



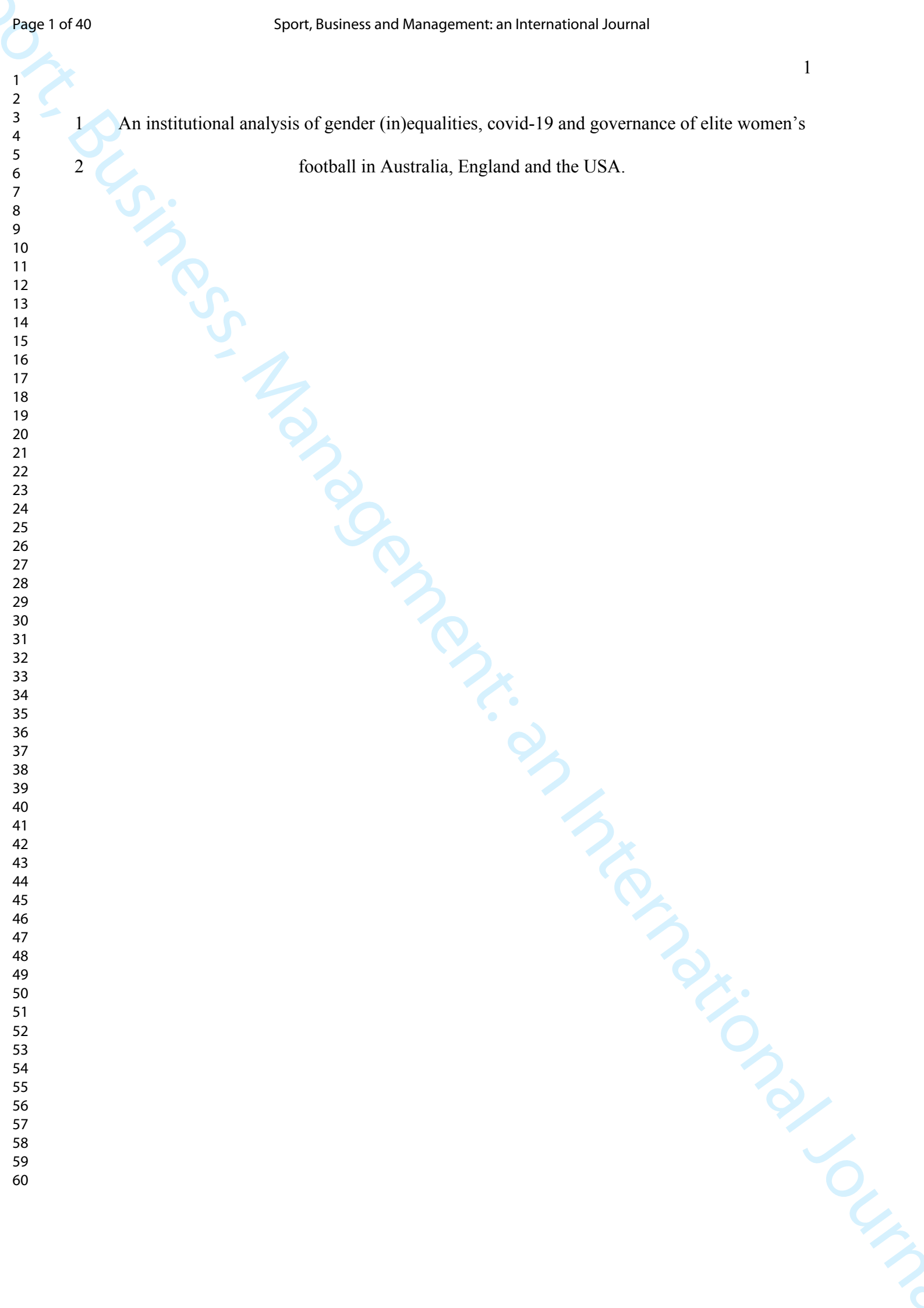
An institutional analysis of gender (in)equalities, covid-19 and governance of elite women's football in Australia, England and the USA.

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1 An institutional analysis of gender (in)equalities, covid-19 and governance of elite women's
2 football in Australia, England and the USA.



Abstract

Purpose: Women's football faces an existential threat from covid-19. Using case studies, we explore the covid-19 responses of three highly-ranked national football associations (Australia, England, and the USA) and their professional women's football leagues to: (a) compare and shed new insights into the wide range of **phased** responses, and (b) establish recommendations for other nations to navigate major crises with their social and ethical responsibilities to women's football.

Methodology: Drawing on institutional theory, a framework analysis was undertaken examining 71 articles to analyse the gendered global impacts of covid-19 on women's football.

Findings: Results highlight several important recommendations for nations to consider during the pandemic: (1) maintain active communication with the community to allay worries about the future of women's football, (2) gather support from health and government officials, (3) seek out commercial and broadcasting partnerships to drive revenue, and (4) the interests of women's football are best served when responsibility for the elite women's league does not rest (solely) with national football associations.

Originality: The study is first to explore institutional pressures and football governing bodies during covid-19 and provides a framework for nations to manage major crises.

Social implications: We argue sport is an interwoven part of society and cannot be separated from gender equality issues irrespective of the pandemic.

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2
3 23 The effects of coronavirus (covid-19) have laid bare the fragilities of women's sport
4
5 24 when governing bodies' surpluses shrink (Clarkson et al., 2020). This study examines the
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7 25 global reactions of governing bodies to covid-19, using women's football as a vehicle to
8
9 26 uncover variations in the response of national football associations (NFAs), revealing new
10
11 27 understandings into gender equality. By taking a case study approach that analyses the
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13 28 responses of three highly-ranked countries and their professional leagues (Australia, England
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15 29 and the United States of America (USA)), this article aims to (a) compare and shed new
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17 30 insights into these wide-ranging **phased** responses, and (b) establish recommendations for
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19 31 other nations for navigating major crises with their social and ethical responsibilities to
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21 32 women's football.

26 33 The covid-19 pandemic presents a complex, unprecedented challenge for nations to
27
28 34 preserve all aspects of society. The prioritisation of returning sport to television schedules
29
30 35 highlights sport as a crucial aspect of society, and the resurgence of sport at all levels requires
31
32 36 careful planning and implementation by national governing bodies (e.g., NFAs) globally to
33
34 37 ensure future prosperity (Parnell et al., 2020a). The global economic downturn caused by the
35
36 38 pandemic has exposed gender inequalities - with women disproportionately affected by unpaid
37
38 39 duties and economic hardship - and hence this has implications for gender equality (Alon et
39
40 40 al., 2020). Like other fundamental aspects of society, sport has not been immune to these
41
42 41 gendered effects and pandemic-driven inequity has occurred **with the context of existing**
43
44 42 **inequalities such as the United States Women's National Team's (USWNT) pay dispute**
45
46 43 **(Archer & Prange, 2019)**. While governing bodies have an ethical and social responsibility to
47
48 44 advance gender equality, they must also consider the pandemic's economic impact and how
49
50 45 their finite resources are distributed (Nicola et al., 2020). In an analysis of National
51
52 46 Basketball Association's (NBA) covid-19 response, decision-making was driven by
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54 47 economic pressures against other factors (Hindman et al., 2021). The England Cricket Board
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3 48 revealed covid-19 led to a £380m shortfall and openly stated that commercially-driven men's
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5 49 cricket would take priority in a bid to mitigate financial losses (Sky Sports, 2020). Elsewhere,
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7
8 50 The Australian Football League (AFL) immediately cancelled the women's competition in
9
10 51 the face of the pandemic without awarding a winner (Canil, 2020). Contrastingly, the men's
11
12 52 competition was suspended and subsequently resumed. In the USA, women professional
13
14 53 basketballers not participating in the restarted Women's National Basketball Association
15
16 54 (WNBA) were not financially supported by their governing body and were later funded by an
17
18 55 individual donation (Roscher, 2020). In comparison, absent NBA players incurred small
19
20 56 salary deductions (Elkins, 2020). Hence, covid-19 has prompted a wide range of phased
21
22 57 responses by national governing bodies (NGBs) that have impacted gender.
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26 58 Association football (soccer) is arguably the world's biggest sport – over half of the
27
28 59 world's population (3.6 billion viewers) watched the 2018 Fédération Internationale de
29
30 60 Football Association (FIFA) World Cup and over 1 billion watched the 2019 FIFA Women's
31
32 61 World Cup (WWC). Given its popularity and ability to provide mental health and social
33
34 62 relations benefits, football could play an important role in societies' recoveries from covid-19
35
36 63 (Parnell et al., 2020b). Common covid-19 measures implemented by NFAs for elite men's
37
38 64 football included financial support and a communicated plan for restarting competitions
39
40 65 (Parnell et al., 2020b). Measures in elite women's football varied. Common 'responses' were
41
42 66 inaction and a lack of communication, leaving the game clouded in uncertainties (Clarkson et
43
44 67 al., 2020). Even economic help from FIFA, specifically for the women's game, has not
45
46 68 always benefitted footballers who, in Columbia for example, were sometimes left without a
47
48 69 playing contract (Biram & Martinez-Mina, 2020). Furthermore, the world players' union
49
50 70 FIFPro (2020) reported that 47 per cent of women players have had their wages cut or
51
52 71 suspended since the pandemic. In comparison, some clubs in the English men's elite league,
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54 72 The Premier League (PL), furloughed non-playing staff but did not cut high player wages
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3 73 (BBC, 2020a). Historically, women's football has been treated in different ways around the
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5 74 world, for instance by struggling to overcome active opposition and discrimination
6
7 75 (Australia; Downes et al., 2015), to being 'culturally superior' to men's football (USA;
8
9 76 Markovits & Hellerman, 2003). Thus, differing NFA's responses are likely to be highly
10
11 77 contingent on the local historical, political and social contexts of women's football. This
12
13 78 study aims to: (a) compare and shed new insights into the wide range of **phased** covid-19
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15 79 responses, and (b) establish recommendations for other nations to navigate major crises with
16
17 80 their social and ethical responsibilities to women's football.
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21 81 **The disproportional effect of the pandemic on women's sport**

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23
24 82 Every sport faces financial disruption and uncertainty for the future of their elite
25
26 83 leagues due to covid-19 (Parnell et al., 2020a). Initially, the pandemic's impacts were
27
28 84 predominantly distributed evenly between men's and women's competitions with suspension
29
30 85 to competitive fixtures and events across the world to curb the spread of the disease (BBC,
31
32 86 2020b). However, multiple governing bodies (e.g., Rugby Football Union, International
33
34 87 Cricket Council) recommenced men's sport whereas women's sport was predominantly
35
36 88 cancelled, significantly postponed or players received inequitable treatment once resumed.
37
38 89 This is exemplified by the effective abandonment of women's sport (see above), the
39
40 90 postponement of the women's football European Championship (Euros) to 2022 to allow the
41
42 91 postponed men's competition to take place first in 2021, and the vast differences in the
43
44 92 quality of working NBA and WNBA 'bubble' conditions (Dator, 2020). Media coverage of
45
46 93 women's sport has also remained low in countries such as Australia (Symons et al., 2021).
47
48 94 The lack of equitable funding and treatment is indicative of women's subordinate position in
49
50 95 sport (Bowes et al., 2020). Elite sportswomen are often on semi-professional or low value
51
52 96 fully professional contracts with geographically dispersed competitive schedules and thus the
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54 97 different lengths of seasons (and contracts) compared to men presents a significant challenge
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3 98 to gender equality for NFAs (Bowes et al., 2021). This is exacerbated by traditional views on
4
5 99 the ‘superiority’ of men’s sport (Allison, 2018) and resistance to change at a governance level
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7
8 100 (Parry et al., 2021). These difficulties in the way that women’s sport can be viewed by NGBs
9
10 101 has made maintaining gender equality in the pandemic extremely difficult (Clarkson et al.,
11
12 102 2021). Yet NFAs have a responsibility to protect overshadowed areas of football; FIFA
13
14 103 recently committed \$1.5bn in its Covid Relief Plan with NFAs able to apply for \$1m to
15
16 104 protect and restart football and an additional \$500,000 available specifically spent for
17
18 105 women’s football (FIFA, 2020b).

106 **Women’s football – a social and ethical responsibility?**

107 As a global male-dominated space, football has been a site for the construction of
108 hegemonic masculinity both on the pitch and in stadiums. Football is also an arena to contest
109 the construction of gender identities (Richards & Parry, 2020) and recent rapid growth of
110 women’s football has heralded a ‘new age’ of the game (Petty & Pope, 2019). While on the
111 surface, the future of women’s elite football is bright, women still have to contest traditional
112 notions of femininity and prejudices about women’s abilities (Pfister, 2015). Coupled with
113 poor work conditions, inferior funding and inconsistent broadcast coverage and marketing of
114 events, the inequalities between men’s and women’s football are stark, irrespective of
115 country (Ellis & Leopkey, 2018). As not-for-profit governing bodies of football, NFAs can
116 exert pressure on professional leagues and clubs (who are typically independent businesses)
117 to ensure equitable treatment of professional players. We contend that NFAs have a social
118 and ethical responsibility to ensure that women are given access to equal resources and
119 funding to align with men’s support. This is especially required as players’ unions are not
120 always well-equipped to adequately support women members and protect their rights (EU
121 Athletes, 2018). Common criticisms of this viewpoint are that, in comparison to the men’s
122 game, women’s teams in countries such as Australia and England are mostly financially

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3 123 reliant on their men's 'parent' clubs preventing independence and thus being viewed equally
4
5 124 (Welford, 2018), while also citing examples such as the USA where men's and women's
6
7 125 football clubs are separate and the women's elite leagues are financially unsustainable
8
9
10 126 (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2003). These perspectives, however, neglect how women's
11
12 127 football has been marginalised in many countries throughout much of its history and has not
13
14 128 had the same development opportunities – or indeed media profile – as has been the case in
15
16
17 129 men's football.

18
19 130 Nevertheless, women's football has become a global driving force for gender
20
21 131 equality, participation and fan interest (FIFA, 2018); we argue NFAs must play a crucial role
22
23 132 in protecting women's football (ethical responsibility) and eradicating gender inequalities
24
25 133 (social responsibility) over time to continue its trajectory. However, significant investment is
26
27 134 required to achieve these aims, and NFAs are facing large covid-related deficits (e.g., £300m
28
29 135 in England), staff pay cuts (e.g., 50 per cent reductions in the USA) and redundancies (70 per
30
31 136 cent in Australia; Reuters, 2020). NFAs have to, therefore, navigate the potential economic
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33 137 repercussions of covid-19 with their social and ethical responsibilities to women's football.
34
35 138 We adopt institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) as a lens to compare and shed new
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37 139 insights into these wide-ranging phased responses and establish recommendations for other
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39 140 nations navigating major crises with their social and ethical responsibilities to women's
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41 141 football.

142 **The research**

143 **Theoretical framework**

144 Institutional theory is an effective underpinning for studying the evolution of sport
145 institutions and their environment (see Nite & Edwards, 2021). This framework proposes that
146 institutions respond to environmental pressures and adopt structures and/or procedures that
147 are socially accepted as the appropriate institutional choice (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

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3 148 These pressures can be at individual (e.g., key decision makers' values), organisational (e.g.,
4
5 149 power and politics), and organisational field (e.g., regulatory [FIFA] pressures, public
6
7 150 pressures, norms and values) levels. Strong and diverse sets of institutional pressures exist in
8
9 151 women's football, especially at the organisational field level making institutional theory an
10
11 152 ideal study framework. We contend that these institutional pressures (e.g., calls for greater
12
13 153 funding, broadcasting and for the game to be better resourced) are derived from the historical,
14
15 154 political and social contexts that women's football operates within and has influenced NFAs'
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17 155 covid-19 responses.

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19 156 Additionally, underlying institutional logics (i.e., the systems of cultural elements;
20
21 157 Seo & Creed, 2002) may also explain and shape different clubs', leagues' and NFAs'
22
23 158 agendas, practices and structures. As Allison (2016) notes, there are conflicting institutional
24
25 159 logics in women's football, where institutions may view it as a 'cause' or as a 'business'.
26
27 160 Logics originate from different central assumptions which then form the basis for
28
29 161 institutions' agendas and practices. Thus, NFAs can come to difficult conclusions when
30
31 162 facing a crisis, like the pandemic, based on their underlying institutional logics.

32
33 163 Thus, institutional theory can be used to explain similarities and differences between
34
35 164 institutions. We use this framework to analyse the latter, by highlighting how our
36
37 165 understanding of institutional actions can be expanded by examining differences in temporal
38
39 166 focus - i.e., how past experiences, current (covid-19) situations and future expectations
40
41 167 influence responses. A temporal focus is crucial – by considering past experiences (i.e.
42
43 168 historical, political and social contexts) we can situate the NFA responses in the country's
44
45 169 women's football landscape. We also bring attention to the historical, political, and social
46
47 170 factors that change institutional practices in women's football, as called for by Washington
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49 171 and Patterson (2011).

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51 172 **Case studies**
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3 173 ***Philosophical assumptions and design***
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5 174 We approach case study research from a social constructivist viewpoint (Merriam, 2009)
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8 175 in that language and discourse are primary devices for the construction of social reality (Mills
9
10 176 et al., 2009). Stake's (1995) collective instrumental case study design was adopted whereby
11
12 177 multiple, related cases are observed together to provide insight on a particular issue.
13

14
15 178 ***Selection***

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17 179 Three countries were selected as cases for investigation: Australia, England, and the
18
19 180 USA. Specifically, the focus is on the actions of Football Federation Australia (FFA); The
20
21 181 English FA; and, the United States Soccer Federation (USSF), hereafter U.S. Soccer, and
22
23 182 their respective professional leagues.
24

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26 183 These cases were selected for multiple reasons. The three countries are at a similar level
27
28 184 regarding gender equality (United Nations, 2020) and the Global Gender Gap Index – all
29
30 185 ranking in the top third of countries (World Economic Forum, 2020). In FIFA world
31
32 186 rankings, an indicator of international prestige, all were in the top seven ranked teams (FIFA,
33
34 187 2020a). Hence, these countries act as industry role models to lower-ranked countries due to
35
36 188 perceptions of their effectiveness, strong football traditions and attitudes towards, and support
37
38 189 of, the advancement of women's football (Haveman, 1993). There is also worldwide attention
39
40 190 on them: Australia as the joint host nation for the 2023 FIFA WWC, England hosting the
41
42 191 delayed Women's Euros, and USWNT involved in a high-profile equal pay lawsuit against
43
44 192 U.S. Soccer.
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49 193 ***Assessment***

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51 194 71 communications were analysed comprising official strategy reports ($n = 2$),
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53 195 statements ($n = 37$), and press releases ($n = 32$) associated only with covid-19 and women's
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3 196 football. All communications were sourced from NFA's websites¹ and official social media
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5 197 accounts. These data helped answer the research question as words take on meaning in the
6
7 198 context of ongoing social relationships and the discourse about women's football from these
8
9 199 institutions' communications were indicative of their covid-19 response. We considered a
10
11 200 six-month period between 1st March 2020 when the World Health Organisation (WHO)
12
13 201 advised against international travel to countries experiencing covid-19 outbreaks and many
14
15 202 countries enacted restrictions, and 31st August 2020. Although restrictions varied, the initial
16
17 203 period is a crucial time for institutions during crises (Goodhart, 2008) and observed in other
18
19 204 covid-19 institutional response research (e.g., Ando et al., 2020; Loi et al., 2020). Sources
20
21 205 outside of NFA communications in the covid-19 response sections were only used for
22
23 206 necessary context to the responses. Critical discussion of the responses follows the
24
25 207 presentation of case studies. Comparisons between men's and women's leagues were only
26
27 208 made when season schedules were similar (e.g., England) to demonstrate similarities or
28
29 209 differences.

30
31 210 A framework analysis, originating from policy research, was conducted to interpret
32
33 211 events and consisted of: thematic framework; indexing; charting; mapping and interpretation
34
35 212 (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). After familiarisation with the documents, data were coded to
36
37 213 uncover 25 key issues, derived from the literature and from the dataset (Figure 1). Specific
38
39 214 sections were indexed and charted to a specific key theme (e.g., competition delay). Finally,
40
41 215 data were mapped and interpreted to provide explanations and applied recommendations.

42
43 216 Reflexivity acknowledges the researchers' positions in research. Although now all
44
45 217 based in England, authors one and two previously lived in Australia and the USA (totalling
46
47 218 12 years) researching diversity and governance and/or working in women's football. This

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¹ <https://www.ffa.com.au> (Australia), <http://www.thefa.com> (England), and <https://www.ussoccer.com> (USA), and their respective leagues' websites: <https://www.w-league.com.au> (Australia), <https://womenscompetitions.thefa.com> (England), and <https://www.nwslsoccer.com> (USA)

219 cultural connectivity provided a richer lens to inform understanding of the historical, political
220 and social contexts within each country. The team are also ideally suited to conduct
221 institutional analysis, having published research widely within women's football: [identifies
222 authors].

223 Results

224 Figure 1 is a timeline of key NFA events and associated communications concerning
225 covid-19 and women's football. These events are placed next to enforced government
226 restrictions in each country for context. **We identify three phases that enables comparison of
227 events across the three cases otherwise not possible due to different timelines with national
228 covid-19 responses and league season schedules.**

229 [INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

230 We have given a brief summary of the NFA communications to keep the timeline coherent
231 and now expand upon these communications in the detailed case study descriptions below.

232 Case study 1: Australia

233 Past experiences: historical, political and social context

234 Football in Australia has a chequered history. Given the country's preference for
235 physical sports (e.g., Australian football and rugby league), football has been deemed "the
236 effeminate cousin in the hyper-masculine family of football codes in Australia" (Carniel,
237 2008, p. 74). Former footballer Johnny Warren, captured the effeminate perception of the
238 sport in the title of his autobiography highlighting issues of sexism, racism and homophobia –
239 *Sheilas, Wogs, and Poofers*. However, the Australian women's national team, 'The
240 Matildas', have enjoyed considerable global success (Rowe et al., 2020).

241 The first national women's league, the Women's National Soccer League, introduced
242 in 1996 had six teams, from six of the eight states and territories (Downes et al., 2015). This
243 competition ran until 2004, alongside the men's National Soccer League, under the control of

244 the Australian Women's Soccer Association. After a four-year gap when Australia's top
245 players were forced to travel overseas to play, a semi-professional league, the W-League
246 began in 2008. Now, owned and operated by FFA, it consists of nine teams; eight associated
247 with an equivalent men's team. Given the organisational structure, communication is
248 replicated across the FFA and W-League's websites and social media channels.

249 Although women's football in Australia has previously been described as "a case
250 study in the failure of sporting prowess to translate into media coverage" (Caple et al., 2011
251 p. 141), the W-League is enjoying a period of unprecedented popularity and media attention,
252 fuelled by the success of the Matildas (McGowan & Downes, 2018). Nevertheless, the season
253 is shorter than the male equivalent, has fewer teams, and typically receives 200 times less
254 television news reports than the men's A-League per season (Caple et al., 2011). Prior to the
255 pandemic, the league ran on a Southern hemisphere winter to spring schedule.

256 **The current situation: Response to covid-19**

257 *Alteration phase*

258 On 13th March 2020, the first covid-19-related FFA communication concerning
259 women's football announced that the upcoming national game against the USWNT had been
260 cancelled. Citing player, staff and fan health and welfare, it suggested the match would be
261 rescheduled (FFA, 2020a). The following game against Canada was also cancelled soon
262 thereafter. The associated press release promised:

263 Football's National COVID-19 Working Committee, comprising representatives from
264 FFA, the Hyundai A-League and Westfield W-League, Member Federations and
265 Professional Footballers Australia, will continue to give regular updates to the
266 football community as it meets to consider advice on the COVID-19 outbreak from
267 federal and state/territory governments. (FFA, 2020b, para 3)

268 269 *Decision making phase*

270 Initially, there were frequent FFA updates on the W-League. Again, on the 13th March
271 2020, it was confirmed that W-League matches would go ahead as scheduled over that

1
2
3 272 weekend (FFA, 2020b). Although grassroots football in Australia was suspended on the 17th
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5 273 March 2020, the W-League was due to run until the W-League Grand Final on 21st March
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7
8 274 2020 and it was announced that the game would go ahead but ‘behind closed doors’, with no
9
10 275 fans (FFA, 2020c). FFA, via their Chief Executive Officer, issued a press release on the 20th
11
12 276 March 2020 that commented on the suspension of football but also highlighted the upcoming
13
14 277 W-League Grand Final, encouraging grassroots players and fans to watch the game (FFA,
15
16 278 2020d).

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18
19 279 Press releases were issued in the following months discussing elite football, the
20
21 280 impact of covid-19 on grassroots football and the successful bid to host the 2023 FIFA
22
23 281 WWC. None were specifically focussed on women’s football and there was no explicit
24
25 282 reference to the W-League until June 19th 2020 when FFA announced a new broadcast deal
26
27 283 for football in Australia detailing that W-League and Matildas’ matches would continue to be
28
29 284 aired on Fox Sports Australia. Johnson stated:

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33 285 “The deal will see the professional game – for women and men – reactivated, and
34
35 286 ensures that football at the heart of all our thinking in the future...We are equally as
36
37 287 pleased to have secured the next season for the Westfield W-League to ensure we can
38
39 288 continue to drive interest and growth in women’s football in Australia” (FFA, 2020e,
40
41 289 para 8-10).

42
43 291 Subsequently, on 2nd July 2020, FFA published a press release and discussion paper,
44
45 292 in light of “the most serious existential threat the game has ever seen” (FFA, 2020f, para 5)
46
47 293 (covid-19), with eleven proposed ‘principles’ underpinning future development and growth.
48
49 294 Reference was again made to the new broadcasting deal, which it was claimed “has secured
50
51 295 the next season of the W-League and ensures that Professional Women’s Football has a
52
53 296 platform to continue to grow” (FFA, 2020g, para 50). While women’s football was
54
55 297 communicated as a strategic priority, reference to the W-League was otherwise limited; **such**
56
57 298 **as** principle 10’s stated aim:

299 Continue the growth of the game by driving participation of women and girls and
300 enhancing existing competition structures to promote player development. (FFA,
301 2020g, para 12)

302
303 The paper also aimed to turn Australia into the ‘centre’ of women’s football in the Asia-
304 Pacific region and pointed to the development of a 10-year plan to drive investment. The
305 desire for the W-League to be “a ‘top 5’ global league which rivals its counterparts in the
306 United States and across Europe” was presented (FFA, 2020g, para 52). The lack of mention
307 of how the W-League would resume and to the specific covid-19 threats to women’s football
308 are noticeably absent. However, the paper also highlighted that:

309 [COVID-19] will place significant pressure on the games’ ability to invest in the
310 promotion of the A-League and W-League and other levels of the game, such as the
311 NPL competitions, to achieve the desired cut-through with fans. A concerted effort
312 will be required across all of football’s major products to rebuild revenues lost during
313 the COVID-19 period. (FFA, 2020g, para 25)

314
315 August communications related only to developments in international women’s.

316 **Case study 2: England**

317 **Past experiences: The historical, political and social context**

318 English football is often positioned as a game played and invented by men (Pfister,
319 2015). However, women’s football was hugely popular at the start of the 1900s in England,
320 peaking during the first World War (Williams, 2014). The women’s game was a threat to the
321 FA’s ‘man’s game’ who consequently banned women from playing football on FA affiliated
322 grounds in 1921, initiating the decline of women’s football (Williams, 2006). This fifty-year
323 ban effectively marginalised women’s football socially, culturally and economically.

324 The FA reassumed control for women’s football in 1993; however, it was 2009 before
325 plans were announced for The FA Women’s Super League (hereafter WSL), a semi-
326 professional league. The WSL’s inception as a summer league in 2011 was critical and timely
327 for women’s football in England as it aimed to provide a commercially viable, competitive
328 product (see Dunn & Welford, 2014). This acceleration towards professionalisation meant a

1
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3 329 turbulent process for many clubs, with some established women's clubs unable to compete
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5 330 financially. In 2017, a second league was introduced and the leagues were numbered, The
6
7 331 WSL 1 and 2.

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10 332 In 2018, The FA announced the forthcoming season would comprise a full-time
11
12 333 professional women's league; a significant development for women's football. Proposed FA
13
14 334 changes to club licences meant clubs were required to meet new investment, player contact
15
16 335 time and financial fair play criteria to secure professional status. Both leagues were scheduled
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18 336 between winter and spring and were rebranded, becoming The WSL and The FA Women's
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20 337 Championship, which remained a semi-professional league.

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22
23 338 The FA presented the two leagues as niche, modern products, separate from men's
24
25 339 football (Dunn & Welford, 2014). However, WSL teams are parented by men's clubs. This
26
27 340 contradictory cultural space (where women's football is considered separate but inextricably
28
29 341 connected) means women's teams are enmeshed in deregulation and advancing neoliberal
30
31 342 principles (i.e., turning surplus into generated profit) that dominate men's football (Kennedy
32
33 343 & Kennedy, 2016). Although, women's football cannot be considered to operate in line with
34
35 344 such objectives (Gayles et al. 2018), it could be argued that women's football teams added
36
37 345 into men's clubs strengthens the club brand and more critically, public perceptions.

346 **The current situation: Response to covid-19**

347 *Alteration phase*

348 The last WSL fixtures were played on 23rd February 2020 and this league was
349 officially suspended on 13th March, initially until 30th April (FA, 2020a). Upon the decision
350 for The PL not to return until May, The FA revised and paralleled its postponement (FA,
351 2020b). At first, The FA stated a desire to complete the remaining fixtures:

352 there is a combined objective for all remaining domestic league and cup matches to be
353 played as and when it's appropriate to do so, enabling us to maintain the integrity of
354 each competition. However, any return to play will only be with the full support of
355 Government and when medical guidance allows. (FA, 2020b, para 5)

356
357 Their stance soon changed, however, citing concerns over the financial, logistical, and
358 operational challenges associated with continuing:

359 Every possible scenario has been meticulously analysed and evaluated in order to find
360 a solution to meet the unique demands of the women's game. This includes a detailed
361 examination of the financial, logistical and operational challenges that we face during
362 this pandemic... Following an assessment of the protocols required to return to
363 football and feedback from clubs, which is crucial to any decision making process, it
364 is clear there will be significant challenges in completing the 2019-20 season... We
365 are continuing to consult on the possibility of terminating the 2019-20 season. (FA,
366 2020c, para 3-6)

367

368 *Decision making phase*

369 The FA delayed decision making until 25th May 2020, choosing to end the season -
370 supposedly in the interests of the women's game:

371 Following overwhelming feedback from the clubs, the decision to bring an end to the
372 2019-20 season was made in the best interest of the women's game. This will also
373 enable clubs, the FA Women's Super League & Women's Championship Board and
374 the FA to plan, prepare and focus on next season when football returns for the 2020-
375 21 campaign. (FA, 2020d, para 3)

376

377 Yet it was another two weeks (5th June 2020) before The FA decided the outcome of The
378 WSL 2019-20 season on a points-per-game method (FA, 2020e). In sharp contrast, The PL,
379 with similar season scheduling, resumed fixtures on the 17th June (PL, 2020).

380 *Resumption phase*

381 Shortly after the 2019-20 outcome decision, The PL donated £1m for covid-19 testing
382 for WSL players (FA, 2020f). Kelly Simmons, FA director of the women's game stated:

383 We would like to thank the Premier League for its support in providing crucial
384 funding that will allow us to align with their testing protocols when we come back for
385 the 2020-21 season. (FA, 2020f, para 4)

386

387 The donation could have been made sooner and saved the 2019-20 season, nevertheless the
388 financial gesture arguably secured the commencement of the 2020-21 season. The FA began
389 testing WSL players on the 2nd July 2020 and published details on the number (1) of positive
390 covid-19 cases in mid-July (FA, 2020g). The 7th July 2020 equalled a phased return to

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3 391 training for WSL clubs. Soon after, the FA announced resumption details of both the WSL
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5 392 (for 5th September 2020) and the Women's 2019-20 FA Cup (26th September 2020) (FA,
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7 393 2020h). A new head coach of the women's national team was announced in mid-August as
8
9
10 394 well as governmental plans to pilot fan attendance at WSL fixtures in September (FA, 2020i)

11 12 395 **Case study 3: United States of America**

13 14 396 **Past experiences: The historical, political and social context**

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16
17 397 Unlike Australia and England, the USA's governance of its elite women's football
18
19 398 (soccer) league is not wholly under purview of its NFA. The National Women's Soccer
20
21 399 League (NWSL) is a professional league (i.e., players remunerated on full-time contracts)
22
23 400 that is owned by the teams, under a management contract with U.S. Soccer and thus devolved
24
25 401 from the association (Linehan & Rueter, 2021). This governance structure is notably different
26
27 402 to Australia and England and enables the league to act independently. As a profit-making
28
29 403 league, however, teams are under pressure to be commercially. It is perhaps unsurprising,
30
31 404 therefore, that the top tier of women's football has gone through many iterations since 1995
32
33 405 when the first women's professional league was created, the United States Interregional
34
35 406 Women's League. Citing failures to produce a financially viable and stable market, women's
36
37 407 soccer in the USA between 1995-2013 arguably failed to feed off the popularity and publicity
38
39 408 of the USWNT's success (who reached the semi-finals of all FIFA WWCs, winning once)
40
41 409 and the top tier of women's football changed six times (Markovits & Hellerman, 2003). In
42
43 410 2012, U.S. Soccer held roundtable discussions with eight clubs and agreed to fund the wages
44
45 411 of USWNT players to reduce team expenses and support the financial viability of the newly
46
47 412 created NWSL for 2013 (Lauletta, 2012). The NWSL has remained as the top tier league in
48
49 413 part due to U.S. Soccer's financial backing and the advent of social media allowing women's
50
51 414 football fans to connect with their teams (Coche, 2014). Before covid-19, the NWSL season
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53 415 ran on a spring through autumn schedule.
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3 416 Recently, U.S. Soccer has been “besieged” with lawsuits, most notably facing two
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5 417 Equal Pay Act and gender discrimination lawsuits with members of the USWNT (Bank,
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7 418 2020, p.1). Critiquing the merit of arguments in these lawsuits is not the purview of this
8
9 419 study, but we acknowledge this political context to situate U.S. Soccer’s covid-19 response.
10
11 420 In March 2019, USWNT players sued U.S. Soccer for ‘institutionalized gender
12
13 421 discrimination’, poor working conditions and violating the Equal Pay Act (ESPN, 2019).
14
15 422 Previously, five members of the team filed a federal complaint commonly referred to as
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17 423 “Equal Play, Equal Pay” in 2017 over claims of wage discrimination by U.S. Soccer when
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19 424 compared to the men’s national team’s pay and was settled out of court (cf. Archer & Prange,
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21 425 2019). At the start of the pandemic, the USWNT’s 2019 lawsuit had yet to receive a
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23 426 summary judicial judgement. The judge in the case recently found for U.S. Soccer
24
25 427 concerning pay discrimination but preserved the claims of USWNT regarding discrimination
26
27 428 in working conditions (McCann, 2020). The events reviewed here speak to questions of
28
29 429 (in)equality in sport, which are more openly and visibly contested in American society than
30
31 430 ever before (Allison, 2018).

37 431 **The current situation: Response to covid-19**

39 432 *Alteration phase*

40 433 In March 2020, covid-19 cases in the USA sharply rose (McNeil Jr., 2020), there
41
42 434 were multiple and consistent communications from the NWSL and U.S. Soccer. On 10th
43
44 435 March 2020, the NWSL described:

45 436 closely monitoring the spread of the virus with respected to our preseason and
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47 437 regular season matches and will be in a position to make changes as necessary to
48
49 438 respond to developments as they happen (NWSL, 2020a, para. 1).
50
51 439

52 440 The NWSL and U.S. Soccer took immediate action, cancelling preseason and USWNT
53
54 441 fixtures respectively (NWSL, 2020b; U.S. Soccer, 2020a). On 17th March 2020, NWSL
55
56 442 Commissioner, Lisa Baird wrote to the NWSL community:

443 We are in active consultation with governmental health agencies, our NWSL
444 medical task force and other sports leagues on the appropriate next steps and
445 contingency plans for the resumption of our 2020 preseason and potential impact
446 on our 2020 regular season. (NWSL, 2020b, para. 2).

448 To support the USA's medical efforts, U.S. Soccer launched the "Bend the Curve. Stay at
449 Home" campaign with the NWSL and the men's elite league, Major League Soccer to spread
450 awareness of travel restrictions (U.S. Soccer, 2020b).

451 *Decision making phase*

452 On 4th May 2020, NWSL allowed individual training to resume (subject to state and
453 local health mandates) if clubs followed their newly devised "Return to Play Phased
454 Protocol" (NWSL, 2020c). This statement communicated the first phase of the Protocol for
455 clubs and provided reassurance to the wider community of the NWSL's commitment to
456 prioritising the health and safety of players and staff. Later guidance on 25th May 2020
457 detailed the resumption of small group (phase two) and full team training (phase three)
458 (NWSL, 2020d).

459 *Resumption phase*

460 With full training underway, on 27th May 2020 Baird announced a new competition,
461 The NWSL Challenge Cup, to be played in Utah (NWSL, 2020e). The 25-game tournament
462 would enable clubs to train within one "village" complex meeting housing, training and
463 competition needs (para. 10). A tournament-format was preferred over a delayed version of
464 the regular season schedule that would have required extensive non-essential travel across
465 nine states, where different state social-distancing rules were in effect. Importantly, this
466 tournament proceeded with endorsement from local and national officials (NWSL, 2020e). It
467 was hoped that the Challenge Cup would generate much needed revenue, with the
468 announcement of title sponsorship (NWSL, 2020e) and further multi-year partner deals.

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3 469 Additional revenue came through a three-year broadcasting deal with CBS, who had agreed
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5 470 to show live games throughout the tournament (NWSL, 2020e).

6
7 471 The Challenge Cup was not without challenges, as the first professional football
8
9 472 league to return. First, players expressed concerns about load management playing so many
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11 473 games on artificial turf over a short time period, and potential exposure to covid-19 for them
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13 474 and their families. On the 27th May 2020, contract guarantees (regardless of participation),
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15 475 insurance, tournament accommodations for families, and input on tournament procedures
16
17 476 were secured for all NWSL players (NWSLPA, 2020). Second, eight days before the start
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19 477 Orlando Pride withdrew from the competition after staff and players tested positive for
20
21 478 coronavirus (Orlando Pride, 2020). State regulations were not broken, but the actions of
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23 479 individual players did not adhere to the NWSL protocols. The opening game of the
24
25 480 tournament was the most watched match in NWSL history with 572,000 viewers, a 201%
26
27 481 increase on the previous record (Williams, 2020a). This was superseded by the final which
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29 482 drew 653,000 viewers (Williams, 2020b). To continue this “breakout 2020 season” (para 1),
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31 483 the NWSL announced on 25th August that a similar ‘Fall Series’ competition would launch in
32
33 484 September 2020 with national broadcasting and commercial partners (NWSL, 2020f). An
34
35 485 international broadcasting deal was soon announced (NWSL, 2020g).

486 **Discussion**

487 The study aims to: (a) compare and shed new insights into the wide range of **phased**
488 covid-19 responses, and (b) establish recommendations for other nations to navigate major
489 crises with their social and ethical responsibilities to women’s football. Accordingly, this
490 section begins by exploring NFA covid-19 responses utilising institutional logics to address
491 (a). Then, for (b), case study findings and resulting recommendations are organised under the
492 three response phases of alteration, decision making and resumption (as identified by the
493 framework analysis and shown in Figure 1).

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3 494 According to institutional theory, homogeneity in predominant organisational values,
4
5 495 norms and practices occurs with social pressures resulting in other organisations conforming
6
7 496 to the dominant organisation's values, norms and practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).
8
9 497 Thus, the role that Australia, England and the USA play in shaping women's football
10
11 498 practices of other nations is arguably vast. Covid-19 presents an opportunity for these
12
13 499 countries to establish practice norms for NFAs navigating crises. However, we find variation
14
15 500 in NFA responses to covid-19 rooted in their differing historical, political and social contexts
16
17 501 and the prioritising of women's football. In light of this finding, institutional theory tells us
18
19 502 that it may be the ordering principles and social structures of NFAs that shapes them rather
20
21 503 than similar organisations (Washington & Patterson, 2011). These principles and structures
22
23 504 are commonly referred as institutional logics and can be inherently contradictory, explaining
24
25 505 differences in organisations' actions (Allison, 2016). We demonstrate that sports
26
27 506 organisations are driven by a unique institutional logic and make a theoretical contribution by
28
29 507 highlighting engrained social structures as a prevailing institutional logic in the governance
30
31 508 of women's football. This finding corroborates the importance placed on social structures in
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33 509 understanding sport governance during the pandemic, as detailed in Byers et al.'s (2021)
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35 510 covid-19 commentary.
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42 511 **Next, we discuss the impact of institutional logics through the three identified phases**
43
44 512 **(alteration, decision-making, and resumption), highlighting key recommendations for NFAs**
45
46 513 **and leagues.** Movement through these phases will have been influenced by the stage of the
47
48 514 season, nevertheless differences in responses highlight diverse prioritisations of women's
49
50 515 football and this study is the first to outline pandemic response phases of sports organisations.
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53 516 **Consistent communication during alteration phase**

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55 517 The case studies highlight the importance of communication for reputation
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57 518 management in the alteration and decision-making phases. In England and the USA, where
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3 519 most fixtures were unplayed, two different responses emerged. In England, there was a two-
4
5 520 month delay between the pandemic and communication about how the 2019-20 season would
6
7 521 be resolved, whereas in the USA, within this timeframe a new competition was launched with
8
9 522 covid-19 measures in place, commercial partners and a new broadcasting deal. The FA
10
11 523 attracted criticism for the lack of urgency in announcing the cancellation of 2019-20 season
12
13 524 and is indicative of its lack of support for women's football - little solidarity was shown to
14
15 525 women's clubs in England to assist with losses or to cover restarting costs (Wrack, 2020).
16
17 526 This finding indicates the importance of clear crisis communication for reputation
18
19 527 management (McGuire et al., 2020) particularly during covid-19 where a lack of institutional
20
21 528 communication has been linked to community worse-case scenario anxieties (Wu et al.,
22
23 529 2020). Women's football was prioritised in the USA as the first professional football league
24
25 530 to restart, and dismissed in England with focus on the PL resumption. Specific case
26
27 531 differences could be attributed to divergent governance structures where the NWSL were
28
29 532 able to act independently of the NFA. In Australia, it was a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'
30
31 533 for the W-League as there was little communication once the season ended in March (Figure
32
33 534 1). While the off-season timing may impact the lack of announcements, clear crisis
34
35 535 communication can instil confidence in the women's football community to be able to restore
36
37 536 and recover from any pandemic effects (McGuire et al., 2020). Despite the award of the 2023
38
39 537 FIFA WWC and the FFA's 'XI Principles' paper claiming a post-pandemic focus on growth,
40
41 538 the lack of information on the resumption of women's football belie this claim. By the end of
42
43 539 July 2020, there had been no update on the resumption of the W-League. These differences in
44
45 540 NFAs communication point towards the influence of social and cultural value structures (and
46
47 541 taken-for-granted norms) in the institutional environment (Joo et al., 2017). That is, the FA's
48
49 542 neglect of women's football in the first months of the pandemic is consistent with historical
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51 543 injustices against it (detailed in the case study) and a taken-for-granted norm that men's
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3 544 football is the popular focus. Institutional logics may also explain differences in
4
5 545 communication where the NWSL's conception of a commercially-driven tournament show
6
7 546 the logic of women's football as 'business' as prevailing in the USA, whereas women's
8
9 547 football as 'cause' (i.e., to empower girls to participate in football via role-modelling) could
10
11 548 explain the lack of FA action and communication.
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14 549 **Multi-agency involvement during decision-making phase**

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16
17 550 At the decision-making phase, this research highlights the importance of collaborating
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19 551 with stakeholders to support gender equality efforts. The NWSL's tournament approach was
20
21 552 successful because of the open support from local and state health and government officials,
22
23 553 in addition to coordination by the NWSL. Here, the geopolitical context caused differing
24
25 554 institutional pressures, where Australia and England entered national lockdowns and the USA
26
27 555 did not, thus NWSL benefitted from relaxed legal restrictions. In England, (financial) support
28
29 556 from the men's PL was only granted to the FA after their decision-making phase and the
30
31 557 NFA did not conceive an alternative revenue stream like the NWSL. Moreover, during the
32
33 558 assessed period, the UK government had not committed financial support to women's
34
35 559 football that had already been afforded to other sports such as rugby league (UK
36
37 560 Government, 2020) – a sport that from a market perspective (turnover figures, club size,
38
39 561 average attendances etc.) is perhaps a more realistic comparison for women's football than
40
41 562 men's football in the UK. Both Australian and UK governments later provided financial aid
42
43 563 in 2021 to support elite women's football (SportsProMedia, 2021; UK Government, 2021).
44
45 564 The USA government provided a financial loan to the NWSL within the first six months as
46
47 565 part of an initiative to support small businesses (New York Times, 2020). Sports governance
48
49 566 have long been autonomous yet covid-19 has caused increasing government/regulatory
50
51 567 supervision and NGBs are likely to need to work closely with these stakeholders, especially if
52
53 568 requiring funding. Covid-19 may thus indirectly cause institutional (isomorphic) change, with
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3 569 environmental pressures from governments forcing NFA's towards gender equality initiatives
4
5 570 (i.e. equitable financial distribution between men's and women's football) in exchange for
6
7 571 financial aid. Indeed, the UK government has criticised The FA's oversight of the game and
8
9 572 in recent years recommended introducing legislation if it did not reform football governance
10
11 573 (House of Commons Library, 2017). However, once the effects of the pandemic diminish
12
13 574 consistent change and homogeneity is unlikely across NFAs in their governance of women's
14
15 575 football without intervention from the world governing body who have authority over NFAs
16
17 576 (Slack & Hinings, 1994).

18
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20
21 577 The case studies also highlight differences in NFA and league actions in seeking out
22
23 578 commercial partners and broadcasters in the decision-making phase. This was key to the
24
25 579 NWSL's financially viable tournament (who acted independently from U.S. Soccer), with
26
27 580 three named partners and a national broadcaster. A new broadcasting deal in Australia
28
29 581 'secured' the W-League's short-term future, with providers set to cover the league until July
30
31 582 2021. A longer-term deal had yet to emerge at the end of the assessed period and FFA points
32
33 583 to "significant pressure" on investment in both men's and women's football. During the
34
35 584 analysed period, English club owners pressured the FA to capitalise on "the massive financial
36
37 585 opportunity" for broadcasting (Garry, 2020, para 1). In March 2021 the FA struck a £7m deal
38
39 586 with broadcasters BBC and Sky Sports (Garry, 2021).

40 587 **NFA stewardship during resumption phase**

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44
45 588 The differing communication levels from NFAs concerning the resumption of
46
47 589 competition highlights a key finding that the interests of women's football are best served
48
49 590 when it is not solely under the stewardship of the NFA. In both Australia and England, the
50
51 591 NFAs had attention divided between men's and women's competitions whereas the NWSL
52
53 592 could focus solely on women's football. Consequently, it returned in a timely and highly
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55 593 visible manner in the USA. As such, institutional mechanisms within NFAs may indeed
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3 594 influence their ability to act (ir)responsibly (Joo et al., 2017). Variation in governance
4
5 595 structures of women's football contributes to why the NWSL were able to return quicker than
6
7 596 FFA and The FA. The NWSL demonstrated an upward fluctuation in demand (as
8
9
10 597 demonstrated by record viewership) for the resumption of women's football, and the swift
11
12 598 involvement of commercial investors highlights a positive change in market dynamics within
13
14 599 the USA. It is important to note that American sports had made significant gains in
15
16 600 commercial and broadcasting partnerships prior to the pandemic (Allison, 2016) and so their
17
18 601 crises responses could also reflect a different sports landscape to Australia and England.

21 602 Additionally, women's football operates in Australia and England within the powerful
22
23 603 and highly constraining environment dominated by men's football and hegemonic
24
25 604 masculinity, whereas the independence of the NWSL from U.S. Soccer means league
26
27 605 organisers are not constrained internally by a powerful and highly constraining internal
28
29 606 environment within the organisation (although these hegemonic masculinity constraints may
30
31 607 be felt in dealing with external parties). Institutional theorists suggest that when operating in
32
33 608 such a constrained environment, constantly fighting for legitimacy, organisations are more
34
35 609 likely to conform to institutional norms (Parry et al., 2021), so with public pressure for
36
37 610 televised men's sport to resume, in addition to the governance structures in both countries, it
38
39 611 is possible to understand why women's football was not prioritised in Australia and England.

44 612 **Conclusion**

46 613 In the context of covid-19, we find that NFAs can impede gender equality, both in
47
48 614 terms of management and communication. This study rationalises institutional logics (i.e.
49
50 615 engrained social structures), constrained environments, and governance structures as
51
52 616 explanatory variables of the differences between NFA actions. The new insights we generate
53
54 617 (concerning communication, government and health support, commercialisation, and
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56 618 stewardship) establish recommendations for how NFAs can navigate major crises in the
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3 619 short-term with their social and ethical responsibilities to women's football so that gender
4
5 620 equality expectations are not diminished.
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8 621 As NFAs continue to respond to covid-19, it is important to assess institutional
9
10 622 actions concerning women's football and whether they advance or hamper its 'new age'. This
11
12 623 study only covers the first six-months of the pandemic and how women's football community
13
14 624 concerns could be alleviated in the short-term. Nonetheless it advances the small body of
15
16 625 literature examining institutions governing women's sport; being the first to explore
17
18 626 institutional pressures and football governing bodies during covid-19 as well as by providing
19
20 627 a framework for NFAs' to manage major crises. We make a theoretical contribution to
21
22 628 institutional theory in sport management by using women's football as a vehicle to uncover
23
24 629 and bring attention to the past experiences (i.e., the historical, political, and social factors)
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26 630 that change practices, specifically by finding engrained social structures as an institutional
27
28 631 logic in women's football that may influence crisis responses as well as the influence of
29
30 632 constrained environments and governance structures in explaining differences. Future
31
32 633 research should use interviews and observations to examine how football governance
33
34 634 decision-makers respond to time-sensitive crises. While the assessment presented here cannot
35
36 635 directly speak to the effectiveness of institutional actions, it will be useful to future studies
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38 636 seeking to better understand the historical, political and sociological effects of this pandemic
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40 637 on elite women's football in addition to providing NFAs with recommendations for future
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42 638 crisis management.
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52 684 [meals-hotels](https://www.sbnation.com/nba/2020/7/8/21317174/nba-wnba-bubbles-inconsistent-mess-meals-hotels)
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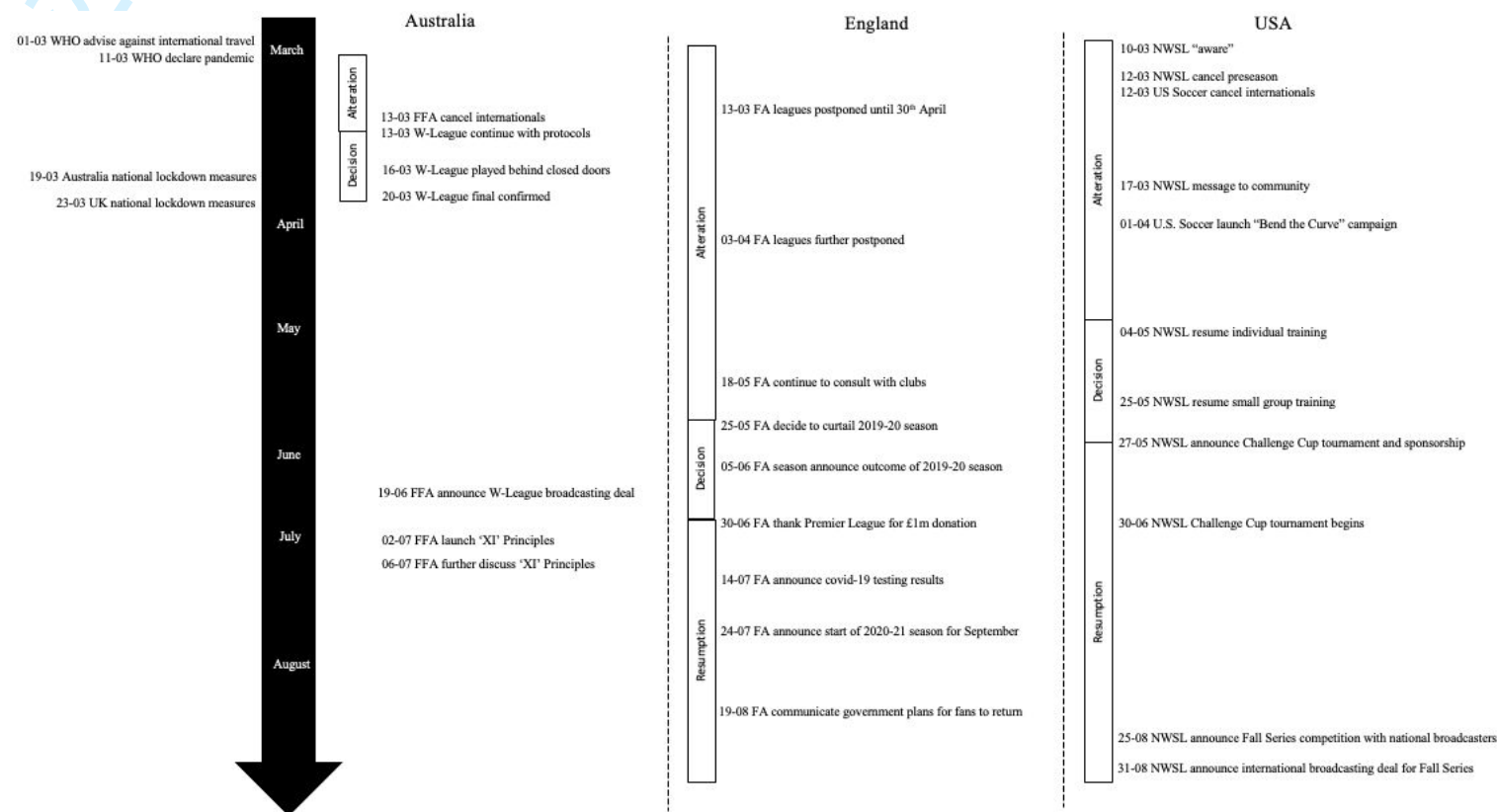
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928 Figure 1. Timeline of key NFA events concerning covid-19 and women's football.



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930 Note. Alteration = alteration or delay due to the pandemic; Decision = decision concerning current competition; Resumption = resumption of
 931 (future) competition

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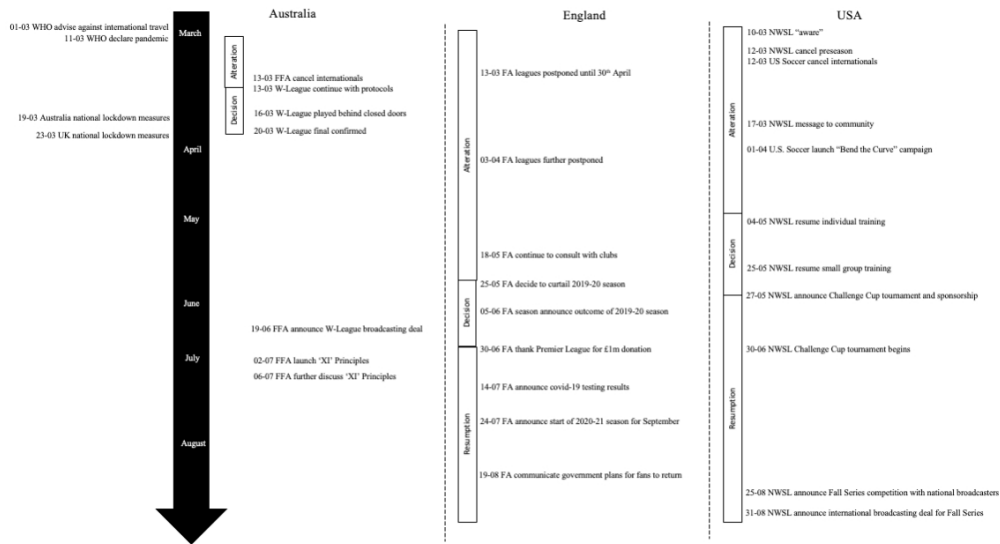


Figure 1. Timeline of key NFA events concerning covid-19 and women's football.

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