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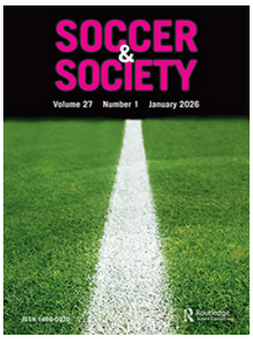

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Exploring online sexism and misogyny in women's professional English football

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ABSTRACT

The increased professionalization of women's football means that women players are now competing in front of sold-out capacity crowds with millions of viewers watching. This enhanced popularity has increased online traffic relating to women's football. Some of these discussions are abusive, and potentially harmful. Nonetheless, while a growing body of research has investigated online harms in football, most of the attention has centred on men's football. This article importantly focuses on women's football. We examine qualitative findings with 30 current and former professional women's players to understand how online sexism, misogyny and wider harms, are experienced and dealt with. Our findings demonstrate that players are vulnerable to online harms and often try to dismiss it as an occupational hazard. We suggest that stakeholders should devote more time and resources to better protect players against such harms. The article concludes by offering some recommendations for reform and suggestions for future research.

Introduction

On 10 December 2023, a Women's Super League (WSL) record was made when 59,042 fans, a then record attendance, watched Chelsea slip to a 4–1 defeat against Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium. No longer playing in front of several hundred fans, this record crowd showcased just how much the women's game has grown since the conception of the WSL. However, online abuse unfortunately overshadowed this record. Chelsea and England midfielder, Lauren James, appeared to stand on Arsenal's Lia Walti's foot after conceding a free-kick and, fortunately, escaped a red card. As a result, a torrent of online abuse, including sexist and racist comments, were directed at James across social media platforms. The then Chelsea manager, Emma Hayes, called the abuse 'disgusting' and 'unacceptable', adding that James was 'not in a good place' following the incident. James is no stranger to online abuse, having previously spoken out about her experiences

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of receiving it when playing for Manchester United in 2021[1] and being on the end of a social media pile-on after being sent off in the 2023 World Cup for England.[2]

With a growing fanbase, which has resulted in more online traffic, women professional footballers are being targeted more and more by fans and trolls online.[3] While male professional footballers also face online abuse, in 2023, women players at the FIFA Women's World Cup were 29% more likely to be targeted compared to their counterparts at the 2022 Men's World Cup.[4] Despite statistically being more prone to receiving targeted online abuse, as the FIFA and FIFPRO (2023) report illustrated, women's professional footballers do not have the same level of support, protection, and resources available in comparison to the men's game.[5]

It is not just women professional footballers who receive such sexist, misogynistic, and violent online communications via social media platforms. Take for instance UK tennis player, Katie Boulter's recent admissions, where she revealed that online abuse is the 'norm' and that her and her family had been sent death threats.[6] It is the same story for women working in the sports media, with Sinclair et al. highlighting that women receive a disproportionate amount of online abuse in comparison to their male counterparts and routinely face heightened scrutiny and critique of their work. They add that the threat and reality of online harms impact on the personal and professional lives of women sports journalists.[7] Equally, when it comes to women football fans' experiences, Doehler's research shows that the environment can be deeply challenging for many women due to gender-based harms.[8]

While this particular article focuses on online sexism and misogyny in women's football, we are aware that this problem is far deeper and more insidious. In other words, while women do encounter sexism and misogyny, as well as other forms of intersectional hate, wider harmful activity can also negatively affect and impact the recipients and targets of such harms, including players, pundits, commentators, sports journalists, referees and match officials, fans, and more. Although used interchangeably, and often conflated, we do recognize the differences between online abuse, hate and harms. Abuse relates to one-off or prolonged offensive or hurtful remarks, behaviours or actions which do not necessarily link to an individual or groups' protected characteristics, and thus it may not constitute a criminal act. On the other hand, online hate does link to an individual or groups' protected characteristics such as sex, sexual orientation and race, meaning that criminal proceedings are more likely to be taken against perpetrators, especially where incitement of violence is purported. Finally, the term 'online harms' acts as an umbrella of abuse and hate, and is a broader term, which includes other categories such as doxing, sextortion, bribery, catfishing, swarming, and mis/disinformation.[9] Within this article, we will therefore use the appropriate term where relevant and possible. But, as noted, our focus is on women's football and their experiences of sexism and misogyny within the context of football.

Research across the wider social media eco-system posits that women's sport, and women participating within, and commenting on, men's sport, encounter gender-based harms.[10] However, most of the wider research in this space has focused on men's experiences of online harms.[11] Therefore, this article treads new ground as we focus on women's football and the experiences of women in football. Drawing on interview and focus group findings with professional women's footballers, we can begin to understand how online harms are experienced, what impact they may have, and what support

structures exist and what else is required. This thinking has helped develop our Research Questions (RQs):

(1) How do current and former professional women footballers experience sexist and misogynistic language directed towards them online?
(2) What impacts do these experiences of online harm have on players' well-being and digital engagement?
(3) What coping mechanisms do professional women footballers employ when navigating online sexism and misogyny?

The article begins with a literature review, which attempts to provide important background and context around women's football, and how sexism and misogyny has migrated from offline to online spaces. We will then outline our methodological approaches, which allows us to draw on empirical work including a social media data analysis of the women's Euros in 2009, 2013, 2017, and 2022, as well as interview and focus group data with current and former WSL players. We conclude the article by providing a series of recommendations for reform to help better support and protect women footballers from online abuse and highlight various avenues for future research.

Sexism, misogyny and women's football: from offline to online

Since the 1990s, women's football has grown in popularity worldwide and the game has become increasingly commercialized and mediatized, at least at elite/professional level. There is also a general impetus in the game towards gender equality in the twenty-first century which is reflected in the ethos of prominent international associations, like FIFA and UEFA. FIFA's statutes promote women's football and address gender-based discrimination, with mechanisms requiring female representation in some of their major committees. Since launching its Women's Football Strategy in 2018, more than two thirds of FIFA's 211 member associations have dedicated women's development plans. Similarly, UEFA's recent Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy also commits the association to the delivery of equal access for all, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religious belief or ability.

Research into women's football, and particularly sexism and misogyny, has expanded in scale and scope since the 1990s, in line with the growth of the game worldwide. Such research has highlighted congruences between past and current attitudes towards women in football and fandom.[12] Notably, sexism continues to hinder women's involvement in football, operating on three general levels: internal (such as performance pressures on players and on their identities as women and athletes), external (in mainstream fan cultures and, more recently in online fandom and abuse), and institutional (media representation and professional roles for women).

Female referees, coaches and administrators are under-represented in the game as a whole.[13] Players continue to be paradoxically framed, as athletic and sexually appealing,[14] and female fans face gendered abuse and are marginalized in mainstream football supporter spaces.[15] Male fans continue to perpetuate stereotypes about femininity and sexuality in women's football[16] and deep-seated and longstanding beliefs about physical inferiority continue to negatively affect girls' and women's entry into, and

subsequent performances in, the game.[17] Such issues, yet ongoing, have been amplified by social media.

Social media is now an integral part of the professional football industry. Platforms serve dual purposes, both social and commercial, by facilitating direct social interaction between individual, communities, and organisational/business account holders, allowing these users to generate financial gains, cultivate professional relationships, and boost visibility.[18] Social interaction occurs in real-time, asynchronously, and via bounded group communication. User-generated content is shared and spread rapidly, such as, text, images, videos and other media. Footballers use 'socials' to interact with fans, enhance their personal brand, and promote their clubs. In turn, football fans can now engage directly with players and clubs away from the fields of play and at a great physical distance. The emergence of social media is especially significant for the aforementioned growth in women's football because it provides powerful tools for fans, players, and organizations to promote women's football, which has faced limited funding and media presence, compared to its male counterpart. Women's football has not relied solely on traditional media outlets to reach a global audience, and clubs and players have been able to create authentic, diverse content that resonates with a broad audience beyond those traditionally interested in the men's game. Social media has also enabled female footballers to exert greater control over their own narratives, build personal brands, and advocate for issues like pay equity and gender equality.[19]

But, even as professional women's football has grown, so too has the online backlash against it. Rooted in fan identity politics and platform culture, the growth in online sexism and misogyny in/about women's football results from wider intersecting cultural, technological, and structural dynamics. Sexism and misogyny are normalized and amplified in online spaces. This is especially the case for platforms like TikTok, Twitter/X, and Reddit which are acknowledged as spaces for a visible, organized, and public form of digitalized backlash against, and gatekeeping of, women's growing presence in football.[20] Former footballer, Joey Barton's recent sexist comments made via social media about women's football, women footballers, and female pundits, such as Eni Aluko, is a case in point as his posts ignited further online abuse, leaving former England striker Aluko fearing her safety and frightened to leave her home.[21] Meanwhile, former footballer turned pundit Karen Carney had to quit social media after suffering a tirade of sexist and misogynistic online abuse while commenting on Leeds United's performances in December 2020.[22] Social media has therefore, provided a space for fans to criticize women's football in an attempt to protect and defend the traditions and sanctity of the men's game. This rejection of women in such online spaces is often played out through emotional maltreatment (i.e. ridiculing, humiliating, belittling) through to overly gendered discriminatory maltreatment.[23]

Put simply, in these online spaces, football fandom and expertise continue to be policed by men, in which beliefs about women's inferiority fuel online ridicule and abuse.[24] Gender-based abuse and wider harms are normalized and amplified on these platforms through virality metrics that prioritize content with high engagement (likes, shares, comments or upvotes), regardless of tone or accuracy. Hateful and abusive gender-based content receives more algorithmic outrage-based visibility, especially when framed or disguised as satire, 'banter', humour, fan passion, or faux critique.

Fans express anger at women's invasion of male spaces, like football; at increased coverage of women's football generally; and at the visibility of LGBTQ+ identities in sport.[25]

This harmful online content is often not well identified because platform algorithms cannot reliably detect context-dependent misogyny, including sarcasm, dog whistles, ironic hashtags, and gendered and sexually coded language. Some platforms allow niche digital communities to thrive in isolation, including those critical of, or hostile to, women's football (e.g. 4chan, BigSoccer, Reddit and subreddits [r/soccer, r/football]). These communities often develop in-group language, memes and norms that reinforce sexism through self-validating upvote systems.[26] Both X and Reddit enforce anti-harassment policies inconsistently, and X's recent policy changes, under Elon Musk, have relaxed many trust and safety protocols. In short, there is continued opacity and increasing complexity in how social media platforms make choices about what content is and is not permissible on their platforms.[27]

Many football federations recognize the growing problem of online abuse in the game, particularly in relation to sexism, misogyny, and racism. For instance, FIFA's social media guidelines encourage users to set a positive example and to report and combat abusive behaviour. There is limited evidence of the effectiveness of these, and other guidelines, designed to combat gender-based online abuse in football. All in all, then, there is a lack of consistent enforcement of anti-abuse measures across social media platforms and by football associations, coupled with a reluctance to take decisive and sustained action without significant public pressures. As a result, player representative bodies, such as, FIFPRO and the Professional Footballer's Association (PFA), have pushed for better reporting mechanisms, automatic content filtering, and blocking features.

FIFPRO's (2020) report[28] highlighted a high incidence of misogynistic and sexist abuse directed at female players, which involved sexualized and objectified comments, body shaming, and derogatory remarks about appearance, athleticism, and gender. Racial- and gender-based abuse often intersected in the online lives of players. Eighty percent of professional players in this report (n = 80 players from 15 countries) experienced online abuse at some point in their careers and many reported daily occurrences of online harassment. The effects of such abuse were varied and amounted to a digital labour of sustaining their love for the game. Players experienced anxiety, emotional burn-out, silencing of their voices online, stress and depression as a direct result of online harassment, and some reconsidered their career choice to be a professional player, and/or left the game because of the mental toll of online abuse. As Sinclair et al. highlight, these experiences are mirrored by women working in the sports media who receive a disproportionate amount of online toxicity, misogyny and sexist abuse while doing their jobs which impacts them both personally and professionally.[29]

Female football fandom is similarly marred. Fans in Fenton et al's and Doehler's studies experienced misogynistic and gender-based harassment in social media spaces.[30] They had to prove their game knowledge or were subjected to derogatory insults and sexualized abuse that reduced their fan identity to their gender. Despite the growing appreciation of women's football among UK fans, Cleland, Cashmore, Dixon and MacDonald also found that social media spaces are major sites for gender-based abuse targeting female players, coaches, and fans.[31] Indeed, gender-based online

abuse is often more explicit in football discourse compared to that of other sports owing to its historical status in the hierarchy of sports in the UK. This means that players face added (digital-based) challenges in their pursuit of professional careers in the game, above and beyond the gendered attitudes and norms that exist in offline spaces.

Taken together, this body of research points to cultural, technological, and structural dynamics that enable and sustain online sexism and misogyny in women's football. Much of the efforts against such online harms remain in the advocacy and policy development stages, led by player groups, and/or some football associations, who have little or no direct influence over gender bias in social media algorithms. These prioritize engagement-driven content and disproportionately amplify gendered and misogynistic harassment, making it a critical issue for female footballers,[32] as well as for the representation and visibility of the game more generally. As our research findings demonstrate, women players experience digital harms routinely and in a myriad of ways.

Methods

In this study, we employed a qualitative approach to gain insight into professional women footballers' experiences of social media, online harms, and potential avenues of stakeholder support. We conducted four online, one-to-one interviews with two former WSL players and two current WSL players. To supplement this, we also conducted two in-person focus groups with a WSL team, which included 13 players in each (26 players in total). The aim of the focus groups was to explore players' experiences of social media, explore harmful online activities and interactions, and consider how stakeholders, including clubs, can better support and protect them.

The interviews and focus groups were recorded and full transcripts were then produced and analysed individually by the research team. Analysis followed an iterative thematic approach. A six-phase model of thematic analysis, as described by Braun et al.,[33] was used to analyse the data. Initially, we were concerned with identifying all interesting and potentially relevant themes. Next, initial codes were generated through systematically coding the entire dataset and subsequently organizing codes into themes. These were reviewed by all authors to ensure they were a good reflection of the larger dataset. In terms of quality assurance, attention was paid to the 15-point check-list described in Braun et al.[34] Our goal was to ensure that no single conversation dominated the narrative; rather, we sought to ensure that themes were representative across the sample. Once all data was coded, the themes were revisited for coherency, refined, and operational definitions were developed to describe each theme. From this process, the following themes were identified: 1) doomscrolling; 2) misogyny; 3) homophobia; 4) feeling silenced; 5) coping strategies.

Findings

The qualitative data analysis helped generate five key themes in relation to women players' experiences of social media and online harms in football. These will be explored in turn.

Doomscrolling

Players in our research routinely spoke about the practice of doomscrolling – excessive consumption of social media which often resulted in worsened mental health.[35] In this context, doomscrolling refers to players actively looking for harmful content about them online. While they know the practice is deleterious to their health and wellbeing, they spoke about its addictive nature. The following former professional female footballer said:

> I spent about three hours just scrolling down just my name, and just reading what people were saying. And it was probably the loneliest moment of my life because I thought, 'goodness me, what chance have I got?' And I honestly didn't know I could survive it … After a period of time I trained myself not to go and look for it.

We note that this is reflective of our wider participant pool, as male footballers and sports journalists also admitted to doomscrolling. For example, both female and male players would seek out negative comments, when they were under performing or their team were losing, while also searching for positive comments and praise when they were performing well or their team were winning. Some of the female sports journalists we interviewed noted that they would doomscroll in the early stages of their career but, as they became more experienced, they would train themselves to refrain from this potentially harmful activity because they were no longer actively seeking validation. For men's professional footballers, especially those playing in the higher echelons of the game, where salaries are higher, they were able to employ social media managers, work with their clubs to help monitor their profiles, or purchase software to help mitigate the threat of online abuse. But, for women's professional footballers, where salaries are not on par, these options were often unfeasible. In short, doomscrolling is routine for many players in the women's game. In turn, these habits deserve to be taken seriously by stakeholders including clubs as this activity can impact on players' mental health, wellbeing, and performance, as illustrated by the above participant.[36] For many women players, misogynistic content is often observed when engaging in such practice.

Misogyny

Female players referred to being directly targeted with misogynistic messages or tagged into misogynistic posts. For example:

> People would just call me things like a dirty whore, a dirty scumbag, a slag, a prostitute, a slag, they would comment on my body parts … they would literally write to me as if it was their diary, as if it was a personal diary and they're their personal thoughts. Sometimes not even at me as well, they'd just say [name of player] this, and then I would find it by searching my name, so if I put my name into the search bit, and all those comments would come up. I would see people having full-blown conversations about me on their platforms, so have people interacting back … And I couldn't believe that what I was reading … So just reading your name like you're a piece of dirt on someone's shoe … I've seen people that have really done wrong in life be treated much better than what I was. (Former professional female footballer)

Although an extreme case, it is symptomatic of the experiences of other female athletes across sports. Sarah Glenn, England women's cricketer, revealed that she often receives sexualized comments and criticism online for wearing make-up. She said:

> I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't (wear make-up while playing). I do it to feel more confident, but people would comment, saying really demeaning stuff. Do you really think one layer of foundation is going to affect how I bowl?[37]

Kavanagh, Litchfield and Osborne,[38] who examined Facebook and Twitter, highlighted that top-seeded women's tennis players encounter threats of physical violence; sexualization in relation to physical appearance, desire, or proposed physical or sexual contact; and sexualization that was vile, explicit, or threateningly violent. These findings are echoed by research from FIFA and FIFPRO,[39] who investigated the women's 2023 World Cup. The research examined X, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube between the period from 19 July and 21 August 2023, thus encompassing all 64 fixtures. Using Signify's Threat Matrix system, 102,511 posts were flagged as potentially discriminatory. Following human review, a total of 7085 posts were deemed discriminatory, abusive, or threatening, and reported to the platform. Their report illustrated that one in five players at the tournament received targeted online abuse (150 out of 697 players). General abuse (23.31%), homophobia (20.40%), and sexualized content (15.03%) were the highest forms of abuse with the vast majority of the abuse originating from accounts residing in North and Central America. As the report postulates, women are more likely to encounter sexualized threats and violence further reinforcing the call for comprehensive interventions and actions. Significantly, the report highlighted that over 20% of all abuse towards women footballers was homophobic.

Homophobia

A collaborative report by FIFPRO, NBPA, and WNBPA[40] found that sexism (63%) and homophobia (27%) constituted 90% of all abusive tweets that women professional footballers in England faced between 1 May and 30 September 2021. Female players thus spoke about the prevalence and normalization of homophobic discourses surrounding female players. For example:

> One of my recent teammates just got engaged and put a post saying, 'so happy', and people are commenting underneath with completely homophobic messages, horrible, said horrible things. Unfortunately, that is where social media is at. I know numerous girls will receive them sorts of messages . . . The majority of my teammates are in same sex couples, and they, unfortunately, have to put up with this all the time. And it's got to the point where it's just normal, and they just brush it off. But they shouldn't have to . . . I can't imagine at all what it must be like for them to be shamed like that, you know . . . they put a photo up of them and their partner and people are just giving hate . . . I can't imagine what they must have to go through, and it's not fair, it's not fair at all. (Professional female footballer)

This testimony resonates with Manchester United and Brazil forward, Geyse, who was targeted with homophobic abuse online after sharing photos with her female partner on Instagram in August 2024, illustrating that homophobia is still a major issue within women's football despite there being many openly gay players, in contrast with the men's game. The paucity of openly gay players in the men's game might help explain why the FIFPRO, NBPA, and WINBPA report[41] found that homophobia was actually more prevalent online in men's football (40%), rather than women's football (27%). That said, it is clear that homophobic discourses are routinely used in online spaces when discussing female and male players. This abuse may therefore, prevent players from

revealing aspects of their personal lives online and being their authentic selves. In other words, it may result in players being silenced or feeling silenced.

Feeling silenced

Our research highlights that players who have the courage to challenge discrimination and use their voice and platforms to influence positive change are more likely to receive online abuse in return. This connects with Kilvington's research findings on football fan forums, Instagram, and Facebook, as he notes that footballer, Max Lowe, formerly of Derby County, received an influx of racist comments and general abuse online after publicly challenging a racist incident which occurred in the broadcast media.[42] Meanwhile, the PFA (2020) reported that Raheem Sterling, who played for Manchester City at the time, encountered a significant increase in online racism and abuse after he posted on Twitter condemning a 'White Lives Matter' banner which was flown over the Etihad Stadium in 2020. This banner was in opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement which was supported by the Premier League. The following female former professional footballer said:

> When I spoke out about my own experiences, I knew there would be some negative comments, but for me, it literally just brought so much negativity in the first few days, I would say it's the worst decision of my life speaking out.

Our research indicates that athletes do not feel comfortable or empowered to speak out, report abuse, or even discuss how it has impacted them with managers and wider leadership in sporting organizations. This is explained by a lack of faith that anything can be done and not wanting to look weak, potentially impacting their standing in what are hyper competitive environments. For example:

> It's often advised to footballers not to speak out. So, it's like, 'no, we [the club] don't think you should speak out because of this, this and this'. And it's actually like, 'well, I want to speak out … I feel like I should be able to have a say on what I'm going through right now'. … Too many people around you don't actually support you speaking out. (Former professional female footballer)

Athletes have internalized the abuse they receive as inevitable and 'part of their job', similar to those working in the sports media.[43] Players only take it seriously when it spreads to family members, friends, and their wider social network. For example:

> It's massive to have the right people around you to make sure you keep yourself in the best mental state possible, and it is so important to talk about it. But it comes down to that whole situation of, if you're reading the comments, people will just tell you to stop reading the comments, and if you can't stop reading the comments, then you need to take more drastic measures, i.e. come off whatever platform is giving you the most abuse. The whole Twitter thing, I came off it, because I was getting myself in such a state that even my partner was saying, 'just fucking come off of it then. You know you're reading the comments, you shouldn't be reading the comments, you know you shouldn't be reading the comments' … The person I listen to the most is her, so … at that point I made the decision. (Former professional female footballer)

As noted, players rarely seek available institutional support (if any) as admitting that online abuse is affecting their mental health and wellbeing, for example, may hinder their

opportunities and progression in what is considered to be a hyper-competitive environment. However, when family members and friends are targeted, or are made fully aware of the issues, this can lead players to seek support and take action. We strongly advise stakeholders, such as, clubs, to ensure that there are clear policies and practices in place around supporting their players and wider workforce against online harms. Rather than staying silent, or waiting until breaking-point, players should be encouraged to access institutional support services without fear of any professional repercussions. This is where coping mechanisms can be explored and outlined to players, and the wider workforce.

Coping mechanisms

Although athletes receive some training on safe social media usage, there is minimal evidence of support for athletes coping with abuse. Education has not necessarily kept up with the speed of change in the women's game. For example:

> What's happened is, because of the shift in players being more highly profiled, they're open to criticism, as any other male footballer is. But, because we've grown up in a world as professional women footballers where that didn't really happen, players don't like it. And it knocks their confidence. You know I think of the difference between men's and women's footballers in that capacity is like going into the cauldron of men's football, everybody knows how horrendous it is. Whereas with women's football, there's this really faux, shiny, grateful image … However, once the media comes into that, and social media, in an uncontrolled medium of potential abuse … I think the impact is greater on women footballers. From my experience as a player, and also friends now, who may be getting a little bit of shit on social media, they don't know what they're doing with it, they don't know what to do. (Former professional female footballer)

For this interviewee, she suggests that players 'don't know what to do' when receiving online harms. A number of participants reflected that they either delete, or consider deleting, social media accounts or try to refrain from using them due to fear of abuse. Therefore, it is imperative that stakeholders have clear policies, practices, and educational resources related to online harms that players, and the wider workforce, can access if/when needed. Without this, players, who are often the recipients and targets of online harms, are left to their own devices to process and respond to online toxicity. Clear signposting to resources and support frameworks are thus imperative for players and the wider workforce.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has critically investigated the extent to which online harms is manifest within women's professional football by analysing WSL player experiences. Our findings identified that some women players who participated in our research engaged in doomscrolling practices, which negatively impacted their mental health and wellbeing. When engaging in this practice, they are more likely to observe, and see, targeted, online abuse directed at women players, their teammates, or even themselves. For those early on in their careers, this practice was more common. During doomscrolling, participants spoke of their experiences of seeing sexist,

sexually aggressive, and misogynistic content. As one participant powerfully said, social media has become 'an uncontrolled medium of potential abuse', which has a greater impact on women footballers. Unfortunately, players are reticent to speak out against online harms and although one participant did so, they regretted this as it exacerbated further abuse.

From a practical perspective, it is essential that players are educated, trained, and supported around and protected from not just social media but wider online behaviour. For example, if they do want to challenge online harms by speaking out, they should work with their clubs to do this safely, while utilizing institutional supporting mechanisms if/when needed. Moreover, players must be briefed on what they can do as individual agents in the fight against online harms, such as, blocking, muting, and setting boundaries, while also being systemically supported by stakeholders, including clubs. Institutionally, football clubs and associations need to ensure that the correct policies, protocols, procedures, processes and resources are put in place to protect players and the wider game.

Future research must continue to critically examine the experiences of women and girls participating in online football spaces. Previous research has illustrated that such spaces are often unwelcoming and harmful.[44] While players' voices have been drawn upon in this article, we suggest that the experiences of women fans and match officials similarly need exploring, particularly the latter group. Moreover, further research is needed around the specific gendered harms that are circulated and directed at recipients online, such as, players, family members, fans, and match officials. In particular, how does this differ from men's experiences and are different forms or types of harms being sent to women through different platforms, mediums, or approaches. For example, as technological advancement rapidly evolves alongside an ever-changing social media landscape, to what extent is generative AI and deep fakes being used to cause digital harms for recipients and targets? Online harms encapsulate a myriad of abusive and hateful activity online and this is an issue that is complex, nuanced, and constantly evolving.

It is important to acknowledge that sexism and misogyny are not restricted to the women's game but permeate broader football discourses, warranting exploration of the sociolinguistics of feminine-coded slurs and other sexist language within football and sports more widely. Specifically, examining how habitual or appropriated uses of gendered language, even when not directly targeting women, reinforce toxic masculinity, normalize sexism, and perpetuate harmful stereotypes across gender lines would provide critical insights into the negative impacts of such language in sports fandom. Empirical data is particularly needed on this issue to substantiate these impacts, inform targeted interventions, and better understand the mechanisms through which misogynistic language shapes attitudes, behaviours, and cultural norms in digital sporting contexts.

Despite meaningful campaigns and education with the best intentions devoted to challenging online harms, we will not see its complete eradication. Therefore, we must accept that players, unfortunately, are very likely to encounter online harms during and after, and even before their careers. Stakeholders, such as clubs, are therefore able to 'control the controllables'. Stakeholders can and should be proactive and provide comprehensive policies, practices, and systems designed to better protect and support women players from online harms.

Notes

1. Millington, 'Lauren James'.
2. Wrack, 'Lauren James Made a Stupid Mistake – but We Need to Have More Compassion'.
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