

# Media Framing of Women's Football During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Communication & Sport  
2023, Vol. 11(3) 592–615  
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DOI: 10.1177/21674795211041024

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## Abstract

This article examines British media coverage of women's association football during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, to identify how the media framed the women's game and how these frames could shape the public perceptions of it. Through a database search of British-based news coverage of women's football, 100 news articles were identified in the first 6 months after the start of the pandemic. A thematic analysis was conducted, and five dominant frames were detected in the context of COVID-19: 1) *financial precariousness of women's football*; 2) *the commercial prioritisation of men's football*; 3) *practical consideration of the sport* (e.g., alterations to national and international competitions); 4) *debating the future of women's football* and 5) *concern for players* (e.g., welfare, uncertain working conditions). These frames depart from the past trivialisation and sexualisation of women's sport, demonstrate the increased visibility of women's football, and shift the narrative towards the elite stratum of the game. Most of this reporting was by women journalists, while men were shown to write less than women about women's football. This research advocates continued diversification of the sports journalism workforce to dissolve the hegemonic masculine culture that still largely dominates the industry.

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## Keywords

women's sport, women's association football, sports media, coronavirus, framing theory

## Introduction: Framing Women's Football

Sport has global appeal and is, therefore, an immensely influential social institution (Fink, 2015). It is often integral to the everyday lives of citizens around the world (Rowe, 2018) and can influence the views of large numbers of the global population. The COVID-19 pandemic caused the widespread cessation of sport in 2020, leading some sport and leisure studies academics to comment that sport – and specifically in the case of the United Kingdom, association football (soccer) – no longer mattered (Black, 2020). However, for many, sport – and specifically men's football – *did* still matter, something (Black, 2020, p. 5) referred to as 'sacred seriousness... it is clear football holds *some* importance'. When men's football returned in England via the resumption of the Premier League (EPL), albeit without fans, it reinstated a leisure routine in many people's lives and maintained social connections within communities in times of isolation (Parnell et al., 2020). Particularly significant as an indicator of the importance placed on women's football, though, was the cancellation of all women's football competitions during this time (Clarkson et al., 2021a).

The media have an important role within the world of men's football, which expanded during the pandemic given the restrictions on fan attendance (Manoli, 2020). In the context of COVID-19 and sport, the media have played a crucial role in defining issues and shaping public perceptions of various phenomena (Sanderson & Cassilo, 2019). As Nicholson et al. (2015) (p. ix) state, 'sport media has become an important part of the ways in which people and nations construct individual and collective identities, as well as understand their place in the world, yet it is often left unquestioned'. Professional men's sport is often presented in the media as the pinnacle of sporting value and achievement (Wensing & Bruce, 2003), and much reporting at the start of the pandemic concerned the need to restart men's competitions (Manoli, 2020). Nonetheless, there has been a positive shift in the last few years towards media reporting of women's sport, in particular women's football (Petty & Pope, 2019), that is aligned with widespread growth of the game. The cancellation of women's football in England, while the top two tiers of men's football returned, has been identified as of key concern by scholars (Clarkson et al., 2020; Clarkson et al., 2021a). This empirical study examines British media coverage of women's football during the first 6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to identify how the media framed the women's game and how those frames could shape public perceptions of women's football.

## Literature Review

### *Sport Media*

Mediated sport has now grown to such an extent that, although attending sporting events is a common practice, consumers in most continents are now much more likely

to watch it on television than to attend in person (Parry et al., 2014). Vast global viewing audiences for mega events and massive broadcasting deals for the most popular sports leagues (Rowe, 2015) provide further evidence of the popularity of mediated sport. This shift towards mediated access to sport has been raised as a point of concern, with some critics arguing that the media have come to dominate the institution of sport in significant respects. Furthermore, through their representation of sport, the media have been criticised as being implicated in a wider reinforcement of social inequality, not least regarding gender (Rowe, 2004).

Although sport – and especially men’s football in England – has, until recently, benefitted considerably in economic terms from increased media investment (Manoli, 2020), it has also been changed by it. There have been adaptations of and modifications to sports such as basketball and golf to benefit television audiences at the expense of co-present spectators and players (Boyle & Haynes, 2000). Technological advancements have shaped the consumption of sport by increasing the accessibility of global sport through television, the Internet and mobile content (McDonald et al., 2010).

Given that sports and sporting events typically have audiences with identifiable demographics, television companies depend on sports programming both to fill their schedules and to attract viewers, particularly young males, who sponsors are keen to reach. Similarly, although sports journalism has frequently been derided, it is of longstanding and, perhaps, heightened significance regarding the revenues and audiences of media organisations (Farrington et al., 2012; Weedon et al., 2018). As such, it is naïve to imagine that media reporting is predominantly objective and neutral, as it is influenced by both the values of the media organisation (and/or the writers) and also a desire to sell (directly or indirectly) content to readers/viewers. The media, therefore, ‘frame’ content around a variety of values and practices, and construct coverage relating to specific themes and messages. In addition to emphasising themes linked to topics such as success, nationalism and sacrificing self for team success, media coverage also historically privileges the coverage of men’s sport over women’s (Wensing & Bruce, 2003; Biscomb & Matheson, 2017).

### *Media Positioning of Women in Sport*

Despite the increasing numbers of females who are taking part in, engaging with and consuming sport, media coverage of women in sport continues to be problematic. As (Pfister, 2015, p. 639) explains, ‘all over the world media sports play an important part in people’s everyday lives, but it is men’s sport that is at the centre of public interest...produced by men, for men and about men’. Similarly, Bruce (2016) writes that the articulation of sport and masculinity has positioned women as ‘other’ in the realm of mediated sport. Historically, research has demonstrated a mismatch in the coverage of men’s and women’s sport (Bruce, 2008), with little changing in the four decades of research in this field (Bruce, 2016; Cooky et al., 2021). Excluding mega events such as the Olympic Games, the vision of sport as a male space where women are outsiders is

one that has been preserved and reinforced by the mass media, both in terms of the quantity and quality of coverage. Identifying a variety of ‘rules’ regarding the media coverage of female athletes, Bruce (2008, 2016) has charted the landscape of women’s sport media coverage. These patterns have included persistently low rates of reporting, highlighting the ‘symbolic annihilation’ of women’s sport, and the sexualisation of women athletes. In some cases, journalists display ‘ambivalence’ towards their performances, often juxtaposing sporting achievements with irrelevant information that depicts them as mothers or girlfriends (Bruce, 2016; Cooky et al., 2015; Cooky et al., 2021). In this sense, the status of women as legitimate athletes is simultaneously accepted and rejected.

Recent research on media representations of sportswomen has paid attention to technological changes in the media, incorporating online and new media analyses alongside traditional television and print media research. This body of work paints an ambiguous picture. LaVoi and Calhoun (2014) highlight that sport continues to be presented as a male domain in new, online spaces, as well as persisting in more established media forms. However, there has been some evidence of positive change, and Bruce (2016) notes that there are ‘current rules’ that challenge dominant assumptions about women in sport, including images of female athletes in action being represented as serious athletes and as ‘model citizens’. She then outlines two ‘new rules’ in the digital media age: the opportunity for female athletes to use their own voices, on their own terms, and through the discourse of ‘pretty and powerful’ over ‘pretty or powerful’ (Bruce, 2016).

However, in most mainstream media spaces, sport is still overwhelmingly constructed as male ‘territory’. Professional men’s sport is often presented in the media as the pinnacle of sporting value and achievement (Wensing & Bruce, 2003), and men subsequently dominate the pages of the sport press. It has been noted that the proportion of coverage allotted to women’s sport is approximately 4% on average and rarely rises above 10% (Bowes, 2020). Moreover, the proportion of photos of women participating in sports in national newspapers has been as low as 2.9% (Global Web Index, 2019). Despite this gender gap, in recent years there has been significant success regarding coverage of women’s sport, with the 2019 International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) Women’s World Cup (WWC) bringing unprecedented coverage of women’s football. In the UK, research found that, during a 6-week period between June 7 and July 14 incorporating the WWC, there was near parity in the coverage of women’s and men’s sport (Women’s Sport Trust, 2019). The challenge is to sustain this increased coverage of women’s sport outside these major events.

### *Media Coverage of Women’s Football*

Woodward (2019) notes that, whilst coverage of the women’s game is improving, it is much less visible than the men’s game, and the relatively limited research on the media coverage of women’s football centres on the international scene. Ravel and Gareau

(2016) observe that the initial boom in media interest around women's football was seen at the 1999 FIFA WWC, which was hosted and won by the United States. Like broader research into the representations of women in the sport media, [Christopherson et al. \(2002\)](#) noted that the successful United States Women's National Team gained popularity through reporting which primarily framed them as feminine and heterosexual. [Peeters and Elling \(2015\)](#) also found that, from 1995–2013, media coverage of women's football in the Netherlands saw a serious increase, but that football retained a close association to men and masculinity, with men's football the norm against which women were measured. Similarly, [Pfister \(2015\)](#) highlighted that media coverage of women footballers in Germany following the 2011 FIFA WWC was 'gendered', with an overt emphasis on femininity and beauty. [Dunn \(2018\)](#) identified a lack of both appetite and effort to cover the 2015 FIFA WWC in Canada from media organisations. Writing about the 2019 FIFA WWC, [Ravel and Gareau \(2016\)](#) found similarly gendered trends, with gender marking and infantilisation prevalent, alongside a media focus that was often on athletes' heterosexuality and femininity. [Coche \(2021\)](#), looking at online media coverage in Europe of the same tournament, found that women received 20% of coverage, more than the typical 4%, but still less prominent than the reporting on men's off-season club football.

In the specific context of the United Kingdom, there has been a lack of media coverage of women's football ([Pope, 2018](#)). However, [Black and Fielding-Lloyd \(2019\)](#) report an increase in media coverage aligned with improvements in England's women's team performances. This on-field success opened up possibilities for conventional narratives about women's football to be challenged (or, in some cases, reinforced). They found, like [Peeters and Elling \(2015\)](#) and [Pfister \(2015\)](#), that print media coverage often represented the women's team in relation to the dominant male standard, positioning them as outsiders and re-establishing men's football as superior ([Black & Fielding-Lloyd, 2019](#)). [Woodward \(2019\)](#) identified not only the relative quantity of media coverage as problematic, but its quality too. [Petty and Pope \(2019, p. 491\)](#) found that, in relation to newspaper reporting, there were differences in terms of both the quantity and quality of coverage between "Quality" broadsheets and "popular" tabloids'. The latter were less likely to report on women's football and more likely to conform to the older 'rules' on media reporting of women's sport. The positioning of women's football in general, including the persistent gender marking of the sport, means that 'to achieve parity between women and men there has to be parallel nomenclature as well as equal media coverage' ([Woodward, 2019, p. 1108](#)).

However, there have been some positive shifts in media reporting of women's football, such as during the 2015 FIFA WWC, where [Petty and Pope \(2019\)](#) detected improved media representation of women's football in England. Attributing this beneficial change to a number of recent developments in women's sport, they propose that the media coverage of women's sport in England had entered a 'new age'. The media reported on women's football as football, [Petty and Pope](#) observe, removing the common gender-marked descriptor. This positive finding was also noted by [Leflay and Biscomb \(2021\)](#) regarding greater coverage, and more positive and authentic

representations, during England's 'summer of women's sport' in 2017, which included the European Football Championships. English domestic women's football was set to be regularly broadcast on free-to-air and subscription television services from 2021/22 in a deal worth £7 m (Garry, 2021). Clearly, then, there is increasing space for women's football and better qualitative coverage of it within the British media, but this improvement is vulnerable to changing circumstances.

### *COVID-19 and Women's Football*

The pandemic clearly damaged women's football, with the game subject to threat and uncertainty (Clarkson et al., 2020). These problems relate to economic and organisational repercussions, player contracts, migration and investment, and player well-being (Clarkson et al., 2020). Furthermore, national football association responses have been compared and analysed across the world, with the English Football Association (FA) criticised for its lack of communication of the implications of the pandemic for women's football during its first 6 months (Clarkson et al., 2021a). Accordingly, some of the media (e.g., Scott, 2020; Whyatt, 2020a) have spread awareness of these existing and predicted consequences for women's football.

As argued above, the media have the power to influence public perceptions and to position women's football in mainstream British society. Therefore, greater understanding of how the media framed women's football during the COVID-19 pandemic is required for several reasons. First, COVID-19 has laid bare gender inequalities (Pavlidis & Rowe, 2021) and, of particular interest to this study, the inequitable treatment of women's sport by institutions when compared to men's sport (Bowes et al., 2020; Clarkson et al., 2021). Given the comparatively short time since the global pandemic was declared by the World Health Organisation in early 2020, little research has yet analysed how the media have framed this inequality. One study by Symons et al. (2021) of Australian mainstream media coverage of women in sport during the pandemic, found that coverage of women's sport reduced slightly at the start of the pandemic and was largely excluded thereafter. More such work is needed. Second, there is a shortage of up-to-date, detailed knowledge of the impact of the pandemic on the media framing of gender in particular sports. Football is England's national sport, but women have historically and recently had to fight its masculinist ethos in a quest for legitimacy in English football culture (Clarkson et al., 2019). This study seeks to expand our limited knowledge of these developments with an in-depth, sport-specific examination.

The research presented here examines: (a) how women's football was framed by the media during the COVID-19 pandemic. To help to answer this broad research question, we further ask: (b) whether there are differences between broadsheet/tabloid and traditional print/online-only outlets; (c) the sources that support media coverage and (d) the gender of the journalists reporting on women's football in our sample.

## *Theoretical Framework*

Given that journalists' reporting of events plays a central role in shaping individuals' thoughts, opinions and attitudes (De Vreese, 2010), the theoretical perspective of framing is pertinent here. Framing theory concerns the ways in which the media focus attention on certain events and how media audiences make sense of information and their reality (Goffman, 1974). As Smith and Pegoraro (2020, p. 375) explain, 'when framing is employed in a communicating text it serves to select various aspects of reality and makes them more salient through the selection, emphasis, and exclusion of information'. Specifically, a frame involves how ideas, events and topics are presented to audiences by the media, who act as gatekeepers. Originating in the application of Goffman's landmark political communication work, framing has been widely used to examine gender issues in society in general (e.g., Nicolini & Hansen, 2018) and, more recently, in sport in particular (e.g., Kian & Hardin, 2009; White et al., 2020). Scholars have found that frames can be used tactically to organise individuals' and groups' particular interpretations of problems or events (Chong & Druckman, 2007), and are especially important in influencing readers' judgements regarding topics that are well established (Bronstein, 2005). Repetitiveness and consistency of the framing become pivotal, and the more frequently an issue is framed by the media in a particular way, the more likely it is for audiences to adopt that frame for it (Smith & Pegoraro, 2020).

## **Method**

### *Timeframe*

The timeframe for analysis was between March 1 and August 31, 2020, the first 6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Britain. All elite sport was suspended at the start of this period and the following 6 months were surrounded by uncertainty regarding the future of women's sport (Bowes et al., 2020). In football, there was a communicated plan for the resumption of men's elite competitions and a noticeable absence of an equivalent plan for the women's game (Clarkson et al., 2020). During this timeframe, all grassroots and sub-elite football was cancelled until at least the start of the 2020/21 season, with elite women's competitions in England following suit in May (Clarkson et al., 2021a). While COVID-19 represents an ongoing major concern, the first 6 months of the pandemic were a period of evaluation for both communication (e.g., Jo & Chang, 2020; Ogbodo et al., 2020) and women's football (e.g., Clarkson et al., 2021a) research.

### *Sampling and Data Collection*

All published articles using any one of the keywords 'coronavirus', 'COVID-19' and 'women's football' were included in the sample of nine of the 11 most popular



British newspapers according to a recent YouGov poll (YouGov, 2020). These were: *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* (which we examined together), *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Daily Telegraph*, the *i* and *The Sun*. *The Metro* and the *Financial Times* were excluded due to *The Metro*'s regional focus (London only) and the *Financial Times*' lesser relevance to the study topic. Additionally, two popular websites in the UK were included to provide a point of comparison to the print/online news sources: *BBC Sport* and *The Athletic*. *BBC Sport* is an online platform of the national broadcaster and has a longstanding association with sports broadcasting (Rowe, 2004), while *The Athletic* is a recent subscription-based sports website that has promised to revolutionise sport reporting by providing 'quality and quantity' in its coverage, with a primary focus on football (Banerjee, 2020, para. 4). Each source was searched using the keywords and all sections of the newspaper or website were searched weekly for any articles which could have eluded the title search. These items included news stories, columns and commentaries.

100 original articles mentioned women's football and COVID-19 in the 11 outlets over the examined time period. The number of articles and average word counts were: *The Telegraph* ( $n = 29$ ; 494), *The Guardian* ( $n = 19$ ; 644), *The Times* ( $n = 17$ ; 547), *The Daily Mail* ( $n = 12$ ; 349), *BBC Sport* ( $n = 5$ , 457), *The Sun* ( $n = 5$ ; 411), *The Athletic* ( $n = 4$ ; 1414), *The Mirror* ( $n = 4$ ; 395), *The Independent* ( $n = 3$ ; 335) and *i* ( $n = 2$ ; 769). Women journalists wrote 71% of articles, men 27% and non-specified 2% about women's football: 50% of articles were behind a paywall (average word count = 818) and 50% free to access (average word count = 480).

## Data Analysis

This study utilises a two-stage data analysis approach. First, a quantitative overview of the sample of news articles was completed, followed by a text-based, qualitative thematic analysis of the written text of these articles (excluding any images) to identify relevant frames. For this first stage, two independent coders (the second and fourth authors) noted each article's topic(s). The textual data were quantitatively categorised, including type of outlet (e.g., tabloid), quoted source (e.g., player, coach) and author gender. The second stage involved a process of thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2016). Coders read and re-read the data, looking for central stories. Initially, codes were inductively developed, using keywords or phrases denoting the stories and topics considered. The first, second and third authors then used these codes to generate themes, and these co-generated themes were developed and translated into broader frames to articulate the ways in which women's football was constructed and represented during the pandemic. This analytical process involved detailed discussion among the researchers about the framing of the stories, noting the sources cited and the types of media outlet that employed the frame, with no major disagreements arising with regard to story framing.



## Results and Interpretation

The number of articles (100) identified reveals that, at a time when little women's football was being played, and in contrast to the findings of Symons et al. (2021), there was frequent reporting on it, particularly for the first 4 months of analysis (Table 1). In comparison, Petty and Pope (2019) identified 181 UK media articles published during a major international tournament. The coverage in our research detailed COVID-19-related developments, such as league cancellations and government legislation but, as we detail later, there were several distinct themes within the reports that indicate a shift in the media framing of women's football. We do, however, acknowledge that the majority of media coverage of sport during the lockdown period was focused on men's football (Giulianotti & Collison, 2020). It is also salient that there were only 13 reports on women's football after the EPL resumed on the June 17, 2020, which suggests that news priorities shifted away from women's football toward men's – particularly as the elite women's leagues did not restart until September.

Our initial analysis revealed a number of instructive patterns in the media reporting of women's football. First, as noted above, 71% ( $n = 71$ ) of the articles were written by 14 women. It is worth noting that this number was skewed by three writers who wrote 53% ( $n = 53$ ) of articles within the sample (Katie Whyatt in *The Telegraph*, Suzie Wrack in *The Guardian* and Molly Hudson in *The Times*). This finding may point towards a shift in sports journalism, which has traditionally been dominated by men (Schmidt, 2018). Given the established trend of invisibility of female sports journalists in the UK (Franks & O'Neill, 2016), and the culture of 'hegemonic masculinity' that has pervaded sports newsrooms (Hardin et al., 2006), it is clearly important that women have opportunities in this sector. Men are, historically, less likely to report on women's sport (Kian & Hardin, 2009) and our findings reflected this continuing under-representation, with more women than men writing about women's football.

However, the on-balance positive outlook is not consistent across media types and formats in a digital environment where the old broadsheet-tabloid division cannot be easily drawn and formats constantly change (for example, *The Telegraph* and *Sunday Times* are the only remaining broadsheets in the list). Many categories are used in media

**Table 1.** Distribution of Articles by Month.

Month	Number of articles
March	15
April	22
May	33
June	22
July	6
August	2
Total	100

content analysis research, including broadsheet, quality, serious, popular, tabloid, compact and ‘red top’ (Rowe, 2010). In this study, newspapers are classified as broadsheet/compact/quality or tabloid (apart from the online-only quality newspaper *The Independent*), and websites as either magazines or sports news.

Broadly, it was found that tabloid papers and online publications (including, surprisingly, the online quality *The Independent*) had fewer reports on women’s football. There were also fewer female writers in the tabloids than in their broadsheet/compact/quality equivalents (Table 2). In particular, *The Independent* (a broadsheet turned tabloid and then online only) and the *BBC* had no articles by women – although the latter did not always give its authors bylines. Table 2 demonstrates that, as is to be expected, the average length of articles in broadsheet/compact/quality publications (545 words) was greater than that of the tabloids (373 words). The average length of articles in the two non-newspaper websites was highest (932 words), but this figure is influenced heavily by *The Athletic*, a magazine-style publication. The five ‘qualities’ also had a higher average number of articles on women’s football (14) than the tabloids (7) and online publications (5). However, the average for three ‘qualities’ (*Guardian*, *Times/Sunday Times* and *Telegraph*) was 22, while two (*i* and *Independent*) averaged only 2.5, both publishing fewer articles than any of the tabloids, with the *Mail* alone publishing 12 (although *i*’s average word count was far higher than that of any of the tabloids and was exceeded only by *The Atlantic*).

Despite these variations, our findings in the main support those of Domeneghetti (2019) as observed immediately above, who notes that tabloid papers are more likely to focus on men’s sport. In addition, female writers for all the sampled publications on

**Table 2.** Summary data from media reporting

Publication	Format/type	Total articles	Average word count	Women writers	Articles by women writers
<i>Guardian</i>	Compact/Quality	19	644	3	18
<i>Times/Sunday Times</i>	Compact/Broadsheet/Quality	17	547	2	17
<i>Telegraph</i>	Broadsheet/Quality	29	494	3	27
<i>i</i>	Compact/Quality	2	769	1	2
<i>Independent</i>	Online/Quality	3	335	0	0
<i>Sun</i>	Tabloid	5	411	2	4
<i>Mirror</i>	Tabloid	4	395	1	1
Daily Mail	Tabloid	12	349	1	1
<i>The Athletic</i>	Sports magazine/website	4	1414	1	1
<i>BBC</i>	Sports news website	5	547	0	0
Overall	—	100	546	14	71

average wrote more about women's football than men (545 words compared to 374 words).

As noted by [White et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Tiffen et al. \(2014\)](#), it is common for media reporting to draw on official sources to support their stories. In this instance, while not all 'sources' were named (in nine instances), the most common source was the FA – typically without naming any individual – which was referenced in 33 articles. Other footballing bodies were also quoted: Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) ( $n = 7$ ), International Federation of Professional Footballers (FIFPro) ( $n = 6$ ) and FIFA ( $n = 2$ ). In addition, the former England women's national team manager, Hope Powell ( $n = 4$ ), and footballer-turned-presenter and columnist, Alex Scott ( $n = 3$ ), were the most cited individuals. In total, 11 different women were cited in our sample, comprising (current and former) players, managers, commentators, a politician and academics. Thus, in addition to detailed coverage of women's football, it is reasonable to propose that media reporting gave a greater and broader voice to women in sport. 70% of articles that featured women as sources were written by female journalists (25% were men writers, 5% where no individual writer was specified). Only two articles featured a named male source (English Premier League chief executive Richard Masters) and were written by one male and one female writer. Organisations were the most frequently cited source across broadsheets (59%), tabloids (57%) and online-only outlets (22%). Women were the next most cited source across broadsheets (15%) and tabloids (43%), whereas opinion was the second highest source in the online-only outlets (33%). Therefore, there is some evidence of positive shifts in sports journalism practices that provide the prospect of a move away from the hegemonic masculine culture that has consistently been identified ([Hardin et al., 2006](#); [Franks & O'Neill, 2016](#)).

As described, the second stage of the empirical research involved a thematic analysis of the qualitative data in order to identify how the reports had framed women's football. Five frames were identified as prominent.

- 1) The financial precariousness of women's football (evident in 53% of articles)

Here, reports covered topics relating to commercial interests in women's football, such as the financial implications of the pandemic, and framed the financial precariousness of the women's game as reinforcing the marginalisation of women's football. It was identified in *The Athletic* by two male writers that the 'the additional costs of frequent COVID-19 testing while playing matches behind closed doors' ([Twomey & Pearce, 2020](#), para. 10) posed a threat to the financial stability of women's football. Some journalists (e.g., [Hudson, 2020a](#)) framed the pandemic as exacerbating the inequalities experienced by women's football, citing women footballers taking to social media to source basic training equipment. Indeed, some articles problematised clubs bearing the approximate £3 million cost of finishing the season (i.e., the need for testing combined with the cost of paying player wages for an additional 2 months if the season were to be extended) as 'prohibitive' ([Whyatt, 2020b](#), para. 2). The eventual decision to cancel the season for the top tiers of women's football was claimed to be based by the

FA on financial considerations in consultation with women's football clubs. In a statement released by the FA that was quoted by male writer Mark Jones (2020) in *The Mirror*, it was confirmed that:

financial pressures during the coronavirus pandemic have forced the move, with the decision now to be taken on the season's outcomes based on sporting merit (para. 2).

A report by female writer Katie Whyatt (2020c) from *The Telegraph* questioned how actually involved clubs were in the decision, quoting a statement by Liverpool FC Women (who were relegated as a result of the decision):

Preparation for this has been ongoing for many weeks and as a club we believe we would have been able to meet the operational and financial obligations associated with a return to play, once detailed drafts and accurate protocols had been shared with clubs (para. 5).

Reference was made by four female writers and two male writers to a report by FIFPro suggesting that, 'the women's game is particularly vulnerable as it has less-established leagues, short-term contracts and lower value sponsorship deals' (Matchett, 2020, para. 3). It is significant that the following comment from male writer Jack Pitt-Brooke for *The Athletic* highlighted the link between women's teams and their male counterparts:

But in the immediate term, women's football is still likely to go through a difficult spell financially. Even the most successful teams, with budgets estimated at roughly £3 million per year, are dependent on their association with men's teams. So if their men's teams are forced to cut costs this summer because of coronavirus, then the women's teams could suffer. In reality, that means their playing squad (Pitt-Brooke, 2020, para. 18).

These quotations indicate how the precarious nature of women's football was framed during the pandemic. Sport scholars have pointed to women's clubs' financial security as often being reliant on that of the men's teams (Woodhouse et al., 2019). Women's teams are rarely seen as an integral part of footballing culture and may be an easy option to trim as part of cost cutting measures (Clarkson et al., 2020).

## 2) The commercial prioritisation of men's football (evident in 46% of articles)

Media articles within this frame challenged and critiqued the commercial prioritisation of men's football and subsequent marginalisation of women's football in English football culture. (Male journalist) Kieran Theivam, writing *The Athletic*, drew attention to the tension that results from this prioritisation of men's football, noting that 'Fans of the women's game have often felt that they have had to live in the shadow of the men's, with the sport still playing catch-up...' (Theivam, 2020, para. 4). Moreover, female pundit and writer Alex Scott (quoted in BBC, 2020a) remarked that the

pandemic would also impact on the visibility of women's football as the primary focus returned to men's football: "we're going to go a whole summer of just watching men's sport again." (para. 10). In 11 reports, reference was made to men's football, frequently detailing the inequalities that exist in terms of resourcing and prioritising, particularly when it comes to media coverage. The following comment identified these issues:

Women's football is simply being ignored amid the coronavirus crisis. Whenever I switch on the television the updates are all about the male players... (Scott, 2020, para. 1).

Furthermore, Alison McGovern, Shadow Minister for the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, predicted that the greater attention to the men's game would be detrimental to the women's:

My big worry is, at the moment, all the attention is on the Premier League...I understand why that is - there's a commercial imperative - [but] I think that those involved, whether it's the FA or the clubs, need to have a wider view. To say: "Unfortunately, we're going to have to cancel the league this year,' without a wider plan for the elite game, is a mistake, in my view. (quoted in Whyatt, 2020d, para. 5)

McGovern was quoted in three articles, all written by female writers. Ultimately, all the examples within this frame point to women's football as of lesser importance than men's football. This perception has resulted, for women, in less media coverage, greater financial hardship and the ongoing marginalisation of the women's game. The final comment above, which drew attention to the cancellation of the women's leagues, is indicative of another common frame in our analysis.

### 3) Practical consideration for the sport (evident in 55% of articles)

Over half of the articles referred to the impact of the pandemic on the league structures and the alterations to domestic and international football competitions. These reports were framed *via* a focus on elite women's football and highlighted the most visible impacts of COVID-19. In addition to focusing on the cancellation of the Women's Super League (WSL) and Championship, reference was also made to the postponement of the 2021 Women's European Championships until July 2022. It has been suggested that this decision might be beneficial to women's football and could present opportunities for the sport (Clarkson et al., 2020). The FA's Director of Women's Football, Baroness Sue Campbell, said in *The Telegraph*:

We fully support its decision to postpone the Women's Euros. We agree that this decision will ultimately benefit the tournament, creating its own window in the football calendar. It will also allow us all more time following this challenging period to deliver an unforgettable event (Quoted in Whyatt, 2020e, para. 8).

While this delay was generally reported in a positive manner, the same cannot be said of the cancellation of the WSL and Championship. The decision to end the season and to decide league places on a points-per-game basis (although it should be noted that the men's season from League One (the third tier of football) and below was decided on the same basis) meant that, as noted, a high-profile club, Liverpool, was relegated from the WSL, and the league title was awarded to the team which was in second place when the league season was terminated. This decision was the focus of much media attention and quotes from the Liverpool manager at the time, Vicky Jepson, were commonly used, such as:

The focus of our women's team and staff since the beginning of the crisis was to be ready to return to WSL play when it was safe and proper to do so. We believe we would have been able to meet all operational requirements but a return to play was deemed impractical (Vicky Jepson quoted in [Meade, 2020](#), para. 8–9).

Another well-known football figure and ex-England Women manager, Hope Powell, was quoted by female writer Katie Whyatt in *The Telegraph*:

Former England manager Powell worried that it would be “hugely unfair” to relegate a club when the season remains unfinished. Points per game, whether weighted or un-weighted, would see Chelsea leapfrog Manchester City to be crowned champions ([Whyatt, 2020f](#), para. 4).

The use of such official and established sources, which add authority to media reporting, is not unusual in sports journalism, but they are significant because, as noted above, the use of female voices to provide insights further dilutes the masculine influence within sports reporting. In addition, they offer perspectives that may be missed by those not involved in women's football, particularly by drawing attention to the practical considerations for the domestic competitions and not just for the national side.

#### 4) Debating the future of women's football (evident in 23% of articles)

Here, women's football was framed as precarious and attention was focused on the significance of the threat posed to it by the global pandemic. The case of AFC Fylde, whose women's team was disbanded in April 2020, featured in three stories. This decision – which was later reversed due to the media attention that it garnered ([BBC, 2020b](#)) – was largely attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic by the club:

‘Due to the current and ongoing fluid situation regarding the COVID-19 virus, the chairman has had to take the tough decision to disband the women's team in its current format’, a statement said (quoted in [Wrack, 2020a](#), para. 2).

However, reporting also presented the challenge in a positive manner. Although the threat to women's football was made clear, a variety of articles referred to the positive state of the sport prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. For example (male journalist) Jack Pitt-Brooke in *The Athletic* claimed that:

The challenge for women's football will be to survive the obvious financial and logistical challenges while not losing sight of the longer-term gains that have been made in recent years (Pitt-Brooke, 2020, para. 16).

Indeed, one article by female writer Fiona Thomas in *The Telegraph* subsequently presented women's football as a solution to the issues associated with the return of crowds to football matches in England while the country was still under government restrictions. She observed that:

there is a widespread feeling that women's football, given its lower crowd attendances, could be suitable for smaller spectator pilots. The average crowd attendance during the WSL 2019-2020 season, which was prematurely ended in May due to coronavirus, was 3072 (Thomas, 2020, para. 4).

Such a positive and innovative positioning of women's football may be needed if the sport is not only to survive but to be successful (Clarkson et al., 2020). As *The Guardian's* female writer Suzy Wrack stated, 'Women's football needs bold and innovative leadership to navigate this period', but she went on to suggest that the FA, which has administered women's football in the UK, was unable to provide this leadership as it was 'shackled by the FA's other commitments', notably to grassroots football and the professional men's game (Wrack, 2020b, para. 5).

##### 5) Concern for players (evident in 22% of articles)

The final frame that we identified was a concern for women footballers and was constructed by female writers (with the exception of one article by a male writer). It broadly contained two key areas for consideration: player welfare/health and uncertain working conditions. The first of these elements highlighted the impact that the pandemic was having on players. Katie Whyatt (2020g) in *The Telegraph* noted that mental health support had been provided for England women's players, 'amid a surge in depression and anxiety among female players during the coronavirus crisis' (para. 1).

The uncertainty surrounding the women's game was identified as detrimental to the health and wellbeing of players. Writing in May, Suzy Wrack (2020c) observed that 'many Women's Super League players [were] mentally "checked out" and desperate for the season to be ended' (para. 1). Wales and Watford female player, Helen Ward, wrote an article in *The Telegraph* where she highlighted the experience of women players from outside the top two leagues, saying that:



It's hard, because you can't replicate team training when you're on your own. It's basically using what you can now that all gyms are closed. The plan factors in different things: if you can get hold of a treadmill, do this. If you can't, do that. Use a bike, body weight exercises – there are all sorts of contingency plans. The ideal is to get out and run as much as you can (Ward, 2020, para. 6).

Similarly, a [Daily Mail \(2020\)](#) article (derived from the Press Association news agency) featured the case of Liverpool Women captain Sophie Bradley-Auckland, who was forced to put her football career on hold because she subsidises her playing career with managing a care home, and did not want to be exposed to a greater risk of contracting and passing on COVID-19. This article draws attention to the nature of 'professional' women's sport, where athletes are usually required to play for multiple teams or to take on additional jobs as their sporting careers have not historically been financially secure or sufficiently well remunerated (Bowes & Culvin, 2021).

For health and safety reasons, testing players for the coronavirus was crucial to getting the WSL and Championship up and running again. No extra funding for COVID-19 testing (as was also the case for the men's lower leagues) was available to allow those competitions to extend and complete the 2019/20 campaign, and journalists who employed the *concern for players* frame discussed the gender inequalities in relation to the men's top two tiers of football. Katie Whyatt (2020h) problematised the cost of testing being placed on men's parent clubs, which would put them 'under further financial pressure to cut their women's sides' (para. 3). In this article, an undisclosed source from a tier-two club was cited: "Why should male players get it and women players shouldn't? Why is our safety any less important than the men, and why is the cost of it seen as dismissible? (para. 5)." This discourse of gender inequality, that has been demonstrated above, pervaded the framing of women's experiences in English football under the pandemic.

## **Conclusion: The Framing of Women's Football During the Pandemic**

With the increased visibility of women's football, the narrative around the sport has shifted, with greater reporting of women's football in general and, specifically, of the business-related aspects that are a frequent element of the coverage of men's football (Manoli, 2020). These findings are significant as they depart from the conventional trivialisation of much earlier coverage of women's sport (Bruce, 2016) towards a genuine interest in it. Furthermore, in the context of football, women are receiving greater visibility outside the international sporting space.

Whereas women's sport has been previously neglected by the media, we have provided some evidence of change in this regard. As demonstrated here, the media are now reporting on a variety of aspects of women's football and, significantly, on women's football when the sport is not being played. The five frames identified here are also in marked contrast to the indifference that has been found in much of the reporting

on women's sport (Bruce, 2016). We found that UK media reporting highlighted areas of concern in women's football and a variety of issues pertaining to sport in general. Furthermore, some journalists challenged and critiqued the marginalisation of women's football in English football culture. As Staurowsky et al. (2020, p. 411) note, this reaction demonstrates the 'precarious position women's sport holds within the sport industry'. These frames could be viewed as largely negative and, like Staurowsky et al. (2020, p. 411), focus on 'scarcity, uncertainty, and lost opportunity'. However, this framing also highlights the increasing societal acceptance of women in sporting spaces, and a need for greater action to address the gender imbalances that are, to some degree, being led by elements of the sport media.

The frame addressing *the implications for players* highlights that, in our sample, there was a depth of coverage that has rarely if ever been seen previously in mainstream reporting of women's football. In particular, by drawing attention to the wellbeing of women players and their inferior conditions, this sports journalism has moved away from the traditional media sexualisation of women players and/or presentation of them as psychologically weak (Bruce, 2008) to portray them as elite athletes negatively affected by gender inequality. However, while both male and female journalists framed discussion in the *commercial prioritisation of men's football*, *practical consideration for the sport* and *debating the future of women's football* frames, only female writers (with the exception of one article) employed the *concern for players* frame. Our data also indicated that reporting on women's football in England might have declined following the resumption of the men's competitions. Furthermore, these articles were written during a period when no women's football was played and were reports on the implications of the pandemic; it is uncertain – indeed, unlikely – that this depth of reporting will transfer into reports on the sporting contests after the resumption of matches. Longitudinal research is required to track such developments.

In addition, established trends in sports journalism, such as longer stories in the 'qualities' and greater emphasis on traditionally masculine sports in tabloid publications, were shown to still be predominant. Therefore, we have provided additional evidence of the need to diversify sports 'newswork', as men were shown to write less about women's sport, and the majority of reporting on women's football was by women. Women were also cited as sources more often by female writers. Given the significant role that the media play in shaping socio-cultural values (Rowe, 2004), an increased number of women in sports journalism has the potential to increase the quantity and quality of reporting on women's sport, and to dissolve progressively the hegemonic masculine culture that has dominated the media sport industry since its inception (Hardin et al., 2006; Kian & Hardin, 2009; Franks & O'Neill, 2016). Strategic recruitment policy is crucial in this respect, although this is not to discount the extensive challenges that women face within the sports journalism industry, and the persistent perception that covering men's sport is a more legitimate occupational practice (Knoppers & Elling, 2004).

We found a higher number of articles published in broadsheets such as *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian*. The lower number of articles written in tabloids

such as *The Sun* and *The Mirror* is indicative of tabloid journalism's focus on men's sport for consumption by men (Domeneghetti, 2019). As Rowe and Boyle (2021) have noted, the conservative *Daily Telegraph* made a commercially oriented decision to broaden its readership by launching a print and web section dedicated to women's sport under its first female Sports Editor and Deputy Editor. Female sports journalists at the *Telegraph* also cover men's sport in order to ensure that they are not 'ghettoised'. The paper now publishes almost a third more women's sport stories than its rivals, and led with a women's sport story on its sports website approximately every second day in the summer of 2019 (Rowe & Boyle, 2021). There is no doubt that these initiatives were responsible for the high-level of coverage of women's sport in *The Daily Telegraph* captured in our research conducted in the following year.

Rather than viewing the framing of women's football in England during this time as negative, we see it as positive that the articles expressed legitimate concern for women's football and players. This is evidence that there is enthusiasm and support for the sport, and that there are now many journalists with a genuine interest in women's football. Moreover, our study found that, during a period when women's football was not played, there was a substantial number of stories written about it and, particularly, about its domestic competitions – a marked contrast both to the historical media apathy towards women's sport outside the elite international arena and to the situation during this period in Australia (Symons et al., 2021). As noted, whether this 'pandemic moment' constitutes a turning point in the reporting of domestic women's football, or merely an interruption to 'normal service' prior to its resumption (as identified in the Australian context by Symons et al., 2021), can only be established by later inquiry. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced gender inequalities across the social spectrum (UN Women, 2021), this research offers some reasons for optimism with regard to setting an agenda for the future of gender equity both in sport and society.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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