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'We shouldn't have to ask': exploring the realities of minority ethnic women football spectators

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ABSTRACT

Research Question:: Women's football is experiencing significant growth, but is it fully inclusive? Little research explores the experiences of minority ethnic women spectators. For women's football to capitalise on its success and be welcoming for all, it is critical to explore the barriers facing women intersectionally. This paper seeks answers to the following questions: What influenced minority ethnic women's decisions to watch the UWE, and what challenges exist to their spectatorship?

Research Methods: An online survey and three focus groups explored United Kingdom respondents' thoughts around spectatorship at the 2022 UEFA Women's Euros. Topics included the marketing before the event, their experiences, and future intentions.

Results and Findings:: Analysis of the results resulted in the following themes: the importance of supporting the England women's team vs. a lack of diversity, lack of cultural awareness, performativity and the FA, and women's football being different to men's football. Minority ethnic women face numerous challenges, including perceptions of tokenism, a lack of representation on and off the pitch, and religious observances, including a lack of prayer rooms and no-alcohol zones.

Implications: Governing bodies must take action to diversify the sport at all levels, especially grassroots, including consulting and listening to the voices of minority ethnic women. The creation of role models will increase feelings of connectedness. While this work has focused on women's football, leaders in the men's game and other governing bodies could embrace our suggestions to encourage more minority ethnic spectators.

Introduction

Context

The 2022 UEFA Women's Euros (UWE) in England globally reached an audience of 365 million people, with a record-breaking match attendance of 87,192 spectators for the final fixture between England and Germany at Wembley Stadium (BBC, 2022). The last decade

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has witnessed increased visibility of female mega sport events (Dashper, 2021), (e.g. the UWE, FIFA World Cup, the ICC Cricket World Cup, Women's Rugby League World Cup, etc.) resulting in increased audiences. Similarly, domestic women's football in England is also on the rise, with average attendance at Women's Super League (WSL) fixtures up by 200% since England's victory in 2022 (BBC Sport, 2022). Yet we know little about the demographics of these spectators or the barriers they face. Whilst Giulianotti (2002) groups spectators into four categories: cool/consumer spectators (flaneurs), hot/consumer spectators (fans), traditional/cool spectators (followers), traditional/hot spectators (supporters), we have chosen to use the general term spectator to describe our participants to encompass the continuum of spectators and fans.

There are several benefits to being a sport fan and spectator. These include creating a sense of community and enhancing well-being (Dunn, 2014; Obel, 2012; Toffoletti & Palmer, 2017). Yet, positive well-being might not be a contributor for spectators who are more likely to experience discrimination. For example, Cleland and Cashmore's, 2016 survey of 2,500 fans revealed that 83% of respondents believed racism was 'culturally embedded' in football (p. 27). However, it is worth noting that current research frequently cites that women's sports are more inclusive and welcoming spaces than men's (FSA, 2023; Leslie-Walker et al., 2024). But this does not mean that more cannot be achieved.

Academics have widely researched sport consumerism since the 1980s. However, this work has often excluded ethnically diverse communities (Andrijw & Richardson, 2023). Understanding the determinants of stadium attendance, including in women's football, has been an avenue for research by sport economists (LeFeuvre et al., 2013; Meier et al., 2016; Valenti et al., 2020b). Common factors influencing spectators' motivation in attending women's football fixtures include the stage of the competition, uncertainty of match outcome, competitive balance, competitive intensity, team quality, and having 'superstar' players, as well as the away teams' reputation, and ticket price (Lee et al., 2017; Meier et al., 2016; Valenti et al., 2020b; Vamplew, 2022; Yüce & Katirci, 2016). However, much of this research has focused on statistical analysis and questionnaires rather than speaking with spectators.

In addition, this research has often ignored 'race' or other demographical characteristics that might impact attendance. In fact, diversity and inclusion in research about spectators continue to be underexplored (Andrijw & Richardson, 2023; Schallhorn et al., 2023). Even rarer are examples of research exploring the experiences of minority ethnic sport fans and spectators (Andrijw & Richardson, 2023; Rankin-Wright et al., 2019a). Minority ethnic women may find themselves in multifaceted burdens that may visibly be racism and sexism, but other characteristics such as disability and sexuality (Clarkson et al., 2022), yet little research exists on strategies to improve this situation. The fact that there are no statistics about attendance rates by minority ethnic women demonstrates how little concern there is about this area. Supporter groups exist to represent the interests of LGBTQ+ fans (e.g. Pride in Football) and disabled fans (e.g. Level Playing Field). Yet, there is little for minority ethnic women outside of Black Footy Babes, who organise watch parties during major football events, and Nutmegs which was created due to the challenges faced by minority ethnic women in feeling a sense of belonging in football environments (Nutmegs, 2023). The lived experience of author two and those of our participants confirm there are few minority ethnic women attending women's football matches.

Feminist sport scholars have applied several frameworks to theoretically interpret gendered experiences in fandom. Whereby early writings synthesised the divergent differences between women's and men's experiences (Pope, 2016; Pope et al., 2022). Such writings tended to homogenise the experiences of women upon a single axis of power and absence other intersectional experiences of women who are not White. The study employs intersectionality to theorise the layered forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989), as gender has contextualised meanings, and Black females are often constructed with negative connotations in reference to physicality, aggression and sexualisation (Collins, 2000).

To advance theoretical understanding, this study explores the race-gendered experiences of women, urging consideration of the complex myriad of historical and current challenges that may be represented and reproduced due to 'race'. Through the exploration of the women in this research and their roles as spectators, the narrative prompts readers to grasp the intricate religious, socio-cultural, and racialized frameworks stemming from UK imperialism, colonialism, and migration (Mirza, 1997). This work builds upon the work of Adjepong and Carrington (2014), who suggest that black sportswomen cannot be universalised due to the 'intersections of racial, gendered, sexual, and classed oppression' (p. 170). Therefore, it is critical to explore the experiences of minority ethnic women to ensure that the spectatorship landscape is open to all and reflects the diversity of those who love the game.

The first paper from this project focused on the experiences of minority ethnic fans while attending the UWE (including in the stands and at fan zones); however, this paper predominantly focuses on the broader barriers to spectatorship faced by these women (Leslie-Walker et al. 2024). Consequently, the research questions at the heart of this paper are: what impacted minority ethnic women's decisions to watch the UWE, and what barriers exist to their spectatorship, including the role of the football's governing bodies? While these might appear simple questions, given the lack of literature on this topic, they are imperative to explore. As such, this paper will begin by reviewing the literature on female sport fans and spectators, including how sport is marketed to these women. It will then explore the barriers that minority ethnic women discussed in the focus groups and survey. Following presentation of this data, we offer our key recommendations for governing bodies.

Previous research

Diversity issues in sport organisations

Concerns about barriers for minoritised groups in sport often result from a lack of representation within national governing bodies. Football governance has consistently been a predominantly white, male institution internationally and domestically (Bradbury, 2013; Clarkson et al., 2022; Cleland & Cashmore, 2014; Kilvington, 2019), which can maintain exclusionary practices (Kilvington, 2019). Institutional racism within sporting structures at all levels is coupled with resistance to change by gatekeepers (Bradbury, 2013; Lusted et al., 2020; Rankin-Wright et al., 2019b; Spaaij et al., 2020).

The reasons for this lack of diversity within sporting organisational structures are multifaceted. A colour-blind ideology can be present, where those in power do not

see, or deliberately choose to ignore, that racism exists (Bradbury, 2013; Cleland & Cashmore, 2014; Cunningham, 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Spaaij et al., 2020). This approach can be due to a desire to maintain a positive public image, ultimately pushing the problem elsewhere and reinforcing overt and covert racism (Kassimeris et al., 2022). When White privilege fails to see the disadvantages others face, the blame is put onto those minoritised individuals for not acquiring positions (Kilvington, 2019). Therefore, there are beliefs that minority ethnic individuals do not have the competencies to undertake leadership positions, further perpetuating stereotypes (Cleland & Cashmore, 2014; Kilvington, 2019).

An organisation should value diversity, avoid tokenistic visible acts, and position accountable diversity within its strategic aims (Chelladurai, 2002). Fostering cultural diversity can emit critical questioning practices from the workforce. For example, performative and symbolic visibility may lead to workforce resistance when implementing positive discrimination in support of social justice (Hylton, 2021). These considerations can also extend to sport. However, organisations that understand the value of diversity and utilise sustainable practices can gain a competitive advantage (Sibson & Stanway, 2022).

Regarding football's governance, there appears to be an inability to recognise some structural issues that create 'race'-based inequality (Campbell, 2020; Fletcher & Hylton, 2018). Yet, cultural diversity needs to be viewed as a positive and developed to benefit the sport and help make connections with diverse populations (Bradbury, 2013; Cunningham, 2019). However, this commitment to diversity must occur at all levels of the sport and across various roles, for example, player, spectator, coach, and in governance.

Challenges faced by minority ethnic women in sport

Racism persists in men's football within the stadium environment (Burdsey, 2020; Caselli et al., 2023) and online (Cable et al., 2022; Kilvington et al., 2023). Colour-blindness exists within governing bodies, with evidence suggesting that ignorance has been an issue when acknowledging and addressing racist behaviour, resulting in a homogenous workforce and the lack of ethnic women participating in some sports (UK Sport, 2021). The inertia in addressing these concerns is linked to a lack of diversity in leadership roles and results in insufficient engagement with minority ethnic spectators (Bradbury, 2013; Cleland & Cashmore, 2014).

Women's experiences when attending events can also create barriers. While there is a growing amount of literature on women's experiences as fans and how they negotiate this gendered space (Chiweshe, 2014; Dunn, 2014; Ginhoux, 2018; Gong, 2017; Kossakowski et al., 2022; Pope, 2010; Zuaneti Martins et al., 2022), there is little that considers the intersectionality of 'race'. Yet, it is critical to engage minority ethnic women in sport, including as spectators, as it not only provides health benefits but can also help integration into spectator communities (Leslie-Walker & Mulvenna, 2022; Maxwell & Taylor, 2010; Toffoletti & Palmer, 2017). Minority ethnic women face multi-dimensional forms of oppression and face different challenges than their white counterparts (Leslie-Walker et al., 2024).

Female fans in men's sport

Research exploring the experiences of female sport fans has increased, and the emphasis is often on the differences between men and women (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2000; Fink et al., 2002; Ridinger & Funk, 2006). Some common observations are that female fans attend due to the players' profiles (Armstrong, 1999; Leslie-Walker & Mulvenna, 2022) and commit to supporting women's teams more than men's teams (Armstrong, 1999; Funk et al., 2001; Funk et al., 2002; Ridinger & Funk, 2006; Schallhorn et al., 2023). Frequently cited is that women are more likely to attend sports fixtures for social reasons (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2000; Fink et al., 2002; Leslie-Walker & Mulvenna, 2022; Richards et al., 2020; Ridinger & Funk, 2006;).

Two papers focusing on spectator motivations at the 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup (Funk et al., 2001; Funk et al., 2002) reveal that supporting women's sport was a significant factor, as was team interest, excitement, vicarious achievement, aesthetics, entertainment, a wholesome environment, and time spent with family. However, neither explored gender or racial differences. Coche (2014, p. 466) provides one of the few pieces of research into this area and found that 'non-Caucasian' female soccer fans were 'significantly more motivated by the feeling of identifying with the players and/or coaching staff than Caucasians'. This point is significant given recent discussions about the lack of ethnic diversity in the England women's national team.

Marketing women's sport

To understand what attracts female spectators, it is essential to consider marketing since increasing awareness will 'raise the demand for watching sport and sport consumption' (Giachino et al., 2024, p. 1). The means used to market sport to female fans are often problematic. Promotions targeted at female fans often remain highly gendered (Giesler, 2017; Johnson, 2016) and are designed to appeal to the 'figure of the maternal fan' (Johnson, 2016, p. 16). For example, the National Football League's 'Football is Family' campaign included branded kitchenware and emphasised their support of breast cancer awareness (Montez de Oca & Cotner, 2018). In some cases, advertising stereotypes female fans as 'beer babes, WAGS (wives and girlfriends), and woe-begotten "football widows"' (Wenner, 2012, p. 136). Gee's (2015) research into the National Hockey League's 'Inside the Warrior' campaign explored marketing that included a scantily clad woman in a hockey changing room and employed a soap opera style campaign. These tokenistic/sexualised advertisements remind people that 'the woman fan [is] not a natural occurrence' (Wenner, 2012, p. 142), potentially alienating them. However, research into Danish football clubs' marketing strategies reveals that most clubs knew that women wanted to be treated as authentic fans and thus not differentiated in marketing materials (Sandager, 2022).

While these articles have focused on attracting female fans to watch male leagues, there is limited research into marketing women's sport (Thomson et al., 2023), including women's football (Valenti et al., 2018). In some cases, adverts for women's sports have utilised sexualised images (Fink, 2015; Kim & Kwon, 2020; Weaving, 2016; Weaving & Samson, 2018). In other instances, the focus has been on attracting fathers (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2020; Sequerra, 2014) by promoting women's sports as a family-friendly

atmosphere that fathers and daughters can share. However, such strategies, including the Football Association's (FA) promotion of the Women's Super League, can risk alienating the existing audience (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2020) by attempting to bring in new fans.

Highlighting the differences between men's and women's football is another marketing approach (Coche, 2014; Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2020; Sequerra, 2014). Research into the FA's promotion of the Women's Super League demonstrates they sought to promote the sport as 'inherently distinct' from the men's game by positioning it 'at the periphery of broader entertainment' (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2020, p. 166). However, introducing a carnival atmosphere concerned fans who believed it delegitimised and trivialised women's football (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2020) and made the action on the pitch a 'peripheral part of the experience' (Sequerra, 2014, p. 152). Coche (2014) explains that the US Soccer Federation not only promoted the men's and women's teams differently, through less coverage and infantilisation, but also framed the women's team as less important than the men's despite their successes. In other cases, women's sport is promoted in feminised terms, including that it is morally superior to men's sport (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2020).

Two key issues arise from the review. Firstly, there is little on the barriers that ethnic minority women face regarding spectatorship. Andrijw and Richardson's (2023) rare exploration of the experiences of minority ethnic women fans of ice hockey found that their minority status acknowledged they were subject to exclusion, gendered stereotyping, and discrimination. Many participants felt they could not present their authentic selves and instead attempted to minimise their differences. Secondly, the discussions around ethnic minority women must be far more nuanced. Research on ethnic minority women needs to acknowledge 'their multiple and complex lived realities' (Carter-Francique, 2017, p. 64) to shift the focus from them as subjects of analysis to exposing 'structures and cultures of control, exclusion and oppression' (Ratna & Samie, 2017). Inclusivity in the sports space can be achieved by building trust, incorporating culturally appropriate food, increasing cultural awareness, adjusting clothing requirements, and creating non-discriminatory policies (DeKnop et al., 1996; Maxwell & Taylor, 2010). In the case of football, Valenti et al. (2020a; 2020b) suggest that investment into the elite women's game and encouraging grassroots participation will also help build attendance in the stands as well as international success on the pitch.

Methods

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach of a 46-point online survey and focus groups of female spectators of the 2022 UWE from England. There was a combination of multiple-choice Likert scale questions and open text boxes. We took this approach to ensure we could synthesise the quantitative data to understand the spectators' pre-, during, and post-experience and as a primary method to create questions of pertinence for the focus groups. Qualitative research in this area is essential as it 'focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences' (Sparkes & Smith, 2013).

Phase one was an online survey completed during the tournament. Following ethical approval from a university ethics panel, we recruited respondents via purposive sampling to ensure that only female spectators from ethnic minority backgrounds in the United Kingdom were included. The survey was based on Nicholson et al.'s (2023) research

on the experiences and motivations of female spectators at The Hundred cricket competition. We chose this approach as, like this research, theirs sought to explore how to improve the match-day experience in a major sport seeking to reach a new audience. The researchers had also worked alongside the charity Women in Sport to ensure a rigorous approach (Nicholson et al., 2023). We distributed the survey via a QR code on social media platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp, as well as within our networks. The survey covered respondents' pre-existing relationship with football, their experiences of the UWE, including the number of games they attended and who they attended with, and aimed to anticipate the tournament's impact on their future spectating plans. The complete set of questions can be found in the Appendix A.

The online survey attracted 51 respondents with a mean age of 33, with the 21–25 age category having the highest representation (31%). 15 respondents considered themselves Black/African/Caribbean/Black British, 20 respondents identified as Asian/Asian British, 11 respondents as Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups, and four chose Other, with one preferring not to say. Regarding participants' religion, the majority identified as Muslim ($n = 18$), 10 identified as Christian, three as Hindu, three as Sikh, and one as Jewish. Others either had no religion or preferred not to disclose. Information relating to our focus group participants is detailed in Table 1.

Data from the Likert scale and multiple-choice questions were analysed descriptively, including calculating means and standard deviations where relevant. Free text boxes were subjected to thematic analysis. The authors met to discuss the survey answers and identified those questions that we felt needed further exploration in the focus groups to answer our research questions about what impacted minority ethnic women's decisions to watch the tournament and the barriers they faced. Not all questions from the survey are represented in this paper, as they have been explored as part of other outputs from this project.

Survey results revealed several interesting issues that became the basis for our focus group questions. Firstly, participants noticed that the UWE had a marketing approach different from that of other football tournaments (Table 2).

Secondly, when attending the event, participants had mixed views. When asked to rate their experience attending the UEFA Women's Euro 2022 competition, 89.7% of respondents were either Very Satisfied or Somewhat Satisfied. However, when asked if women's

Table 1. Focus group participants' information.

Pseudonym	Age	Self-identified ethnic group/s	Number of years watched women's football?	Preferred women's super league team
Sophie	22	Mixed: Black Caribbean and White British	10	Chelsea
Aminah	25	Pakistani	3	Arsenal
Aaliyah	27	Pakistani	6	Manchester United
Natalie	30	Mixed: Black Caribbean and White British	10	Arsenal
Sandra	40+	Black	4	Arsenal
Eve	42	Black African	15	Liverpool
Salma	44	Pakistani	5	Arsenal
Nazreen	45	Asian – Other	12	Arsenal
Nasima	50	Indian	6	Arsenal
Vicky	46–50	Indian	8	N/A

Table 2. Marketing perceptions.

Question	Yes	No
Did you notice anything different in the marketing of the UEFA Women's Euros 2022 compared to the marketing of other football tournaments?	32 (72.7%)	12 (27.3%)

football was an inclusive space for people from minority ethnic backgrounds, 70.7% of respondents believed the sport was either Far Short of Expectations or Short of Expectations. Scales ran from 1 (Very Unsatisfied/Far Short of Expectation) to 5 (Very satisfied/Far Exceeds Expectation) (Table 3).

Phase two of the study included 10 participants in online semi-structured focus groups. The 10 focus group participants ranged in age from 22 to 50, with six participants over 40 and the other four aged between 22 and 30. Two participants considered themselves Black Caribbean and White British, three Pakistani, one Black, one Black African, and two Indian, and one Asian (other). We did not collect religion for this group. Six of our focus group respondents supported Arsenal despite not all living in London. It is unclear the reason for this. However, Arsenal's long-standing commitment to women's football and their history of success are likely causes. We chose focus groups because they can be empowering, as sharing views 'means that people can realise they're not so isolated in their experience' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 111). They are excellent methods when working with underrepresented communities (Liamputtong, 2007). While there is always the chance that someone might dominate discussions, it was considered that the benefits outweighed this concern. There were three focus groups in total, with three participants in two of them and one group of four. Questions focused on the participants' engagement with football in other capacities, their experiences as spectators at the UWE, and what they thought of the tournament marketing and were based on responses from the questionnaire. In addition, we selected a series of quotes from the open text boxes from the questionnaire that we wanted to explore further, including topics around the diversity of crowds, the lack of diversity in the England team, and inclusivity in football.

Participants were informed that the focus group recording would be kept securely and all names pseudonymised in the final write-up, allowing an open and free discussion. Author two generated pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and anonymity within the research and to detach possible abuses of power when suggesting pseudonyms (Lahman et al., 2015). We gave all participants the option to recommend an alternative name. However, we received no change requests. All focus groups lasted approximately 60 minutes and were undertaken and recorded virtually. Author two conducted the focus groups due to sharing similar characteristics to some participants in terms of gender, ethnicity, religion and 'race'.

Table 3. Experiences at the UEFA Women's Euro 2022.

Question	Mean	Standard Deviation
How satisfied were you with your experience attending the UEFA Women's Euro 2022 competition?	4.38	0.93
To what extent do you consider women's football an inclusive space for people from minority ethnic backgrounds?	2.24	0.99

Table 4. Team Preferences.

Question	England	France	Sweden	All Other Teams
Please select your preferred team, in the UEFA Women's Euro Competition.	41 (83.7%)	6 (12.2%)	2 (4.1%)	0 (0%)

We used photo and video elicitation within the focus groups to stimulate reflection (Fernández-Prieto et al., 2019). We selected the 'Our England: The Official England Squad Announced' (FATV, 2022) and four pictures (one of the England team, one of the France team, and two of fan zones). Such images can help to elicit latent memories and/or reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings between respondents and researchers (Harper, 2002). The French team was selected as this team was second only to England in popularity (Table 4).

In addition, the images may also help engage respondents who may otherwise be unlikely to express themselves fully (Banks, 2007). For example, as in this study, respondents were unfamiliar with one another.

Focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis. The free text boxes on the questionnaire underwent the same analytical process. This approach consisted of familiarisation, initial coding, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, and final presentation of data. After reading the transcripts multiple times, the first author hand-coded the transcriptions, identifying 28 initial codes, taking an inductive coding approach. As per Braun and Clarke (2022), this was based on coding data relevant to the research questions rather than line-by-line. Reflecting on these codes led to the identification of four themes. At this stage, author two reviewed the codes and themes. Themes were then further examined by author one and analysed to explore their meaning. Analysis of the survey results and the focus groups resulted in the following themes that both authors agreed: the importance of supporting the England women's team vs. a lack of diversity, performativity and the FA, lack of cultural awareness, and women's football is different to men's football.

Findings

We present the results of the survey and focus group together as some of the themes overlap. Examples of where themes overlap include the following sections: England Women's Team: Importance of Supporting vs. Lack of Diversity and Performativity and the FA.

England women's team: importance of supporting vs. lack of diversity

Four focus group participants acknowledged that it was more important to them to support women's teams over men's at club and international levels. Salma spoke of supporting her local women's Super League team more than the men's. At the same time, Sophie stated that Emma Hayes (the Chelsea Women's manager) is 'the greatest thing since sliced bread, so that's where my loyalties lie' despite supporting the men's and women's teams. Salma acknowledged that supporting the England women's team at a home tournament was important to raise the profile of the women's game.

The acknowledgement that supporting women's teams was important was fed by a belief that the players were important role models. Eve spoke of the importance of 'having those heroes that really elevate the team and the sport for you'. She particularly noted being a fan of Leah Williamson and Lotte Wubben-Moy because of their 'social consciousness and awareness of social action'. Eve thinks highly of the current England women's team because 'she trusts and admires them as players and people'. Sophie spoke of how she took the junior team she coaches to a UWE match. While she did not specifically mention the England women as role models, that she took the team when she had not done a similar thing in the past indicates that there is something different with seeing the England women play. These comments confirm research that suggests that gender equality and contributing to social change are reasons for supporting women's sport (Delia, 2021; Delia & James, 2018). Nasima attended a match with her husband and son specifically to watch females play. She explained that she did not want her son only to have ever watched men's sport. Nasima's comments, especially, provide evidence of solidarity spectatorship, where the cause is more important than the team, as identified by Leslie-Walker and Mulvenna (2022). Despite this belief that supporting women's teams was important, the survey results revealed that only 22.9% of the women were members of a women's football supporters club. These statistics warrant further research, but evidence suggests that social media promotion and creating a sense of community within supporters' groups can increase membership (Leslie-Walker & Mulvenna, 2022).

However, there was concern about the England women's team and how the lack of diversity made it difficult for them to be true role models. Natalie explicitly stated that 'they [the players] can't really be like true role models' because they do not represent minority ethnic women well. Sandra said she 'would never go to a Lionesses game unless they diversify' and criticised the players for not speaking out. This comment is further evidence of the cause being more important than the team, albeit in a reverse way to the above. This echoes the findings by Gupta (2021) that the visibility of similar identities acts as an inspiration. However, according to Sophie, 'many women of colour [say] I would never have bought an English shirt, but I've bought an England shirt'. Thus, the women remain role models for some, even if it was seemingly surprising to them. This contradicts research that found that merchandise purchasing is linked with higher levels of team identification (Clarke et al., 2022; Kwon & Armstrong, 2006). Our focus group participants want to support women's football, but as our research shows, there are several barriers. One issue is not seeing themselves represented on the pitch, a problem raised by Leslie-Walker et al. (2024). This lack of representation might also explain the survey results showing that while 84% supported England, 12% supported France, a more ethnically diverse team. These findings confirm similar results in minority ethnic male football supporters that seeing themselves reflected in crowds and teams impacts their connection with a team (Lawrence & Davis, 2019). In reference to intersectionality, the interconnectedness of race-gendered and other identities is paramount to the study. As highlighted by Sandra a lack of affiliation for her and others to the England team, was due to the lack of diversity on the pitch being unreflective of her identity (Carter-Francique, 2020) and potentially the engagement expected of her as an England supporter.

Performativity and the FA

A key theme from the survey and focus groups revolved around performativity and tokenism. The focus groups revealed significant adverse reactions to the marketing. For example, Sandra felt the Commonwealth Games must have had excellent marketing. She explains: 'I saw … a lot of brown people in the crowd in Birmingham, and London is more diverse, but, I mean, yet we struggle. So I think football could learn a lot from the Commonwealth Games'. Vicky was concerned that some of the marketing was just the same as it was for men's football and, as such, attracted the same, less diverse, crowds as men's matches. However, she and three others were concerned that marketing executives 'try to ramp up the diversity as much as possible, and I think we do see a lot of tokenism'. Similarly, Eve referred to some of the attempts at diversity as 'performative'. Thus, there is a difficult line for marketers to straddle between emphasising inclusivity and not appearing tokenistic or performative. Eve considered some of the advertising to be a 'bit more like a slick marketing exercise; a bit contrived'. The performativity of organisations is a frustration for minority ethnic individuals across other sports, including the hiring practices of the National Football League (NFL) (Cunningham, 2022), and the NFL playing the Black national anthem (Bland, 2020). Deeper engagement with underrepresented communities will reduce these perceptions. Intersectionality theory aims to accentuate the requirements of structural and/or policy change. The above notion of potential tokenistic actions to conceal racial and gendered discrimination is unacceptable. Therefore, inclusive marketing practices and diversity training that diminishes such acts endeavours to form equitable practices.

Open text boxes on the questionnaire relating to the differences respondents noticed in marketing for the tournament revealed different answers. Seven answers highlighted the focus on gender within the tournament's marketing, with some praising the focus on gender equality and others criticising the focus on the players' personal lives and appearances. Seven answers related to the efforts to diversify audiences, with some praising the marketing for broadening the audience, particularly the inclusion of families, and others critiquing the lack of ethnic diversity within the content. Within the focus groups, Sandra, Eve, and Aaliyah appreciated attempts to show diversity in promotional videos for the UWE. However, this was only one part of the story.

Issues of representation were important to the focus group participants, and the video elicitation drew out contradictory thoughts. Six women (Sandra, Eve, Vicky, Aminah, Salma, and Nasima) commented that while the video had good diversity, it was not reflected in the team. This was echoed in the questionnaire which asked how many players from a minority ethnic background they saw in the last fixture they watched. However, it is unclear which team they were watching (Table 5).

However, several participants acknowledged that this lack of diversity extended beyond just the women on the field. Aaliyah commented it was also an issue in 'coaching

Table 5. Minority Ethnic Representation on the Pitch.

Question	0	1	2	3	5+
In the last fixture you watched, how many players did you see playing on the pitch from a minority ethnic background	6 (15.4%)	16 (41%)	11 (28.2%)	4 (10.3%)	2 (5%)

(M = 3.10, SD = 2.05).

and just general figures around the games, like through punditry or whatever else'. Sophie also acknowledged that the Lionesses' structure does not demonstrate diversity. While Vicky sees this lack of diversity as representative of the FA, Eve directly links diversity on the field and in the stands. When asked how to make the crowd more diverse, she said the 'obvious answer [is] having more diversity in the team itself'.

There were also negative comments about the video. Nazreen commented, 'Where are the Black players in this?' and felt they were not promoted the same way as the White players. Similarly, Aminah noted that when the girl on the video showed the cards with players on, 'it was just the white females, and it just emphasised that people of colour are still kind of in the background'. More concerning for the FA is the overriding opinion that the video was tokenistic and performative. Eve commented that she is often cynical about these sorts of advertising and that it is 'performative for these big events rather than it's been there all along through the journey', further describing it as a 'tick box' exercise. Three participants (Nazreen, Vicky, Natalie) specifically used the word tokenism/tokenistic, with Natalie calling it 'tokenism 101'. Both Vicky and Aaliyah imagined the marketing team sitting around a table and coming up with the concept to appear diverse. The video made Natalie 'quite angry' because she felt that the money spent to make the video could be spent 'investing in community engagement'. Marketing strategies in sports are often the result of the organisational culture, which can impact social innovation (Matic, 2022). Consequently, the FA may want to reflect on how its culture and workforce diversity impacts the authenticity of work in this area. For our participants, the video appears to be a cynical attempt to present football in a more diverse way than it is.

Part of this cynicism is linked to some participants' beliefs that the FA has not fully resolved past racism problems. Sophie remarked about the issues surrounding the former England women's team manager, Mark Sampson. Despite the FA reviewing charges towards Sampson over discriminatory language, Sophie felt they never addressed the situation adequately. She acknowledged that 'other national governing bodies have come out retrospectively like the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) and apologised for how things were treated at the time'. She believes that similar actions from the FA would help. Her feelings over what happened have contributed to her 'tug-of-war' feeling about the women's national side. Natalie felt the same and stated that the FA 'need to address, like, some of the legacies of racism that has happened'. As Ratna (2014) explains, racism within football reminds individuals that they are not welcome in the space. Therefore, a 'tug-of-war' feeling results from a hybrid of their homeland and a presentation of British culture.

A lack of cultural awareness

Because of a lack of a deeper awareness of cultural issues that may have led to the performativity and tokenism discussed in the previous sections, our participants voiced several concerns about barriers to their spectatorship. Several focus group participants highlighted alcohol as a reason for avoiding football matches. Eve noted the perception that 'alcohol is pushed as such an integral part of British sporting culture match-day experiences'. For Nazreen, Aminah, and Nasima, not wanting to have contact with alcohol was a reason to avoid fan zones at the tournament. Nazreen would not take

her nieces and nephews to these zones because of the presence of alcohol. Thus, some people whom the tournament should inspire are excluded, echoing research in other sports where similar issues occur (Dun, 2014; Fletcher & Spracklen, 2012). Salma watched the final in a pub, acknowledging that 'with the pubs at football games, they tend not to chuck alcohol because you're inside'. Her concern is not about being around alcohol but about religious observances to avoid physical contact.

Alcohol issues are not just related to religion but also the fear of increased aggression from drunk individuals, something that scares Nazreen. Nasima commented: 'I know [that alcohol] puts off a lot of Muslim people from going to football'. Aminah and Eve wished there were alcohol-free zones, with Aminah willing to pay for the privilege. These women are dedicated to football yet cannot engage fully; therefore they may need to advocate together for environs that attain to their needs when consuming football.

Focus group participants also identified access to prayer rooms as a structural barrier for Muslim women. Nasima refers to this as a 'massive, massive downfall', having never seen any. Salma mentioned that Arsenal's Emirates stadium had a space, and Aminah had been able to pray at Stadium MK, but only because she knew someone who worked there. She also explained that Wembley had a space when she attended conferences, but that room was unavailable during the tournament. Both Nasima and Aminah agreed that access to prayer rooms would encourage more minority ethnic women to attend matches, especially in winter when prayers are closer together. Aminah spoke of the discomfort of praying on the streets and being discreet to avoid any acts of racism and abuse. While Nasima mentioned that she had never asked about a prayer room at her local club, Salma opined, 'We shouldn't have to ask'. Sophie mentioned that, through following a lot of football clubs on Twitter and LinkedIn, she sees that many of the male teams have prayer rooms, especially in areas with high Muslim populations, but this has not been extended to women's clubs. In many cases, Muslims have to reconcile conflicts between their culture's normal practices and their beliefs (Fletcher & Spracklen, 2012; Nakamura, 2017; Thorpe et al., 2022). It is apparent that intersectional theory encourages minority ethnic women who are simultaneously marginalised, to contest intersecting oppressions faced within society and locate ways in which they can promote social justice strategies for gender equality and anti-racism.

Women's football is different to men's football

While several women in the focus groups stated that women's football needed to be more aligned with men's football when it comes to stadiums, there was broad acknowledgement that governing bodies should not treat the men's and women's game the same. Vicky stated, 'What's being done in women's football is just trying to replicate exactly what's being done in men's football' and that the FA believes that if they market the women's game in the same way as the men's 'then the game will grow as well'. Natalie was more explicitly negative about the idea of replicating men's football to women's football than Vicky, as she mentioned:

We can't fall into that trap of just trying to recreate like a popular following of England that we have done with the men. We have to do some things that are a bit different, that are gonna be more inclusive, and then people probably feel more likely to attend.

She thought it was important that there is an attempt to 'define what they want the culture of supporting England women's football to be'. There is a clear, difficult balancing act for the FA here in attracting as many spectators as possible to women's football but ensuring that the same mechanisms of inequality do not exhibit themselves in women's football.

Natalie believed that the attempts to mimic the men's game were part of the reason for having a lot of alcohol sponsorship. She was concerned that following the same pattern as male games would result in a 'lad culture'. Sandra, Vicky and Natalie mentioned food and drink, stating that it is predominantly burgers, hot dogs, chips, and pints. Sandra said that women prefer variety, and more consideration of female spectators would have been beneficial. Eve mentioned the 'uninspiring and insipid' food and lack of anywhere to sit at the fan zones and how she was glad that she had bought her own food into the stadium. She suggested more music, street food, and information about the 'story of the history of how we got to this point in time', would have been good. Sandra felt that 'the female Euros needs to be a different mindset', and she felt 'they [the organisers] forgot'.

Two women mentioned what they thought could be learned from other sports and mega-events. Eve had attended several events at the Commonwealth Games and spoke of the fact that there were DJs and people doing live interviews and updating spectators on what had been happening over the week. She also spoke about a greater choice of food at venues. Sandra echoed these thoughts and said a lot could be learnt from the Commonwealth Games. Eve also spoke about attending Netball Super League fixtures and how they have different themed days that 'celebrate the countries that the players come from … or like LGBT theme days'. This feeling of inclusion, 'no drunkenness', and a diverse crowd helped Eve feel comfortable attending sports fixtures again after a negative experience with racism. Making a more concerted effort to make women's sports different from men's, including celebrating marginalised communities, can help to reduce the feelings of performativity and tokenism seen in previous sections. As Dunn (2014) notes, the 'malestream' of football fandom highlights masculine hegemony, including deviant acts relating to alcohol, violence, and hooliganism. Our participants want to see these issues avoided in the women's game.

Discussion and conclusion

Summary of key findings and contribution to literature

The intersectional approach undertaken in this study has encouraged a deeper understanding of the engagement of minority ethnic women in football stadia and the ways in which discriminatory behaviour such as stereotypes and prejudices may enact within football culture. Utilisation of this framework advances sociological thinking, by uncovering the varied social identities and the structures of oppression at play that negate a sense of belonging within the football community for minority ethnic women (Calow, 2022).

Participants in the survey and focus groups were troubled by some aspects of the UWE marketing. The fact that only 25.6% of our survey respondents attend women's football matches in person suggests that more strategies are required to enable them to attend.

Supporting from afar can be the result of negative media representation and oppressive behaviours (Lawrence & Davis, 2019). Academic literature makes several suggestions for increasing attendance at women's football matches, including creating a more personal connection between players and their young fans through events such as signing autographs, talking to young athletes, and providing free tickets (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2020; Wakefield et al., 2018). Additionally, increasing general awareness, especially through social media, is recommended to attract more spectators to women's football matches (Hallman et al., 2022; Meier et al., 2016). However, these need to be complemented with other initiatives (Meier et al., 2016). These women are keen to engage in football spectatorship. However, appropriate interventions are required to engage and sustain women from diverse communities.

The women from our focus groups are committed to supporting women's football, yet the numerous barriers mentioned in the Findings section make it difficult. Salma was acutely aware of the need to discuss these issues because 'you know, the race debate, the gender debate, all of it is very nuanced because we're all so different. And, I think if we don't talk about it, it's not gonna change'. Our survey shows a limited number of minority ethnic women are part of a WSL or WSL1 women's supporters' group. Consequently, a continued positive partnership with the Football Supporters' Association is required to increase this number and provide a greater sense of belonging for minority ethnic women. Greater contact between key stakeholders and women from these communities is needed to ensure women's football is an inclusive space that challenges discriminatory behaviour.

Managerial and policy implications

As a result of our findings, we make the following recommendations. In terms of immediate action points, we advise the following:

(1) Greater contact between football's governing body and minority ethnic fans. Natalie hoped that the outcome of this research would result in 'some specific interventions to … go out of the way to include people' and 'welcome communities into women's football'. She commented that there did not appear to be a 'proactive outreach to talk about getting tickets or a push in communities', unlike her previous experiences with male football tournaments.

(2) Better promotional opportunities to encourage minority ethnic fans. Nazreen commented that subsidised tickets for football matches and coaching sessions for girls could be beneficial. Aminah suggested that 'instead of advertising, I don't know, alcohol or something else, they should advertise how to get more women in'. But it remains a delicate balancing act between making the sport financially stable and ensuring that it does not become dominated by white males.

(3) Heightened understanding of cultural sensitivity within stadiums. Diversity and inclusion should be at the forefront when planning fan zones in women's football, including areas such as 'race', religion, disability, and childcare commitments. As Sandra commented, 'They [the organisers] don't understand the difference between men and women … Women supporters have different needs, like how many toilets were there?' This further emphasises that it is not possible to treat

the women's game in the same way as the men's, which is further commented on by Pope et al. (2022).

There are also cultural issues that will take longer to implement. However, we recommend the following:

(1) That governing bodies, such as the FA, need to work closely with the communities they want to reach. This will help reduce perception of performativity on the part of governing bodies.
(2) There needs to be more work to resolve the structural barriers within women's sport that has led to the low visibility of ethnically diverse women on the pitch and in administration roles. As this research has demonstrated, identifying with those similar to them is essential to making minority ethnic women feel included in football. Yet there is a gap in the literature about team identification in women's sports (Clarke et al., 2022).
(3) More work needs to be undertaken to combat racism in the stands. Including, ensuring that reporting mechanisms are clear for spectators at women's football matches.

Our findings confirm some aspects of previous research, including that racism and religion create barriers to minority ethnic women's spectatorship. However, it also begins to fill a gap in team identification literature and explores the nuances of solidarity spectatorship. It also highlights the importance of governing bodies communicating with marginalised communities to ensure that actions are not considered tokenistic or performative. Most importantly, this work helps fill a gap in the literature about minority ethnic female spectators of women's football in the United Kingdom.

Limitations and future directions

This paper represents an important step in understanding the barriers that minority ethnic women face when trying to spectate at women's football matches. However, there are limitations to the work. The sample size for the questionnaire and focus groups are small. This has arisen due to low attendance at fixtures by minority ethnic women, something that our participants acknowledged, and author two has experienced as a minority ethnic football fan herself. Additionally, this work has focused only on minority ethnic women. There is a requirement for further exploration of intersecting identities, including minority ethnic men and in other football competitions such as national league football. The focus on the UWE was opportunistic and although it attracted many supporters who are engaged in football fandom, national football may acquire differing viewpoints. Further research is needed to expand upon these findings. Academics and sport organisations should undertake more work to explore why some minority ethnic women choose not to attend football matches. There is also the potential for more intersectional work in this space, looking at issues related to minority ethnic women who may experience intersectional lived identities, such as disability, sexual orientation, and class. Future research by academics should explore the role of clubs and their activities in supporting diversity and inclusion. In addition, extended discussions with current spectators and those who choose not to attend will be critical in gaining deeper insights.

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Disclosure statement

Ethics

Ethical approval was gained on 23 June 2022 from the University's Non-Invasive Research Ethics Panel.

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