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# Women's football subculture of misogyny: the escalation to online gender-based violence

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## ABSTRACT

**Research question:** Given the worldwide growth of women's football and its presence on social media, it is essential to explore and understand fan attitudes and culture.

**Research methods:** This article provides the first empirical social media netnography focusing on English women's football teams (Manchester United and Burnley) and international fan views towards women professional players on TikTok. We extend this discussion by utilising a netnography in which researchers immersed themselves for seven months in women's football groups on TikTok to gather and analyse new qualitative data in this context.

**Results and Findings:** We identify the escalation of gender-based violence on social media against women players. Four key themes emerged from the netnography: 1. Sexism: the place of women in football; 2. Misogyny and hatred of women; 3. Sexualisation of women; 4. Demand for a male-only space. Sexist comments were apparent in all of the TikTok posts containing female football players, with some also containing more aggressive misogynistic comments. Other dominant comments sought to reduce women to objects of sexual desire and belittle their professional skills, whereas others were appalled at the presence of female players on the clubs' official accounts, demanding them to be a male-only space.

**Implications:** The study contributes to the understanding of online fan cultures on complex, video-based platforms such as TikTok. Through literature review and netnography, we identified a problem for football clubs on social media of longstanding, problematic issues of toxic fan comments.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Netnography; gender-based violence; TikTok; women's football; social media

## Introduction

TikTok has become an increasingly popular tool for sport organisations to share short-form video content and has over 3 billion downloads worldwide (Ceci, 2022). TikTok is not only eclipsing other social media platforms in terms of global internet traffic, but it is

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also surpassing Google and its suite of services, including Google Maps and Gmail (Moreno, 2021). Thus, it is unsurprising that football teams (known as soccer in America) all over the world have set up official TikTok accounts to take advantage of its accessibility to fans.

The contribution of this article lies in its focus on understanding how fans around the world respond to the greater visibility of female sport professionals on social media. We offer the first social media empirical netnography study to focus on UK women's football clubs and fans' attitudes towards women professional players. Green (2016) and Fenton (2018) highlight the lack of regulation of social media communities and the correlation with the 'veil of anonymity' perceived to protect and encourage misogynistic and sexist comments on social media in response to female athletes (Litchfield et al., 2018). Given the global development of women's football and its prominence on social media, it is important to study fan responses and culture as presented through online commentary surrounding women's professional players. Fielding-Lloyd and Woodhouse (2023, p. 17) highlight the significance of the 'professional' framework within which the Women's Super League (WSL) operates. They also underscore the Football Association's (FA) concerted endeavours to establish sufficient support systems for female players and initiate measures to establish benchmarks for gender equality in the sport. Popp et al.'s (2016) study of sport highlights the 'dearth of empirical research charting men's attitudes towards women and the reproduction of gender inequality' (p. 745). The authors also call for new qualitative research which 'could unpack how men perform different types of masculinities in different contexts' (p. 745). Liston's (2023) research into the commercialisation of women's football examines the political and gender-related factors that shape the organisation of the sport and contribute to significant disparities compared to male professional players. Previous research has also found that all levels of sport athletes are likely to receive abuse on social media (Meggs & Ahmed, 2021), especially women athletes (Kavanagh et al., 2019; McCarthy, 2022).

Our study aims to bridge an important gap in current research, critically examining fan reactions to sport organisations on social media. The study contributes to the body of work exploring new forms of gender-based violence on social media. We contribute to this work by employing a netnography (Kozinets, 2020) in which researchers immersed themselves in women's football groups on TikTok for seven months to collect, reflect and analyse qualitative data in this setting. Our results provide novel insights by generating themes from social media responses to women's football and recommendations for brands related to gender-based violence. Our goal is to assist other scholars interested in examining complex platforms such as TikTok and the way gender-based violence literature enables us to explore broader social concerns such as privacy and security. The present study further represents a response to Adá Lameiras and Rodríguez-Castro's (2021) request for future empirical research to examine newer digital video social media channels and women's football. Therefore, we posed the following research question: how do fans react to women's football on TikTok in the framing of gender-based violence?

This article examines English Premier League football (EPL) clubs' comments from fans within the context of gender sport studies politics from two clubs. We are particularly interested in the fan-based mentality at play here, revealing what we perceive to be vulnerabilities when these female athletes' video content is open for comment via TikTok. The netnography helped understand how the clubs present their high-profile

female football league players. We further discuss how these clubs navigate the complexities and contradictions inherent in sport in terms of how women are empowered individually while also being used as targets for harassment. The article contributes to and expands on current studies on how fans utilise social media, with a particular emphasis on abusive comments. Through adopting this approach, we also respond to Ströbel et al. (2021) and Stegmann et al. (2021), who reviewed the sport and digital transformation and social media literature. They specifically call for netnographic research in sport.

## **Research context/background: women's football**

Women's football in 2021/22 furthered its expansion in terms of the number of people watching it in the UK. The England Women's Football Euro 2022 tournament saw record TV audiences and stadium attendance. The final in July saw 17.6 million viewers (80% of all TV viewers) tuned in to see England beat Germany, winning the first major football trophy in England in 56 years (Sweeney, 2022). The relationship between women and football is a complex one with decades of negative stereotypes. When the Football Association reluctantly took official control of women's football in 1993, it did nothing to overtly challenge the stereotypical attitudes and gender discrimination that existed in society (Clarkson et al., 2022; Jacobs, 2014).

A slight shift took place in 2015 when the England women's team won a bronze medal in the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) Women's World Cup, with Petty and Pope (2019) finding that coverage of the tournament was positive overall, focusing on the skill and achievements of England, as opposed to undermining their achievements and reducing them to sex objects, and thereby representing the move to greater equality in football and media coverage. The increase in viewing figures continued for the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup in France, whereby England reached the semi-final before losing out to the top team, the USA and peaked more people's interest in the game (Clarkson et al., 2022). Thus, elite women's football in England has grown significantly both commercially and financially since the 2015 World Cup (Clarkson et al., 2022). Yet, what remains unknown is whether this growth in popularity has helped to diminish the negative stereotypes and discrimination on 'new media' that target much younger demographics. FIFPRO (Federation Internationale des Associations de Footballeurs Professionnels) has addressed this issue in a significant manner. A 2017 report by FIFPRO found that social media has become an integral part of the professional football industry. Players increasingly use social media to interact with supporters, promote their clubs, and enhance their personal branding. Social media platforms serve a dual purpose. They facilitate social interaction and self-expression and function as a professional tool for cultivating relationships, boosting brand visibility, and generating financial gains. We argue that employers should be aware of the potential repercussions of social media use, as it can foster a hostile work environment, especially for women athletes (see Kavanagh et al., 2020). Organisations must establish clear guidelines for employee conduct on social networking sites (Bunch & Cianfrone, 2022; e.g. Felix et al., 2017). This study has implications for the effects of social media in the workplace. We recommend a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by professional football players in the era of digitalisation.

## Conceptual background: social media fan engagement of women sports professionals

TikTok is a social media network for short-form videos created by ByteDance in 2016 for the Chinese youth market. TikTok has gained prominence as a social media platform and has been adopted as a tool for fan engagement for sport teams (Su et al., 2020). The social media pages of football clubs are micromanaged so that fans may comment and connect with content (Balliauw et al., 2020; Maderer et al., 2018). Managers of social media marketing grapple with companies' lack of control over user-generated content on their networks (Chrimes et al., 2019). Some official football club accounts safeguard players with disclaimer labels and restricted tagging systems, while others are unmonitored and open to public comments and tagging (Popp et al., 2016; Stavros et al., 2014).

Football fans expect personal memoirs of players, behind-the-scenes information, and new ways to engage with athletes (McCarthy et al., 2014; Vale & Fernandes, 2018). Fans spending more time online as a result of the pandemic lockdown has increased club content on social media across all leagues (Su et al., 2020; Weimar et al., 2021). With new social scripts portraying an idealised sport image, social media has become a crucial instrument for clubs to increase player profiles and club revenue (Lardo et al., 2017; Parganas et al., 2017). In addition, Schmidt and Koenigstorfer (2022) assert that sport researchers must create fan-centric, inventive, and creative means to promote the use of digital technology by sport fans. A similar observation is made about professional esports players and the extension of football culture and fan behaviour into digital domains (Bertschy et al., 2020).

Visibility, participation, and safety must be addressed as more women sporting professionals establish a social media presence or, in the case of women's football teams, their sport organisations require a public identity. The social media environment can be unfriendly, combative, and confrontational and promotes harassment (Murthy & Sharma, 2019; Wheatley & Vatnoey, 2020). Research conducted by Ortiz (2019) on gaming culture demonstrates how digital culture is connected to cultural repertoires and structural conditions that parallel 'real world' identity structures, most notably racist and sexist 'trash talk'. Professional women's sport participation is associated with intolerance, discrimination, bullying, and a gaming culture that targets and harasses players (Velija & Silvani, 2021). Even though marketing or club organisations may monitor social media accounts to give an additional level of inspection, social tagging enables harassers to focus on unfavourable remarks and talk maliciously.

Bowes and Culvin (2021) contend that the professionalisation of women's football has led to its commercialisation, which has increased the sport's and women's players' visibility. This increased visibility has increased the likelihood of discriminatory comments on social media platforms. Fielding-Lloyd and Woodhouse (2023) further emphasise the significance of social media in the professionalisation of women's football. They argue that social media has allowed women's football clubs to reach a larger audience and supporters to engage with the sport in novel ways. However, they also observe that social media has been utilised to perpetuate sexist football stereotypes. This article expands the work of earlier studies that have examined gender-based violence in online spaces (Kavanagh et al., 2019; McCarthy, 2022; Phipps, 2022). This literature contains instances of abuse towards female esports champions and a growing belief that women are unfit to

play 'extreme, aggressive, and masculine' games (Yusoff & Yunus, 2021). As women athletes face daily misogyny and sexual harassment on and off the field (Fasting et al., 2003, 2002), scholars must delve deeper into the meanings embedded in sport culture and their transmission via digital spaces such as social media.

### **Online gender-based violence in sport**

While social media technologies have had a significant positive impact on sport and fan interaction (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012), it is also becoming increasingly apparent that this environment can play host to several darker behaviours and provide an outlet for a variety of types of abuse and discrimination to occur, according to Cleland's (2014) research, racism, homophobia, disability, and sexism, as well as cyberbullying, fuel such hate narratives. As a result of this process, hate speech can be articulated en masse (Bjork-James, 2020) in ways that endanger and target individual players.

Social media abuse towards athletes has been attributed to fandom and celebrity culture (Kavanagh et al., 2023). Fans feel emboldened to post hateful social media when they perceive an athlete has underperformed (Cranmer et al., 2021), when an athlete outperforms others and is viewed as an outlier (Litchfield et al., 2018), to publicly shame an athlete due to a norm violation (MacPherson & Kerr, 2021) or because of speaking out about a social or political issue that diverges from how a fan feels about that topic (Frederick et al., 2019). These studies underscore the uncontrolled nature of virtual places that can foster unpleasant or violent encounters. While all people engaging with online platforms have the potential to experience abuse, women and girls are recognised as primary victims of violence and oppression online (Moloney & Love, 2018).

Despite the prominence of violence directed at women online, it has proven difficult to name and define (Jane, 2020), resulting in a range of terms being adopted to describe such behaviour(s), including but not limited to e-bile (Jane, 2017), gendered cyberhate – including gender trolling (Jane, 2020), online misogyny (Barker & Jurasz, 2019), hate speech (Richardson-Self, 2018), networked harassment (Marwick & Caplan, 2018) technology-facilitated sexual violence (Powell & Henry, 2019) and cyber violence against women and girls (Pritchard & Tandon, 2015). Studies agree that such violence is directed at women and gender-based (Kavanagh et al., 2019).

Gender-based violence is violence against women or violence that adversely affects women disproportionately (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, n.d.). In 2015, UNESCO published 'Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls: A Global Wake-Up Call' (Pritchard & Tandon, 2015). This report reveals that 75% of women have suffered internet abuse. Globally, millions of women and girls endure gender-based violence. Violence against women and girls (VAWG) affects victims, loved ones, and society, transcending borders, race, culture, and socioeconomic status (Pritchard & Tandon, 2015). Amnesty International (2017) surveyed 4000 women in 8 countries and concluded that a quarter had experienced online harassment at least once (in virtual and physical spaces). The disproportionate gender-based violence women suffer online is a major societal concern (Kavanagh et al., 2019).

Online gender-based violence includes sexually explicit language, exaggerated rape and murder threats, unpleasant remarks or social criticism connected to gender, sexual allusions, and mocking. Abuse may be text – or image-based and target victims



or their families. As Posetti et al. (2021) contend, violence against women online radiates far beyond the target and can affect others within social and/or professional networks making it an intimate and personal form of attack. Lewis et al. (2016) state that the online abuse of women is an extension of the abuse they face in offline and online contexts that may duplicate and/or amplify gender-based violence that occurs in physical environments (Phipps, 2022). Therefore Jane (2020) argues that contrary to suggestions that online violence is benign, scholarly research shows that it can cause actual, concrete, and embodied misery (Lockyer & Savigny, 2020). The UN Broadband Commission (2015) says VAWG online may harm free expression and other human rights (p. 2). What unifies studies is that the content of gender-based violence in digital spaces overwhelmingly can be deemed misogynistic or sexist.

Misogyny consists of animosity against women, as well as physical, psychological, and social aggression towards them (Code, 2002), and can be defined as hatred or disdain towards women (Moloney & Love, 2018). Misogyny is not limited to objectifying, humiliating, and diminishing women. It may result in discrimination, antagonism, androcentrism, degrading women, sexual objectification, and physical and sexual assault (Farrell et al., 2019). Social media has spawned new types of misogyny and made it easier to express them (Jane, 2017). Such misogyny is directly evidenced by the documented hate targeting high-profile women in various professions, including politics, journalism and sport, for no reason other than their gender (Farrell et al., 2019; Kavanagh et al., 2016). Virtual spaces promote gendered and sexualised politics that support patriarchal structures; as such, abuse ‘infuses the virtual world’ (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016). Moloney and Love (2018) refer to virtual masculinity when men use verbal and visual cues to create a (hyper)masculine identity online. They promote hegemonic sexuality and gender norms that subjugate women.

Women’s sport participation is associated with a much higher level of intolerance, prejudice, and bullying, in addition to gaming culture targeting and harassment of players (Velija & Silvani, 2021). As more sport commentary has moved online, so have methods of disparaging female athletes. Indeed, harassment of women is becoming more visible, with social media commentary allowing harassers to ‘display their aggression in public’ (Everbach, 2018, p. 134). There has been limited examination of women sport professionals’ vulnerabilities concerning misogyny and sexual harassment via social media.

Litchfield et al. (2018) noted sexist, racist, and violent encounters with women athletes in virtual forums and gender-based violence from sports fans. Gendered antagonism, sexualised threats of violence, and racially tinged vitriol are part of a grim story of human behaviour online, write Litchfield et al. (2018) (p. 13). Kavanagh et al. (2019) studied virtual violence against women athletes via a third-wave feminist framework. Social media allows unfettered gender-based violence against high-profile women in the workplace, unlike conventional sports media. In their research, women athletes were criticised for their profession and performance. The violence marginalised, sexualised, and devalued the performers and their work. The presence of misogyny targeting women athletes has also been supported by the work of both McCarthy (2022) and Phipps (2022), who refer to such commentary as virtual manhood acts (VMA’s). VMA’s are used to police gender boundaries, regulate gender norms and ideologies, and endorse a hierarchical gender order online. Pocock and Skey (2022) sought to

examine how women athletes use and experience online platforms by conducting interviews with UK-based sportswomen with an active following on the social media platform Instagram. They highlight the key tensions that elite female athletes face when negotiating online spaces, wanting to engage but also experiencing fear surrounding how others might respond to their posts. Pocock and Skey (2022) used the term ‘appropriate distance’ to highlight the extent to which online users try to navigate the ever-changing, sometimes beneficial, sometimes troubling, relationships online. Collectively the research points to the widespread nature of online toxicity creating a ‘dangerous’ environment for athletes and their supporters (Fenton et al., 2021; Haugh & Watkins, 2016; Kavanagh et al., 2019).

Existing research into the relationship between social media and the vulnerability of female sport professionals has pointed to the way that hashtags, free-form comments, social tagging, and other post interactions such as ‘likes’ have created visibility of anti-women narratives. For example, Litchfield et al. (2018) show abuse targeting women athletes based on physicality, sex, sexuality, and race in their investigation of Black-American female tennis player Serena Williams’ social media abuse during Wimbledon 2015. The authors emphasise the interconnected nature of the abuse directed at professional female athletes such as Williams and others: ‘the significance of social media as a space for the reproduction and magnification of inequalities that have been present in traditional print media.’ (Litchfield et al. 2018). Social media images are staged and manipulated by internal marketing teams or other club personnel, unlike idealised traditional media images (Fatt et al., 2019). Therefore, comments on social media sport images may impact how a player is regarded and make them a target for additional abuse. Social media platforms have proven to oppress and marginalise individuals and groups (Osborne et al., 2021). Na et al. (2020) found that this sort of material affects both sport fans’ attitudes (e.g. views of an athlete’s brand) and their behavioural intentions (e.g. the propensity to Like or Retweet the information). This may encourage a discourse of acceptable sexism and misogyny against (women) athletes, based on the assumption that social media content is fair game when attacking players.

Recent literature on online gender-based violence identifies such content as a new barrier to women’s access to safe spaces and recognition in professional sectors, as well as the surge in the popularity of anti-women narratives. This paper argues that by analysing social media content using netnography, we gain a deeper understanding of how online gender-based violence is produced and disseminated across platforms. The techniques of preserving and protecting the individuals associated with verified accounts may further influence resistance to online gender-based violence.

## Method

Our study utilises netnography, which is a well-established way of researching social media culture in order to create a rich understanding (Kozinets, 2020). Netnography was founded by Robert Kozinets in 1995 and is a portmanteau of the words Inter(Net) and Eth(nography). As a branch of ethnography, it has adapted and evolved over two decades as Internet communications have grown and morphed. Kozinets 1st edition of the Netnography book in 2009 firmly established and created clear guidelines for qualitative online research. Whilst there are many other names for studying online



communities ethnographically, netnography has established itself as the most established, with a growing body of literature and the clearest guidelines for this type of research. Online communications have grown immensely and evolved, and the third edition of the book Kozinets (2020), highlights recipes (guidelines) for conducting modern studies of social media communities. We followed the six movements of netnography.

1. Initiation – Conducted review of the literature to understand current gaps and formulated research questions.
2. Investigation – Selection of appropriate social media comments (TikTok Manchester United and Burnley FC), setup of an online immersion journal through a team meeting.
3. Immersion – team immersed in reading and discussing selected comments for seven months, creating research notes in an immersion journal which includes deep data and reflections. Approximately one journal entry per week was added.
4. Interaction – We immersed ourselves in the TikTok community rather than directly interacting in order that the study was naturalistic.
5. Integration – Turtling between data collection, interpretation, literature review, and analysis to sharpen understanding and develop theory. Regular team meetings to discuss observations and themes.
6. Incarnation – Idea finds its form as research in concrete form and answers to the research question presented in this paper.

A critical aspect of netnography data collection is the immersion journal, also known as an online participant observation diary. Kozinets (2020) highlights great potential for team netnography; to date, experiences with team netnography are not well documented. Our study had a team of 4 academic researchers immersed in the data over seven months (between September 2, 2021, and March 16, 2022). The research team regularly documented their findings in the immersion journal folder, including written notes, screenshots and annotated videos. Regular meetings were held to discuss the findings and agree on the themes. A secure document was used to record screenshots and notes of the online traces (fan comments) and reflections/observations on these from the research team as the primary data collection in this study. This approach is usual for netnography (taking screenshots of comments rather than having to download all of the comments) (Kozinets, 2020). Once the immersion journal was completed, we used a thematic approach following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). Whalen (2018) analysed 63 hospitality and tourism netnographies and found that thematic analysis was the most dominant data analysis technique (46% of all studies). In our immersion journal and regular team meetings, we discussed our observations and agreed on the four themes based on our observations, following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) and (Kozinets, 2020).

We selected two women's football teams for this research as an appropriate sample for netnography (Manchester United and Burnley FC). We build on the work of Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018, p. 418), who highlighted for sample selection, 'it was necessary to select two teams with a substantial following and sufficient comments'. At the time of the study, several football clubs had placed the men's and women's team content into one TikTok

channel, and these channels and the comments on the videos are usually not responded to (and often unmonitored). We selected Manchester United as a global brand with a relatively new women's team (started in May 2018). They are a new but strong team, finishing 4th in the UK English Women's Super League (WSL) in both the 2019–2020 and the 2020–2021 seasons. They were selected for this study because the content for the women's team was, at the start of this study, part of Manchester United's main TikTok channel, which is one of the most followed football teams on TikTok globally. However, a new channel was created for the women's team on November 2, 2021.

Burnley FC Girls and Ladies was started in 1995 and renamed Burnley FC Women in 2018. In the 2018–2019 season, they won the Northwest Women's Regional Football League and were promoted to the FA Women's National League North, the third tier in English women's football. In February 2021, it was announced that the women's team would be integrated into Burnley F.C. They were selected for this study because they were the first to sign an exclusive deal with TikTok and live stream their matches only on this channel (Carp, *n.d.*). These teams were particularly selected as a vehicle for this netnography, following the guidelines of searching, scouting and selecting (Kozinets, 2020). For the Manchester United Women's TikTok account, as of September 1 2022, there were 254 TikTok videos posted on the account. On average, each TikTok video received 103 comments, the median being 41. In total, there were 26,000 comments across all videos, and collectively the videos have 34.3 million views. However, the Manchester United Women's account was created halfway through our data collection. For the majority of the data collection, the women's team was combined with the men's team. For the Burnley Football Club account, as of September 1, 2022, there were 163 TikTok videos posted on the account. On average, each TikTok video received 203 comments, the median being 83. In total, there are 33,000 comments across all videos, and collectively, the videos have 36.2 million views. Burnley posted content alongside their men's account. In terms of the content of the TikTok videos themselves, for both clubs, these ranged from videos of players training, showcasing skills such as kick-ups, running, gym work, messages to fans, and clipped matchday footage showing specific events in a game, among other content such as competitions for shirt giveaways. Videos showing players performing specific skills in training tended to receive the most comments.

TikTok is a video-based social media application; therefore, we also used smartphone screen capture software to record videos and researcher narration to share with the research team for discussion in meetings. We also noted findings in the immersion journal document of other relevant observations and discussions relating to the study. This method of team netnography using audio and video narration as part of an immersion journal also offers a novel approach that other researchers can follow. Kozinets (2020) highlights that it is important for netnography teams to divide tasks and bring the experience and observations of team members to the immersion journal data collection and discuss this regularly.

## Ethics

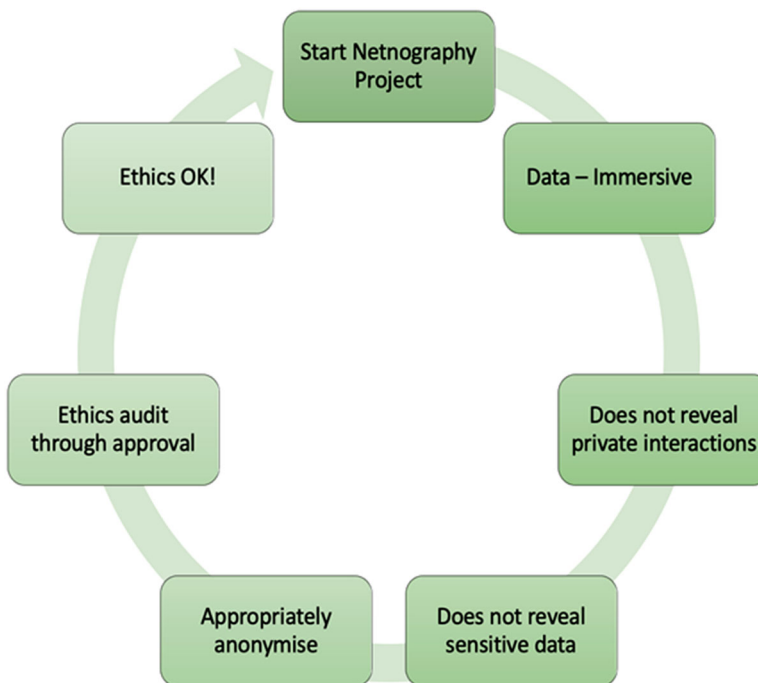
Anne-Marie et al. (2017) studied 52 online ethnography peer-reviewed journal papers in Information Systems and found that 70% did not disclose their ethical practices. This is

clearly a problem which needs addressing, so it is, therefore, useful to utilise and articulate clear ethical guidelines that inform the online research process. We followed the ethical guidelines for netnography as outlined by Kozinets (2020). The study obtained ethical approval from [redacted]. The data selected was immersive as opposed to interactive. Whilst the researchers are football fans and immersed in social media and TikTok content, it was decided that interaction in the communities themselves was unnecessary and would be less intrusive and naturalistic if researchers adopted the stance of immersed observers. As the videos and comments are public, the content is not considered to be ‘revealing private interactions’ or ‘revealing sensitive data’ (Kozinets, 2020, p. 179). Therefore, according to the netnography ethics flowchart, if this data is appropriately anonymised and has an ethics audit (through ethical approval), then the Netnography ethics is ‘Ethics OK!’ (Figure 1).

Whilst it may be argued that fans posting toxic and sexist comments publicly could be revealing sensitive data, the fact that these comments are publicly available on the brand channels meant that we were able to achieve ethical approval to use comments anonymously. It would be difficult, but not impossible, to trace these verbatim comments back to the original post, but this is also in line with and builds on previously published studies (Litchfield et al., 2018).

## Findings

The findings concur with extant literature that professional women’s sport participation is associated with intolerance, discrimination, bullying, and a gaming culture that targets



**Figure 1.** Applied research ethics chart process for netnography (Kozinets, 2020, p. 179).

and harasses players (Velija & Silvani, 2021). Although not all comments on the TikTok posts were anti-women players, the significant discourse of this nature was, at times, distressing to the research team. Quantifying the exact number of comments in the themes was challenging due to the ever-changing nature of TikTok comments, but it does open up opportunities for future quantitative studies. Based on the thematic analysis of comments made on the TikTok posts by each football team's account, we present four main themes framed by gender-based violence rhetoric:

1. Sexism: the place of women in football e.g. 'Why do I want a signed shirt by a woman?'
2. Misogyny and hatred of women e.g. 'Do my dishes', 'it's not classy'
3. Sexualisation of women e.g. 'you're sexy' 'she fit' 'yes Ella sexy baby'
4. Demand for a male-only space e.g. 'why use the mens TikTok account and not your own to sponsor yourself'

The terms 'misogyny' and 'sexism' are often used interchangeably in everyday discourse, but their meanings do, in fact, differ (Konstantinovskiy, 2019). Sexism can be defined as prejudice, discrimination, or devaluation of someone based on their gender or sex, whereas misogyny can be defined as a hatred of women, a nuance which is represented in the data analysed. The key themes are presented and analysed in the following sections. The quotations included below from this study are verbatim from the data, and the language and presentation of the data in this paper reflects this.

### ***Theme 1: sexism: the place of women in football***

All of the TikTok posts containing female football players contained some sexist comments. Examples include:

'Why do i (sic) want a signed shirt by a woman?'

'Who wants a woman's shirt?'

'Who even are these players? Hahahahaha'

'I'm sorry who are you?'

'can they kick a ball?'

'Who?'

'Women 

The majority of these types of comments were along the lines of: 'Who r these people', 'No one knows you'. It is quite clear who they are from the video description, but people felt the need to write that to make the point that the women's team are much less known than the men's team. By highlighting their lesser-known status in comparison to the men's team, the commenters seemingly sought to emphasise the female players' irrelevance and thereby belittle them.

There were also comments pertaining to the quality of women's football not being as good as men's, such as:

'I'd rather watch paint dry'

'Man (sic) football is better than womens'

'No I only watch high quality footbal

These comments devalue women's skills and make them look less impressive:

'Best bit is that they actually believe they are professional'

'Shes (sic) only doing keepe ups carm down'

'Im (sic) sorry my friend can do that'

'Ronaldo could do that easily'

Posts such as: 'do u get paid less than the ball boy?' was interpreted as another sexist comment from a male fan with the implication that female players are valued less than the lowest paid at the club. This links with existing literature surrounding social media platforms being used to oppress and marginalise individuals and groups (Osborne et al., 2021). More specifically, our findings demonstrate how social media platforms such as Tik Tok create an environment where the media representing or showcasing women athletes can become overwhelmingly marked by comments that serve to belittle, humiliate and/or professionally discredit their performances through the presence and acceptance of sexist language.

### ***Theme 2: misogyny***

Misogyny consists of animosity against women, as well as physical, psychological, and social aggression towards them (Code, 2002), and can be defined as hatred or disdain towards women (Moloney & Love, 2018). Misogynistic comments were apparent in all of the TikTok posts containing female football players. These differed from general sexist comments in their more aggressive tone and reliance on outdated gender stereotypes, which appeared to provoke anger when these stereotypes of women's traditional role were challenged. For example:

'Like we want a signed woman shirt. Your (sic) dogwater in football'

'Why the fuck would you buy that shite' (referring to a women's shirt)

'Who the fucking hell are you?'

'Seems a bit desperate'

'You're shit at football'


As shown, these comments featured much more anger and rage at women's football being professionalised. These comments are meant to be very threatening to the female players, creating a toxic environment. This supports extant literature that recognises online gender-based violence (Jane, 2017, 2020; Powell & Henry, 2019; Richardson-Self, 2018).

The analysis also revealed examples of misogynistic comments that harked back to traditional gendered roles included:

‘Do my dishes’

‘When did woman (sic) start playing footy? I was wondering why the ironing was building up’

‘We asked for varane not a cook’

‘Wooman 

‘Women  hahahaha’

This concurs with Fielding-Lloyd and Woodhouse (Fielding-Lloyd & Woodhouse, 2023), who argue that social media is used to perpetuate sexist football stereotypes. Our study builds on this by providing further insights into the types of sexism and misogyny occurring on football clubs’ official TikTok accounts. The immersion in this environment revealed that the men who made these comments felt threatened by the changing nature of women’s roles and their seeming equality to men in a traditionally male-dominated sport.

It is noted that many of the misogynistic comments were coupled with statements that attempted to present these interactions as humour. The cups of tea emojis refer to outdated sexist sayings about how women should make cups of tea for men and in the workplace. Similarly, the dishes comments refer to old-fashioned stereotypes of women staying in the home and doing the housework whilst men go out to work. Violent interactions mixed with the inclusion of ‘jokes’ online are recognised to act as a mask to the severity of the interaction (Kavanagh et al., 2019). Lockyer and Savigny (2020) suggest it is an important part of online discourse to recognise the adoption of humour as a tool adopted in order to normalise and/or trivialise gender-based discrimination, while Cole (2015) suggests that comments worded with humour are implemented to neutralise the sense of threat. These views are echoed in our findings in this study.

Comments such as ‘it’s not classy’ clearly indicate a viewpoint that women should behave with more decorum and not post videos of themselves being vocal on social media. In response to the prevalence of these types of conversations on social media during the England women’s Lionesses games and Euro finals, the telecommunications company EE led an advertising campaign that highlighted men’s abuse of women players. Based on this campaign, it appears for the first time that the general and sport media are acknowledging the extent of abuse against women athletes and holding men accountable for their actions.

### ***Theme 3: sexualisation of women – use of language***

The third theme that emerged in the comments involved sexualised language surrounding women athletes and their ‘work’. All the TikTok posts featuring the women’s teams featured a collection of lurid comments from men.

Examples of this include ‘you’re sexy’, ‘she’s fit’, ‘I want Liv oi oi’, ‘yes plsse sexy??’, ‘she fine’ (Figure 2).

Findings here build upon research by Kavanagh et al. (2019) who found that women athletes were criticised for their profession and performance. The violence marginalised, sexualised, and devalued the performers and their work. Online communication that is gendered in nature often has content which draws upon sexually degrading



language, thus exerting online forms of sexual harassment (Megarry, 2014). Sexualised statements serve to reinforce gendered stereotypes while further adopting a language of intimacy or familiarity, evidence of the subjugation of women athletes online. Phipps (2022) suggests how such acts serve to reinforce male domains and marginalise women's achievements.

Certainly, the present study highlights how language that is sexualised sought to devalue women's achievements in reaching the elite level of their sport by diminishing them to mere sex symbols and objects of desire. Again, this showed that men were not prepared to take them seriously as professional athletes on a par with the men's teams.

#### **Theme 4: demand for a male-only space**

There were also many comments wanting the women's teams to not appear on the clubs' official TikTok accounts as it was seen as belonging to the men's team only. For example:

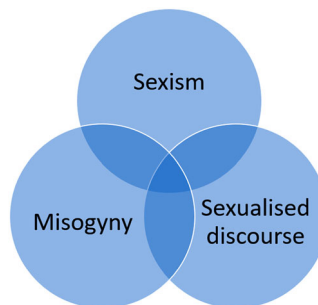
'Why use the mens (sic) TikTok account and not your own to sponsor yourself?'

This implies that the commenters did not see the women's teams as part of their club and wanted a clear separation between men's and women's football. Again, the immersion in the community revealed that the men felt threatened by the influx of women into what was perceived to be a male-only sport. This links to research by McCarthy (2022) and Phipps (2022), who refer to such commentary as virtual manhood acts (VMA's), used to police gender boundaries, regulate gender norms and ideologies and endorse a hierarchical gender order online.

Interestingly during the course of our research Manchester United did open an official TikTok account for their women's team. People still felt the need to comment on the announcement post in a sexist way, for example:

'You don't need to announce it. Just do it and stop asking for follows. It's not classy'

This resonates with the work of Fenton et al. (2021), who found that football social media channels were often primarily male-only spaces. Female fans preferred not to inhabit or comment on main channels because of the level of toxic abuse from male fans. Such findings are indicative of the hostile nature of social media spaces and the elevated risk of women athletes experiencing gendered online hostility directed at them from male social media users. As Megarry (2014) suggests, online violence has a



**Figure 2.** Findings split into three overlapping themes within the gender-based violence nexus.

disproportionate impact on the participation of women in virtual environments. The adoption of violent rhetoric is primarily used to dominate, silence, and control women (Moloney & Love, 2018). It can lead to the censorship of women's voices, resulting in their reduced participation in online communities or serve to silence them completely.

### Other comments

As previously stated, not all remarks were sexist. Most comments on posts were meaningless phrases like 'early', 'first', and 'hi'. There were numerous comments requesting men's team star players, such as 'the goat' (Ronaldo), to sign a shirt or the announcement of men's team transfers. These seemingly random comments did not relate to the content posted, and seemed to be many of the same people commenting in the same way on every post, regardless of its nature.

There was a very small minority of positive comments about the women's team. For example:

'Can she start against Liverpool on Monday'

'Better then (sic) our whole midfield'

'Better than Fred, Maguire, Shaw, Dalot'

'Come on Manchester United women. From Brendan'

'Go girl'

'Amazing'

'Legend. Can't compare her to Maguire that's how good she is'

One individual commented on the sexist nature of so many of the responses:

'Why is everyone so toxic? It would be a whole different story if it was the men's team'.

A sense of collective advocacy and support for the women's team in the face of ongoing online harassment is implied. In social media literature on gender-based violence, it is common for women to discuss their own experiences of harassment and observations about toxic masculine culture; this comment appears to be an extension of such concerns (see Rosramadhana et al., 2021).

### An unmonitored space

The management of toxic remarks is undertaken by various stakeholders, including fellow fans, the social media platform, algorithms utilised by the platform, third-party software employed by clubs, and the clubs themselves. However, it is apparent from the analysis of comments on the official TikTok accounts of Burnley and Manchester United that there is a lack of effective moderation in addressing toxic comments. The absence of comment moderation or removal reinforces an environment that fosters sexism, misogyny, and gender-based violence.

Oftentimes, abusive comments were left unchecked and were not removed. Our findings demonstrate that while clubs are promoting their women's football teams through TikTok, this becomes a platform for a significant amount of toxic content

from fans surrounding the women's game and targeting players themselves. Online toxicity incorporates subtle and more overt forms of sexism, misogyny and sexualised language, all of which belittle and demean women and demonstrates evidence of sites of virtual toxic masculinity. These comments serve to create and reinforce a (hyper)masculine online identity and openly subjugate women.

Our study reinforces previous research on the intersection of online harassment and gender-based violence by explicating how sport can be used to further sexist agency within patriarchal societies. In addition, we recommend that professional sport clubs understand broader forces (i.e. harassment and gender-based violence) to protect players and to provide safe online spaces for fan discourse.

### **Discussion: TikTok and gender-based violence**

As Jones (2008) and Cleland et al. (2020) and others have argued, sexism in football now operates in increasingly complex and covert ways. We discovered that the comments we analysed on TikTok were sexist, misogynistic, and used sexualised derogatory language. Such discourse frequently goes unnoticed by club marketing teams or, at present, remains beyond the capacity of women's football supporters' groups to respond to and manage due to inconsistent regulation of social media accounts. The fluid nature of content shared on the social media platform TikTok has only added to the complexity of social media content management and attempts to tackle sexism. What seems to be missing is any sense of how or whether clubs are concerned with creating 'safe' digital spaces for women players (Fenton et al., 2021). Not only are comments and discussions taking place across club content, but as this study underscores, sexism is still a cultural and social issue in the UK football league.

Whilst we did not see direct evidence of fans spurring each other on directly, as they were not generally replying to each other, we did observe that many toxic comments were receiving a large number of likes. This fact and the fact that the comments were left unchecked served in our view to reinforce that these types of comments were acceptable on these official brand posts. The comments we examined did not single out individual players by username or tagging, but the tone of the discussions allowed users to advocate for and spur each other on using deliberately misogynistic comments or sexualised language to mock and contest the status of women players. However, although the comments didn't tag the player's usernames, they did comment on posts that just contained a single player within the video, meaning that more of the comments on these types of videos would be directed specifically at the player.

This suggests that these accounts are not being monitored on a regular basis for such content, and the danger is that such exchanges become part of the tone of sexist discourse that is acceptable on these accounts. In this regard, the sexism, misogyny, and sexualised language we identified on TikTok persists and is formally associated with the clubs. Reflecting on the data and our reactions to it as researchers, it is striking how sexism and sexualised language continue to be prominent topics of discussion without sufficient moderation from the club marketing teams. It is worth noting that most fans on social media are often 'lurkers', reading and watching but rarely commenting (Fenton et al., 2021). People who tend to post on social media are typically more polarised and extreme in their opinions, and this is an acknowledged limitation of

social media research and netnography (Kozinets, 2020). However, this research has established a significant challenge to brand values of toxic and damaging fan posts against brand content and channels. This opens future opportunities for study when toxic fan comments directly contravene the brand values of the sport clubs.

So, what should clubs do to counter sexist content and create a safe space for players? The prominence of sexualised language by men on TikTok comments indicates that the place of women's football and the players is highly contested, and this is unlikely to change in the short term. The tone of the comments suggests the players are 'fair game' where the posts are public and comments left open to any user. Football club marketing teams must be vigilant in terms of preparing, releasing, and monitoring TikTok content. They must maintain a visible presence on TikTok in order to engage with comments (as appropriate) and delete and moderate as necessary.

By extension, clubs must examine how to establish a safe environment for players when challenged by supporters expressing sexist rhetoric. Overall insufficient consideration has been given to defining how new technologies will be implemented to promote more gender-neutral coverage of women athletes, which may have a direct impact on future sport participation. Additionally, as we discovered, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which clubs have invested in the formal management of TikTok content and comments. Our study identifies a clear need to address this problem through future research and interventions.

## Conclusion

This paper set out to understand how football fans respond to women's football videos on TikTok. We responded to recent calls for research on social media and sport research, including netnography, digital transformation and gaps in the literature regarding social media, gender, sexual violence and casual use of sexualised language. We found that football clubs are using short-form videos on TikTok to promote their women's teams and often combine men's and women's team video content into one channel. Using netnography, our immersion journal highlighted that toxic comments were rife from fans. The present study demonstrates how fans are using TikTok and the types of responses from fans, and we call for sport clubs to invest more time and resources to properly manage social media channels in order to maximise the opportunity and maintain their brand values (Fenton et al., 2021).

Using a thematic analysis of the data, we found that among the comments, four themes of sexist, misogynist, sexualised language and demand for male-only space. Football fans are regularly leaving toxic comments like this unchecked, and fan comments are often unmonitored. Despite some efforts from social media managers, TikTok and third-party filtering software, these toxic comments from fans were rife and stood in direct contrast to football clubs' values of inclusion, diversity and zero tolerance for abuse of fans, players and staff. This is a significant problem for football clubs that wish to engage their fans using social media channels where fans can comment directly on these brand channels.

The study by Kavanagh et al. (2019) found toxic abuse of female athletes on unofficial channels, but in contrast, we found toxic comments on the official brand channels, and this is something that football clubs need to address. Without this, fans will vote with

their feet and reside in smaller, hidden micro-social networks (Fenton et al., 2021). We call for football clubs to invest more time, resources and research to address this challenge which poses a significant problem for their brand values and encourages more diverse, inclusive social media channels.

The solution may be multi-faceted. It could include providing more time and resources for community management, including more regular account checks and strategies to safeguard players against direct contact and harassment. Future research could test these findings with other clubs and social networks. An investigation of third-party software, tools and algorithms may also help to address this issue. Simply hiding or deleting fan comments may simply be masking the underlying issue. Therefore, as part of football clubs' inclusion policies, a stronger commitment to diversity education for fans would also provide a more meaningful solution. This has implications for theory and practice, and researchers should work with sport clubs to understand and address these longstanding, problematic issues of toxic fan comments on social media.

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