson (Ed.), *Research in the Sociology of Sport* (pp. 185–204). Emerald Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/S1476-285420220000015022

Kavanagh, E., Litchfield, C., & Osborne, J. (2019). Sporting women and social media: Sexualization, misogyny and gender based violence in online spaces. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, *12*(4), 552–572.

Kearns, C., Sinclair, G., Black, J., Doidge, M., Fletcher, T., Kilvington, D., Liston, K., Lynn, T., & Rosati, P. (2022). A Scoping Review of Research on Online Hate and Sport. *Communication & Sport*. https://doi.org/10.1177/21674795221132728

Kelly, C. [@chloekelly]. (n.d.). *Posts* [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved 22 July 2025, from https://www.instagram.com/chloekelly/

Kick It Out. (2024). *Reporting Statistics 2023/2024*. https://www.kickitout.org/reporting-statistics

Kilvington, D., & Price, J. (2018). From backstage to frontstage: Exploring football and the growing problem of online abuse. In *Digital Football Cultures*. Routledge.

Kilvington, D., & Price, J. (2019). Tackling Social Media Abuse? Critically Assessing English Football's Response to Online Racism. *Communication & Sport*, *7*(1), 64–79. https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479517745300

Kim, J., & Song, H. (2016). Celebrity's self-disclosure on Twitter and parasocial relationships: A mediating role of social presence. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *62*, 570–577. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.03.083

Koivula, N. (2001). Perceived characteristics of sports categorized as gender-neutral, feminine and masculine. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, *24*, 377–393.

Litchfield, C., Kavanagh, E. J., Osborne, J., & Jones, I. (2016). Virtual maltreatment: Sexualisation and social media abuse in sport. *Psychology of Women Section Review*, *18*(2), 36–47.

Lumsden, K., & Morgan, H. (2017). Media framing of trolling and online abuse: Silencing strategies, symbolic violence, and victim blaming. *Feminist Media Studies*, *17*(6), 926–940. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1316755

Lusted, J., & Fielding-Lloyd, B. (2017). The limited development of English women's recreational cricket: A critique of the liberal "absorption" approach to gender equality. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, *22*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2017.1386123

Mahony, J. (2019). *Report reveals the true extent of negative comments towards sportswomen*. News.Com.Au. https://www.news.com.au/sport/sports-life/report-reveals-the-true-extent-of-negative-comments-towards-sportswomen/news-story/13947776b52aa1c20e9e1b20d791885d

McDowell, J., & Schaffner, S. (2011). Football, it's a man's game: Insult and gendered discourse in 'The Gender Bowl'. *Discourse & Society*, *22*(5), 547–564. JSTOR.

McLaughlin, L. (2022). 'Disgraceful': Pundit Graeme Souness criticised for 'man's game' comment. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/football/2022/aug/15/graeme-souness-criticised-mans-game-premier-league-chelsea-tottenham

Media, P. A. (2021). Chelsea's Roman Abramovich increases funding to fight 'appalling' racist abuse. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/football/2021/feb/01/chelseas-roman-abramovich-increases-funding-to-fight-appalling-racist-abuse

Media, P. A. (2023). Chelsea condemn racial abuse of Lauren James after stamping incident. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/football/2023/dec/12/chelsea-condemn-racial-abuse-of-lauren-james-after-stamping-incident

Moustakas, L. (2023). Sport and social cohesion within European policy: A critical discourse analysis. *EUROPEAN JOURNAL FOR SPORT AND SOCIETY*, *20*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2021.2001173

Newman, J., & Warburton, V., & Russell, K. (2021). Conceptualizing bullying in adult professional football: A phenomenological exploration. Psychology of Sport and Exercise. 54. 101883. 10.1016/j.psychsport.2021.101883.

Pegoraro, A. (2010). Look Who's Talking—Athletes on Twitter: A Case Study. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, *3*(4), 501–514. https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.3.4.501

Petty, K., & Pope, S. (2019). *A New Age for Media Coverage of Women's Sport? An Analysis of English Media Coverage of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup*.

Pfister, G. (2010). Are the women or the organisations to blame? Gender hierarchies in Danish sports organisations. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, *2*(1), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/19406941003634008

Pfister, G. (2015). Assessing the sociology of sport: On women and football. *INTERNATIONAL REVIEW FOR THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT*, *50*(4–5), 563–569. https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690214566646

Piggin, J. (2013). *Discourse Analysis and Its Application to Sport Policy Analysis* (pp. 23–32).

Pocock, M., & Skey, M. (2024). 'You feel a need to inspire and be active on these sites otherwise . . . people won't remember your name': Elite female athletes and the need to maintain 'appropriate distance' in navigating online gendered space. *New Media & Society*, *26*(2), 961–977. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211069343

Powis, B., & Velija, P. (2021). Cricket has no boundaries with NatWest? The hyperreality of inclusion and diversity in English cricket. *Sport in Society*, *24*(8), 1510–1525. https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2020.1789105

Ramsay, G. (2023, December 14). *Lauren James 'not in a good place' following online abuse, according to Chelsea boss Emma Hayes | CNN*. https://edition.cnn.com/2023/12/14/sport/lauren-james-online-abuse-emma-hayes-spt-intl/index.html

Ruihley, B., & Li, B. (2021). An Introduction to Sport Organizations.

Scraton, S., Fasting, K., Pfister, G., & Bunuel, A. (1999). It's Still a Man's Game?: The Experiences of Top-Level European Women Footballers. *International Review for The Sociology of Sport - INT REV SOCIOL SPORT*, *34*, 99–111. https://doi.org/10.1177/101269099034002001

Sherif, V. (2018). Evaluating Preexisting Qualitative Research Data for Secondary Analysis. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *19*(2). https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-19.2.2821

Signify. (2021a). *Decoding Online Abuse of Players* (p. 58). https://imgix.cosmicjs.com/8b71df90-e064-11ec-bb19-d9085ce408df-FIFPRO-NBPA-WNBPA-DecodingOnlineAbuse.pdf

Signify. (2021b). *PFA Report into online abuse in football*. Signify - Better Data. https://www.signify.ai/blog-feed/pfa-report-into-online-abuse-in-football

Signify. (2024a). *Protecting Women's Sport from Online Abuse—Intl Women's Day 2024*. Signify - Better Data. https://www.signify.ai/blog-feed/protecting-womens-sport-from-online-abuse-intl-womens-day-2024

Signify. (2024b). *Arsenal take action on online abuse with Threat Matrix*. Signify - Better Data. https://www.signify.ai/blog-feed/signifys-threat-matrix-delivering-results-for-arsenal-fc-1

Silva, K. (2019). *Social media abuse targets female athletes three times more than men, study finds*. ABC News. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-24/women-receive-three-times-the-abuse-on-social-media-study-says/11039118

Sky Sports. (2025, March 31). *Sport draws nearly a billion hours of viewing, while nearly half of under 35s tune into podosphere for news*. https://www.skygroup.sky/article/skygroup.sky/article/sport-draws-nearly-a-billion-hours-of-viewing-while-nearly-half-of-under-35s-tune-into-podosphere-for-news

Smith, J., & McCarthy, P. (2022). Gender bias personality perception in stereotypically gendered sport. *Sport & Exercise Psychology Review*, *17*(2), 76–87. https://doi.org/10.53841/bpssepr.2022.17.2.76

Stirling, A. E., & Kerr, G. A. (2008). Defining and categorizing emotional abuse in sport. *European Journal of Sport Science*, *8*(4), 173–181. https://doi.org/10.1080/17461390802086281

Sveinson, K., Hoeber, L., & Heffernan, C. (2021). Critical Discourse Analysis as Theory, Methodology, and Analyses in Sport Management Studies. *Journal of Sport Management*, *35*(5), 465–475. https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2020-0288

Sveinson, K., Taylor, E., Keaton, A. C., Burton, L., Pegoraro, A., & Toffoletti, K. (2022). *Addressing Gender Inequity in Sport Through Women's Invisible Labor*. https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2021-0229']

Taylor, T., Fujak, H., Hanlon, C., & O'Connor, D. (2020). A balancing act: Women players in a new semi-Professional team sport league. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, *22*(4), 527–547. https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2020.1815821

The Guardian. (2025). Jaz Joyce-Butchers 'The abuse I received for TikTok video after Women's Six Nations defeat was crazy'. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2025/apr/20/abuse-i-received-tiktok-video-after-womens-six-nations-defeat-was-crazy

Toffoletti, K., McGrane, C., & Reddan, S. (2024). *Addressing Online Harm in Australian Women's Sport* [Report]. Deakin University.

https://dro.deakin.edu.au/articles/report/Addressing_Online_Harm_in_Australian_Women_s_Sport/25107086/1

Toffoletti, K., & Thorpe, H. (2018). The athletic labour of femininity: The branding and consumption of global celebrity sportswomen on Instagram. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, *18*(2), 298–316. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540517747068

Vail, S. (1995). *Developing Public Policy for Women in Sport*.

Vale, L., & Fernandes, T. (2018). Social media and sports: Driving fan engagement with football clubs on Facebook. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, *26*(1), 37–55. https://doi.org/10.1080/0965254X.2017.1359655

Van Dijk, T. A. (2017). *Discourse and power*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Womens Sport Trust. (202). Data shows highest viewing time on record for women's sport as FIFA women's world cup attracts a younger, more female demographic. *Womens Sport Trust*. https://www.womenssporttrust.com/data-shows-highest-viewing-time-on-record-for-womens-sport-as-fifa-womens-world-cup-attracts-a-younger-more-female-demographic/

World Athletics. (2024). *Online Abuse in Athletics*.

## NOTES

**Kick It Out is a not-for-profit organisation tackling online abuse.

*** The Professional Football Association is a Union for professional footballers.

## RESEARCH QUALITY

The credibility and transferability of the research will be controlled for and assessed throughout each stage of the research process. Examples of such include the retrieval of policy, which spans across sports to create a transparent and fair representation of existing policy; a pilot study of the focus group to ensure the questions produce a valid response; as well as the inclusion of three professional women's team sports to include multiple contexts (B. Smith & McGannon, 2018).

## APPENDICES

**Table 1**

*Teams selected for analysis.*

| Sport | Club | League | No. of documents |
|---|---|---|---|
| Football | Lionesses | England Women's National Team | 2 |
| Football | Arsenal Women | Women's Super League | 2 |
| Football | Aston Villa Women | Women's Super League | 2 |
| Football | Brighton and Hove Albion Women | Women's Super League | 2 |
| Football | Bristol City Women | Women's Championship* | 1 |
| Football | Chelsea Women | Women's Super League | 2 |
| Football | Everton Women | Women's Super League | 1 |
| Football | Leicester City Women | Women's Super League | 5 |
| Football | Liverpool Women | Women's Super League | 2 |
| Football | Manchester City Women | Women's Super League | 4 |
| Football | Manchester United Women | Women's Super League | 1 |
| Football | Tottenham Hotspur Women | Women's Super League | 1 |
| Football | West Ham United Women | Women's Super League | 3 |
| Cricket | Notts County Cricket (renamed The Blaze, formally Trent Rockets) | Tier 1 ** | 1 |
| Cricket | Kent Cricket | Tier 2** | 2 |
| Cricket | England women | England Women's National Team | 1 |
| Rugby | Exeter Chiefs | Premiership Women's League | 1 |
| Rugby | Saracens | Premiership Women's League | 2 |
| Rugby | Red Roses | England Women's National Team | 1 |

*Relegated from Women's Super League (WSL) in 2024

**As of 2025, following restructuring

**Table 2x**

*Organisations selected for analysis.*

| Sport | Organisation | No. of documents |
|---|---|---|
| Football | The Football Association | 5 |
| Football | FIFA Pro | 1 |
| Football | Kick It Out | 2 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Football | Professional Football Association | 1 |
| Rugby | World Rugby | 1 |
| Rugby | Rugby Football Union | 4 |
| Rugby | Rugby Players Association | 1 |
| Cricket | International Cricket Council | 1 |
| Cricket | Professional Cricket Association | 1 |

FIGURES

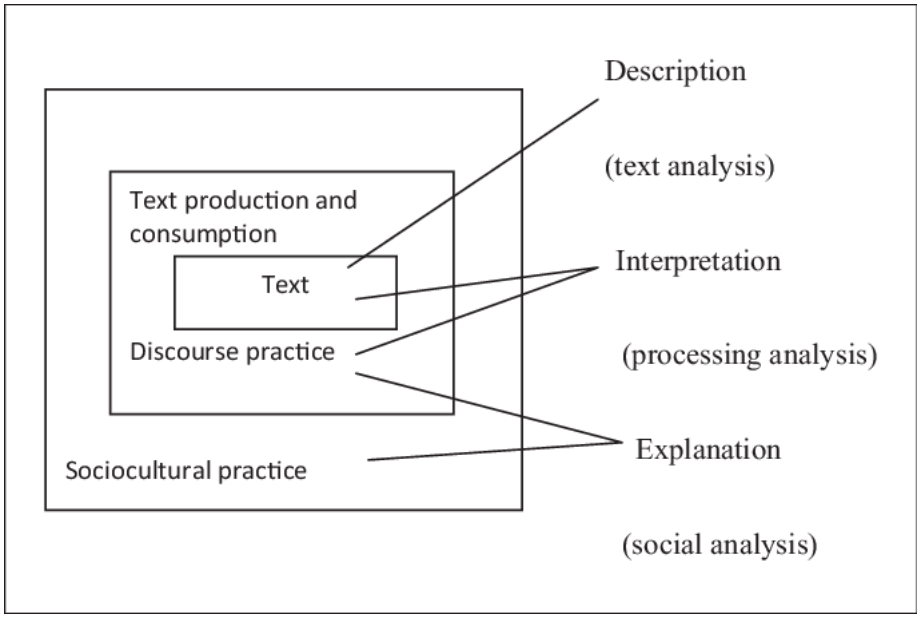


**Figure 1.**

*Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Framework (Fairclough, 2013).*

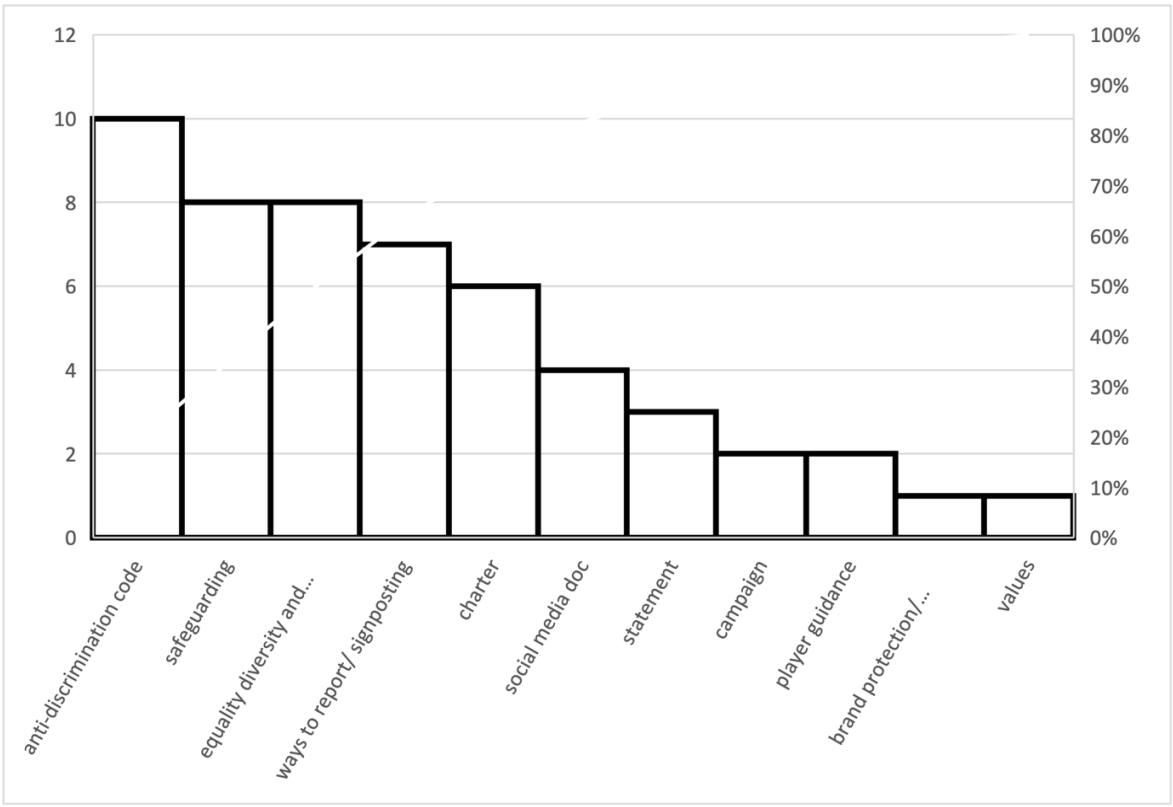


**Figure 2.**

*Visual representation of the various types of documents referring to social media.*

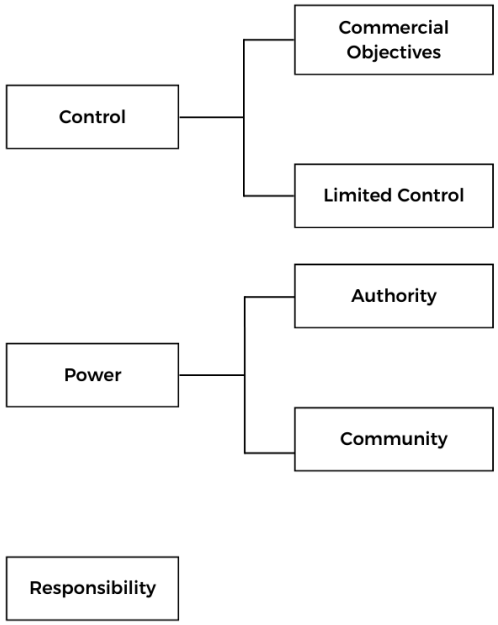


**Figure 3.**

*Visual representation of key identified discourses*