

Still the Outsiders?

Women in Sport Journalism

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Abstract

It has long been acknowledged that sport media is a male dominated space, which has served to entrench women sport journalists' position in the industry as outsiders. This research consisted of interviews with 10 women sport journalists working in the UK, exploring their workplace experiences. Drawing on Kanter's (1977) theory of tokenism, findings indicate that women working within men's sport face workplace practices which reinforce their outsider status. Participants discussed workplace harassment and gendered online abuse, numeric inequality, and the additional labor of fact checking and proving themselves to minimise their outsider status. Additionally, this numeric inequality and outsider status leaves women reluctant to raise issues, fearing career jeopardy, thus highlighting the precarious landscape that women face in UK industry. However, there were suggestions that the increasing mediatization of women's sport was indicative of newly emerging journalistic cultures which could lead to the greater acceptance of women in sport journalism.

Keywords: gender, gendered harassment, sport journalism cultures, women journalist, workplace experiences

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Women in Sport Journalism

The increasing semi-professionalization and professionalization of women's sport (see Bowes & Culvin, 2021) in the United Kingdom (UK) has created a momentum and drive for the betterment of women participating in sport, resulting in several high-profile successes. This has led to increasing calls in popular (Women's Sports Trust, 2024) and academic spaces (O'Neil & Mulready, 2015) to increase the media coverage afforded to women's sport, which has repeatedly been found to be problematic in quantity, quality and content (Bruce, 2013).

The demand for increased media coverage of women's sport is interesting when you consider the sport media industry, which – like sport - has historically been male-dominated (Organista et al., 2021). The National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) found that the percentage of women enrolled on sport journalism training courses in the UK has risen from 7% in 2021-2022 to 20% in 2023-2024 (NCTJ, 2024). However, the path facing women in sport journalism is still fraught with challenges and problems. Women are often perceived to be unqualified to work in the industry and must adapt their workplace behaviours to 'blend in' to their workplace environments and reduce their outsider perception from colleagues and audiences (Sheehan & Kitching, 2024).

As such, this research forms part of a larger doctoral research project that is investigating the relationship between women and sport media production in the UK. Following a detailed discussion of previous work on women working in sport media spaces, this paper details the experiences of women currently working within UK sport journalism. It aims to analyze the contemporary experiences of women sport journalists within the context of wider societal changes for women's sport more broadly.

Literature Review

Women as Industry Outsiders

Nearly twenty years ago, Boyle (2006, p. 149) described women as being numerically “woefully under-represented” compared to their male counterparts in sport journalism in all areas of the industry. This is a persistent problem; globally, studies have shown that women consistently represent low levels of sports journalists (Martins & Cerqueira, 2018; Schmidt, 2018; Schoch, 2013), and produce substantially less media coverage on sport, particularly in the UK (Franks & O’Neil, 2016; Schmidt, 2018). Indeed, inequality in authorship is firmly established within sport journalism, with Strong (2007) finding women wrote just 7% of articles in New Zealand newspaper sports pages, whilst the 2011 International Sports Press Survey found just 8% of newspapers globally carried sporting by-lines from women writers (Horky & Nieland, 2011).

Boczek et al. (2022) conducted a longitudinal byline analysis of sports coverage in Germany and found that there was minimal improvement in the number of bylines written by women between 2006-2020, further reinforcing the enduring and problematic nature of sport journalism’s robust systematic issues around gender. Schmidt’s (2018) research problematises the gender balance in sport journalism in the UK, the United States (US), and Australia, where out of 2242 named-author articles, 2128 (94.9%) were written by male sports journalists. Although Schmidt (2018, p. 66) argues that the hegemonic masculinity that can be seen in sports and sport journalism is “not associated with any particular national identity or bounded by any geographic border”, they note that “women were especially less likely to write articles in the United Kingdom”. Schmidt (2018, p. 65) further argues that the “disproportionality” of authorship by men and women writing newspaper articles was “especially dramatic in U.K newspapers”, with just 1.9% of articles being written by women, in comparison to 9.4% and 7.3% in the United States and Australia respectively. It is also significantly lower than the 15% of journalists reporting on “sports, celebrities and arts” in New Zealand (Comrie & McMillan, 2013, p. 204). Franks and O’Neil (2016) further

highlighted this with their longitudinal study, finding women sport writers in British newspapers were responsible for as low as 1% of coverage, and a high of just 2.3%, this positioning the particularly staunch British context of gender inequality in the industry.

In addition to this numeric inequality, over the last 20 years it has been noted that dominant “masculine” cultures are, unsurprisingly, embedded in workplace cultures and practices (Brum & Capraro, 2015; Hardin & Shain, 2006; Organista & Mazur, 2020). According to Claringbould et al. (2004, p. 716), a lack of representation of women in the newsroom, particularly in senior positions, means that the majority white male workforce has “a greater say in what is considered to be organizational common sense”. Hardin and Shain’s (2006, p. 331) focus groups with American women sport journalists identified that participants “voiced commitments to traditional journalism values such as objectivity and news judgement”, which were based on “male standards”. Participants used phrases such as having to have a “thick skin”, a “cool head” and “aggressiveness” to describe qualities needed to be successful in the industry, and downplayed inappropriate behaviours from sports desk and press box colleagues, such as making sexist jokes about women journalists or athletes, as “par for the course” (Hardin & Shain, 2006, pp. 331-332). Such conformity leads to women in sport being “outsiders” by way of gender, but “insiders” through their “adherence to journalistic norms and values”, thus perpetuating the pervading cultural hegemony within this workplace (Hardin & Shain, 2006, p. 323). Hardin and Whiteside (2009) also suggest that women face greater pressure to conform to the masculine cultures of sport journalism, more so than in any other area of journalism, with the lack of women colleagues highlighting their outsider gender status and intensifying the pressure to conform and succeed in the industry. This androcentric conformity is often internalized as normal, and is downplayed by women sport journalists.

Brum and Capraro (2015) use Bourdieu's theory of masculine domination to demonstrate how these androcentric cultures are reinforced, maintaining male power in sport journalism. Women sport journalists in Poland acknowledged that they had to "masculinise" at work in male dominated newsrooms in which male journalists swore, objectified women athletes, and partook in coarse humour, with one participant acknowledging that in this environment they had to "stop being a woman" and became a "work mate" (Organista & Mazur 2020, p. 1118). Participants described their experiences as a "struggle", but rather than challenge such industry issues, found that they needed to "get a very thick skin", and develop a "survival strategy", as well as choosing to ignore what their male colleagues said about them. This leads to women sports journalists finding themselves having to "adapt to the workings of androcentric sports desks" (Organista & Mazur, 2020, p. 1123).

Working Conditions for Women

A body of research demonstrates that the allocation of work within sports media departments is problematic, and based on a gender-hierarchical structure whereby male journalists dominate the prestigious roles (Miloch et al., 2005; Schoch, 2020; Schoch & Ohl, 2021). In this "task hierarchy", male sports carry the most prestige within departments, and therefore males try to monopolize the coverage of those sports, whilst leaving the "dirty jobs", such as "secondary sports and women's sports", which carry less workplace prestige, for women to cover (Schoch & Ohl, 2021, p. 272). Commonly, women are tasked with reporting on human interest elements of sport stories (Schoch, 2020), or were mainly given roles as side-line reporters when they were tasked with covering bigger sporting events such as the Olympics (Organista & Mazur, 2020). This nature of work allocation reinforces the peripheral position of women in sport media departments, whilst maintaining the professional and public reputation of male reporters (Schoch & Ohl, 2021). Male journalists are likely to use this hierarchy of men and women's sport as a justification of continuing to produce

minimal coverage of women's sport, and pushing back on those that suggest promoting it, including women journalists (Schoch & Ohl, 2021).

Research in sport journalism indicates that women are also less trusted, deemed less knowledgeable, and face higher levels of scepticism regarding their competence than male colleagues (Miller & Miller, 1995; Organista & Mazur 2020). 40% of respondents from Miller and Miller's (1995) research suggested that women were expected to know less about sport, simply for being women. Similarly, Organista and Mazur's (2020) research found that women sport journalists felt they were more closely supervised and scrutinized, were less trusted, and needed to continually prove their competency more than their male colleagues due to a perceived lower tolerance for errors within the workplace. Brum and Capraro (2015) also discovered that stereotyped views within organizations led to the assumptions that women lack sporting knowledge, and were expected to use their femininity and physical appearance as an advantage to gain interviews and extract better responses from male interviewees. Beyond traditional sport journalism roles, Litchfield and Redhead's (2015, p. 7) research identified that ex-male athletes dominated analyst or co-commentary positions, which served to maintain a narrative that sees men as "experts" and male sports as the "norm", while discretely side-lining women's involvement in sport. Clearly, this creates an environment in which women feel they must prove to be significantly better than their male colleagues to be accepted in sport journalism.

As sport media increasingly moves into online spaces, there is an expectation for women sport journalists to use social media, where they are more likely to be the recipients of online abuse and hostility (Antunovic, 2019; Chen et al., 2020; Everbach, 2018). This creates an additional self-regulated emotional burden for women working in the industry (Sheehan & Kitching, 2024).

The literature review poses an interesting positioning of the research of women in sport journalism. The academic scholarship focusses on women's experience in sport journalism as if the industry is a singular, monolithic cultural sphere. This is largely because of the dominance of men's sport globally, which has meant that the field of sport journalism has largely been the field of men's sport journalism. The wider body of previous research focusses, therefore, predominately on women sport journalists' experiences in men's sport settings. However, the context of UK sport journalism – and in other global contexts - has changed, with more media coverage of women's sport which has afforded new employment opportunities in the industry. This research acknowledges changing gendered complexities offered by the emerging opportunities to cover women's sport as well as men's sport, and whether this changes the experiences of women's sport journalists.

So, this research poses the following question: has the wider success and acceptance of women's sport more broadly changed the sport journalism profession for women, and does this offer more positive experiences for women in the industry, or, do the hegemonically masculine spaces of sport journalism resist such changes?

Theoretical Underpinning: Tokenism

Since the publication of Kanter's (1977) work *Men and Women of the Corporation*, tokenism has been a theory widely used to study women who work in male dominated industries. Often, women in such industries have discussed the problematic workplace cultures and experiences that they have had to negotiate, which Kanter (1977) attributes to their numeric underrepresentation – their 'token' status' – within a workplace. Here, the term "token" refers to a subgroup (in this case women) within a workplace that operates in a numerically underrepresented position (15% or below), which leads it to being perceived as different from other groups within the same organization (Stichman et al., 2010). The token status and working experiences of women could be improved, according to Kanter (1977), if

the numeric representation of women improved beyond 15% (Zimmer, 1988). However, academics have been critical of applying a specific figure at which a group becomes tokenistic or not, with Stichman et al. (2010) suggesting that workplace inequalities pertaining to gender are more complex.

Kanter (1977) suggests three main effects from being in a token group. Firstly, tokens receive heightened visibility due to their differences with members of the social group which results in them standing out and/or put under additional scrutiny (Stichman et al., 2010). Consequently, this visible underrepresentation then leads to additional labor compared to the dominant group in order to fit in and prove that they deserve their role (Kanter, 1977). Tokens also experience polarization, the process where dominants exaggerate both their commonality and the token's differences (Kanter, 1977). This is due to the perceived threat of tokens to their accustomed working cultures (Yoder, 1991). Assimilation is a process where the token group's characteristics are generalised and stereotyped by the dominant group within the workplace, which often leads to pigeon-holing tokens into roles deemed to be gender appropriate (Kanter, 1977). Dominant groups also see individual tokens as representative of their entire social groups (Wharton, 2011).

Token groups taking on such limited and pseudo-prescribed work is often detrimental to their career progression, as this can lead to a "role encapsulation", with tokens often finding themselves in "role traps" leading to limited future job progression (Wharton, 2011, p.83). Tokenism has been used previously within the context of sport journalism to analyze women's experiences in the US context (Hardin and Whiteside, 2009). Here, the researchers found that sports journalists conformed to the 'ideal worker' standard and faced pressure to overachieve in order to justify their belonging in the industry (Hardin and Whiteside, 2009). However, occurring in 2009, this research took place before the considerable changes of professionalization in women's sport.

Methodology

This research used an interpretative, qualitative approach. Interpretivism is an epistemological position in which participants construct reality based on their experiences and interactions within their specific social environment (Bryman, 2016). Qualitative research is a form of academic inquiry that uses interpretivist approaches to allow researchers to “study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzil & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). Using this approach for this research enabled the specific experiences of women sport journalists in the UK to be explored, allowing participants the opportunity to discuss their experiences within their workplace context.

Researcher Positionality

The lead researcher had worked previously for six years in sport journalism and communications, and so has some insider knowledge of the industry, including the inequalities and discriminatory practices within the industry. However, the lead researcher identifies as a cisgender male, and so does not have direct knowledge of experiencing gender inequality from the perspective of women within sport journalism. According to Thomas (2017, p. 2), “there are few comprehensive reflections of the research process from male researchers – and even fewer from those in research settings populated largely by women.” There is, however, a wider body of research which explores the issues of women working with male participants in academic fields, which has led to the view that men have an assumed authority when working in any academic spaces. Previous research has put this down to a gender blindness, with Poulton (2012) suggesting that male researchers often fail to acknowledge how their gender status may impact their subsequent research. Thomas (2017, p. 3), however, has suggested that male participants exploring issues of feminism can be seen as a pseudo ‘outsider’, in which the male researcher can be seen as a confidant, whilst

also celebrated for working in a “foreign territory and as exhibiting attributes – such as care and compassion – that were seen as unnatural for them”. Thomas (2017) then calls for male researchers to discuss and debate how their gender takes shape in interpersonal dynamics in the field.

In this research, gender as a factor in the practicalities of interviews was considered. To ensure that participants felt safe, online interviews were conducted to allow interviewees to participate from their own perceived place of safety. As a researcher, presenting participants with a non-threatening, or non-expert, outlook on the interview can help participants to feel less guarded (Cassell, 2005). In this sense, interviews were conducted with neutrality from the interviewer, and without casting opinions, judgements or without highlighting their previous experience in the industry setting, in order to maintain the position of the confidant outsider.

Data Collection

In qualitative inquiry, Smith and Sparkes (2016) suggest that the conversations developed in qualitative interviews provide rich data about the social and personal lives of research participants, allowing them to share stories, perspectives, and emotions of their social world experiences. The qualitative interview, therefore, enables the interviewee and participant(s) to jointly construct knowledge of their social worlds (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Following a review of literature, a preliminary semi-structured interview script was generated, after which a pilot interview was carried out with a women sports journalist from the UK to ascertain the suitability of questions for the participants within the study.

In total, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with UK-based sports journalists, with nine via Zoom and one via telephone, lasting between 45-90 minutes. Participants were recruited via email or direct messaging on social media. Approximately 40 journalists that met the criteria were contacted. UK-based journalists working in print/online

or broadcast sport journalism were identified and privately approached. Following a signal of interest, participants were invited to schedule an online meeting with the first author.

Participants were asked a series of questions about their experiences of working in sport journalism. Questions focused on: biographical information about their sport journalism careers; experiences of working cultures in UK sport journalism; problematic workplace issues faced (such as harassment or gendered abuse); and whether they would encourage other women to enter sport journalism. Each participant had different levels of experience and job roles within the industry (see Table 1), and semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow follow-up questions to be tailored to the responses of each individual.

Participants

All participants worked in the UK in television, radio, print, or online journalism, in media roles including journalists, broadcasters, reporters, contributors, or editors, and either in a full-time, part-time or freelance capacity. Participants varied in their level of experience within the industry, from two years of experience to more than 20 years, and worked either exclusively in men's sport, exclusively in women's sport, or across a combination of the two. Those who worked exclusively in women's sport had another job that supported their sport journalism careers, whereas those working exclusively in men's sport did not. Participants were anonymized by removing any identifying features from their transcripts and were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Due to the low number of women sport journalists, particularly in the UK (Franks & O'Neil, 2016; Schmidt, 2018), specific job titles, occupational work identifiers (sports, leagues and teams covered, for example) and demographic identifiers other than gender were omitted from the data.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis was utilized, a widely used method in qualitative sport and exercise research (Braun & Clarke,

2019). This is an interpretative approach to analyzing qualitative data that relies on the identification and analysis of themes, which are based on initial codes within a data set (Braun & Clarke 2021). Braun and Clarke (2019) have warned against the use of non-reflexive and blended approaches of different forms of thematic analysis that do not follow a set process. As such, reflexive thematic analysis was used because the six-step method, while not intended to be a prescribed checklist, allows for a more structured and robust method of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Each interview was transcribed manually by the lead researcher to facilitate the first step of familiarization with the dataset, after which each transcript was re-read and checked for accuracy. Each interview was then analyzed, and initial codes generated. From these initial codes, themes were created, refined and named (see table 2). Following this, the themes relevant to this research question were organized, and the write up presented below.

Results and Discussion

Broadly, participants working in male dominated spaces discussed being seen as outsiders, in part due to a staunch numeric inequality within their industry. This supports an established body of research which has found women representing less than 15% of the sport journalism workforce (Brum & Capraro, 2015; Comrie & McMillan, 2013; Martins & Cerqueira, 2018; Ortega & San Miguel, 2016). This is consistent with Kanter's (1977) theory of tokenism, which suggests that tokenistic groups under 15% endure problematic workplace cultures.

In the context of this research, participants outlined key workspaces as newsrooms, press boxes, and press conferences, with a prevailing view that the numeric difference led to them feeling uncomfortable and out of place in these male-dominated spaces. This manifests in multiple ways; numeric inequality in the profession meant that the resultant workplace conditions were akin to an old boy's club (1), which brought issues of both harassment (2)

and a sense that women felt the need to perform additional labor to prove themselves as sports journalists (3). However, participants did speak about the potential for a change in culture (4), in part due to the increasing success and prominence of women's sport.

The Old Boy's Club

A gender imbalance in the workplace was raised as being particularly problematic by participants, particularly for women working in men's sport. Similarly to findings from previous scholarly activity (e.g, Organista & Mazur, 2020), which found that numeric inequality led to problematic workplace experiences for women in sport journalism, participants in this study expressed their minority status played a significant role in them feeling uncomfortable, facing intimidating environments and "macho", "old boys" cultures in areas such as press boxes, press conferences, and male dominated newsrooms. This was commonplace for participants that worked in men's sport spaces, which led to a pervasive feeling of being an outsider, where several participants noted they were often the only woman. For example, Claire noted that in her working environment, it was common for her to be the only woman when working out in the field:

"I'll sit in the media room and I'm the only woman in there. I'm the only one.

Because there's so many people, the guys that do the cameras, they take photos, the guys that do the TV cameras recording people, the commentators, the producers, the reporters and it's literally everybody. And I've had experiences and I've been quite literally the one and only woman in a room of about 100 people. I just feel very out of place sometimes and uncomfortable."

Clearly, despite reports of increasing numbers of women in sport media workplaces, this does not necessarily exist in practice all the time, and beyond those in front of the camera or writing news reports. Katie has a similar experience:

“You look at the press box, there are very few women. And the status quo hasn’t changed in like 30 years. It’s probably pretty much as many women in the press box now as there were 30 years ago.”

Claire described her workplace as “a little bit toxic... kind of toxic masculinity.” She said that she received regular comments about her gender status in the newsroom which made her question whether she deserved her job role, or whether she got it to add gender diversity to her workplace. She added:

“There was a comment made just before I started working there...which was, ‘it’s nice to kind of have you’, just to have a woman on the team. It was a bit like, did I get chosen because I’m good at my job, or because I’m a woman? It’s sort of like, oh, thank God we’ve got enough women in. It did make me feel a little bit - because it’s been a few comments like that - like I’ve only got this job because I added a little bit of diversity and representation. And so that’s the stuff I don’t really like about it. I do feel a little bit like an odd one out and sometimes like I didn’t deserve my job.”

Similarly, Abby also highlighted the demographic dynamics of the press box as problematic. She described being in such a male dominated environment as making it difficult for her to fit in “as a young female”, with men’s sport press boxes a “very intimidating environment to go into”. This made her question her sense of belonging in such spaces, describing experiences of imposter syndrome. She elaborates:

“You’re there with a lot of older, more experienced people, most of them men and it is daunting, and it is kind of intimidating. But, also, I think it’s the self-doubt that you have yourself about whether you’re good enough to be in the room, and a bit of impostor syndrome creeping in.”

Observable in these examples is one of the impacts of Kanter’s (1977) tokenism model: polarization. Here, the differences of the token, in this case the women sports

journalists, are contrasted with the established, dominant, masculine cultures of the sport journalism workplace. The established 'old-boys' workplace culture positions the women sports journalists as outsiders from the off, and thus excludes them from the dominant social group because of their established, male-dominated social norms.

In addition to articulating the lack of women journalists in the field and on news desks, it was also noted by participants that there was a lack of women in leadership positions. Fiona discusses the impact of this:

"They're [women] not the ones in power, for the most part, so the editorial priorities and decision making and what gets run, what's important, what gets prioritized are still being decided by the same traditional people. That's not being decided by women or people of color, or young people or disabled people. That tends to be decided still by older white men so, in a way, you've come into a system, but you're still part of that same system and those voices then become the most vulnerable for the most part, because you are still kind of at the bottom rung of the ladder."

Clearly, according to Fiona, this meant that the cultures of sport journalism were not being impacted by women, and that the traditional, homogenous sports journalists (white, heterosexual, middle-class and middle-aged men) that have dominated the industry are still seen as largely responsible for shaping and setting the workplace cultures and practices of the industry. This demonstrates that the UK context is consistent with previous research from Lapchick (2015), whose Associated Press Sports Editors (APSE) Racial and Gender Report Card found that over 90% of sports editors were male.

A similar sentiment was shared by Katie, who noted that numeric inequality in leadership positions also served to perpetuate hidden forms of sexism in the industry.

"You've always been made to feel like you've got to be the best at your job to have any chance of succeeding long term, because there's a lot more we have to overcome.

The male counterparts just having the confidence to go on a call where you might be with thirty men and it's just you. You're the only female knowing when you can speak up, what you can say, navigating through all of that, and I think there's a lot of people that get very put off from... they don't get the opportunity to begin with, but when/if they do, they don't hack it because they can't cope with the hidden sexism, really, that still exists. Things are changing, but until we see more women in positions of power within sport journalism, things are never really going to fully change because we've still got teams of all male recruiters hiring the next generation."

According to Claringbould et al. (2004, p. 716), a lack of women in newsrooms, particularly in senior positions, means that the majority white male workforce has "a greater say in what is considered to be organizational common sense." These experiences outline that the numeric inequality felt by women working in men's sport journalism serves to highlight their token, outsider status within such workplaces (Kanter, 1977). As will now be discussed in more detail, women working in these environments were met with both issues of sexism and harassment, as well as a skepticism about the legitimacy of their presence.

Workplace Harassment and Gendered Online Abuse

This theme discusses the problematic workplace harassment and online abuse suffered by participants, particularly when working in men's sport. The tokenistic position of participants highlights their contrast in relation to male colleagues (Kanter, 1977). Participants noted incidents that had occurred out in the field and in person (see also, Creedon, 1994; Hardin & Shain, 2005), indicating this is a persistent problem for women working in sport journalism. This ranged from microaggressions, such as sexist 'banter' and sexual innuendos, to overt sexist harassment and abuse. For example, Sally mentioned that when she was on duty at a sports venue covering men's sport that she was assumed to be waiting for her male partner:

“I was just waiting to interview [male athlete] and someone came over and they were like, ‘oh, are you waiting for your boyfriend, love?’ I’m just trying to give you a bit of a picture of the variety of comments, and to be honest, those things, I didn’t like how they made me feel.”

Instantly, Sally’s presence as a woman in a space usually dominated by men again shows Kanter’s (1977) notion of assimilation, with her difference in gender immediately highlighted in the setting, demonstrating how the legitimacy of a woman operating within this sport media context is questioned. Claire also spoke about similar experiences in the workplace, adding:

“I have found issues before when I’ve been to matches and I’ve gone to the interview room afterwards, and they’ve said to me before, like, ‘Hello, darling. What you doing here, are you on work experience?’ I was like, work experience? I do the same job as you. But yeah, I think that I’m slightly younger as well. He just sort of saw me and he just automatically made a comment, probably without even thinking. I don’t think he was trying to be rude, but it felt like I didn’t belong.”

Sally then discussed receiving inappropriate comments with sexualised connotations from male colleagues in male sports media spaces. In one case, she mentioned comments received in a press box at a men’s sport fixture.

“It’s [the press box] tiny. You’ve got a squeeze in. If you’re last in, then you’ve got, you know... Everyone’s got to stand up and you have to sort of edge past, you’re brushing past people’s bodies. It’s quite awkward. You’ve got to decide if you’re going to put your back to them, or your front through them. Like, what’s the worst? What’s best the way? I don’t know. And then finally I got to sit down in my seat and the plug sockets are always like strewn around on the floor to plug your laptop in. It’s horrible. And anyway, as we’re scrambling around on the floor, this guy next to me

and he's much... you know... old enough to be my dad type guy. He said to me, 'Oh, while you're down there, love'. And I've never heard that saying before, so I didn't actually know what it meant. Initially I thought it was something to do with cleaning, or something like that. And then I mentioned it to a couple of other women, they were like well... obviously. I didn't know what to say to him and you know I was just shocked that someone would ever say something like that."

Similar experiences were shared by Katie, who has worked within sport journalism for 11 years, who described receiving similar comments when working in men's sport.

"When I first came into sports journalism, there was always, like, it's hard to describe it. But yeah, like seedy comments, maybe because I was quite young going into like a man's world. And it was always a couple of journalists that have got reputations for that, they might say like, let's say, something that you feel a bit awkward around. And then you'd speak to another girl and they'd be like, 'oh yeah, they've got a reputation for that'. Like, 'stay clear' kind of thing. I wouldn't experience that now because like I'm older and [omitted]. People wouldn't dare. And I'm more senior now as well, but I still hear from younger journalist colleagues that it is still quite like that."

Abby told a story of noticing unwanted physical contact during a game from a male colleague in a press box. She noted that "it wasn't just an accident", and as the behaviour increased in frequency, she became aware that it was deliberate and made it hard for her to concentrate on her work. She noted:

"You've just seen the opportunity of sitting next to a young woman and you don't understand the consequences of your actions in terms of you're making me feel very uncomfortable. But to you, this is something that you're deciding to do because you can. That's the one time I've had, where I've been.... I didn't tell anyone about it, but

I was a bit like, that wouldn't obviously happen to me if I was if I was a young male journalist.”

In relation to Kanter's (1977) tokenism, two elements could be interpreted here. Firstly, women experienced polarization (Kanter, 1977) when receiving unwanted physical contact and sexualised messages, which they suggested that men would not receive, simply for being an outsider woman in such male dominated spaces. Participants stressed it was their gender difference that resulted in being targeted in such cases. Secondly, assimilation, with Abby not raising concerns about this incident at the time to align with the expected cultural norms.

Women sport journalists working in men's sport also noted that male colleagues would often send unprofessional private messages to them. This was commonplace among women in men's sport, and these responses were awkward for participants to deal with, as there was a balance between rejecting such advances, while also negotiating with an unwillingness to seem rude and potentially jeopardizing career progression. This also shows the assimilation of women in sport journalism to conform to the dominant group norms.

Issues for women sports journalists expanded beyond the scope of the physical workplace and ventured onto online social media platforms (see, Sheehan & Kitching, 2024). Participants noted the significance that social media has on their careers, with Jade outlining that it was “absolutely fundamental - I wouldn't have my career without social media.” Participants said that it was helpful for networking and promoting work to gain further opportunities and allow a greater reach for work produced. However, despite social media being highlighted as a career necessity, the participants also discussed the challenges of online cultures. Katie, for example, received online hate messages when working on men's sport.

“I’ve experienced harassment in terms of like online abuse as well for reporting. Like trolls. That’s also a form of harassment. So yeah, it’s like both ways. And I’m used to it. I used to have it a lot. So I’d be creating outlines that I’d written while doing my [job] and you’d get, ‘get back in the kitchen’. And then you’d get comments like, ‘yeah, but you’d smash her, wouldn’t you though?’ ‘I wouldn’t, because she’s ugly’, and like you’d be tagged in stuff all because you’d written something that someone may or may not have agreed with. And I’m not bothered by the abuse. I don’t really care, but people around me are bothered by that, so I think it’s just best if I don’t do it [respond] because then I’m not going to upset family members who see it and then attempt to jump in and defend me and stuff. It’s just easiest if I don’t do that”.

Some journalists experienced sexualized messages on social media. For example, Claire discussed having to make amendments to her social media accounts, like closing her direct messages, to avoid receiving inappropriate and often sexualized messages from the public.

“I was getting fans saying sexist comments and secondly, sexual comments, and I didn’t really understand that. I was like, I’m literally talking about [sport]. I’m doing a [sport] piece. I don’t understand why you think it’s appropriate either to just send me a direct message (DM). I closed my DM’s after all that because I was getting really inappropriate messages talking about how I looked and like asking me out and stuff. I’m just doing my job. I don’t like that at all. And in the comments, people were tagging their friends, saying ‘oh this reporter could be your bit of fluff’ to quote one of the guys and I thought, firstly I can see that, that’s my own comments section, and it just made me feel really sort of. I don’t know, just a little bit disgusted. That’s been really common and having those experiences, and it does still bother me now. I’d like it not to, but it’s just something that seems to come with the job and it’s something I

experience that my male colleagues don't experience because I've spoken to [male colleague] about it a few times. But they've never had anything of the sort."

There was also a reluctance from women to report issues around harassment. There was a perception that doing so could negatively impact career progression, with Jade suggesting, "it's upsetting because I feel like it's going to affect my career potentially, and my access to players to get interviews and stuff". Fiona agreed, saying "You're working your way up that ladder, so to voice concerns can be difficult because you are the most vulnerable in terms of your job or tenure security."

This highlights the precarious and challenging position women working within the field are facing. Some journalists were aware of the processes that existed within their workplaces to report abuse or harassment, but others had no knowledge of official channels to raise complaints. In most cases, issues would be reported to editors (if occurring in the workplace) or to important gatekeepers (if working within the field, in a press box for example). This means that issues reported would have to be dealt with by individuals who were directly involved in, and often responsible for, work allocation or granting access to sporting events, leaving such women in a professionally compromising position.

The results here demonstrate that women working in sport media are often subjected to forms of harassment in the workplace (Creedon, 1994; Everbach, 2018; Hardin & Shain, 2005; Kitching & Sheehan, 2024), and by forms of online abuse (Antunovic, 2019; Burch et al., 2023; Demir & Ayhan, 2022; Everbach, 2018). However, this research shows that women working in *men's* sport journalism are particularly more likely to be the recipients of workplace and online abuse.

The Additional Labor of Fact Checking and Proving Yourself

Participants described how their outsider status led them to feel the need to 'prove themselves' to be accepted within the industry. Katie noted that "I always used to feel as a

woman in the industry that I had to be more knowledgeable than my male colleagues.”

Similarly, Abby mentioned that she found being in male dominated spaces “very intimidating”, which caused her “to go away and learn the laws of the game a lot more than I did and kind of educate myself”. She also added “you have to work twice as hard as a woman to kind of get to the same level as a man.”

Participants felt that male colleagues were less likely to be fact-checked and were afforded more leniency when they did make mistakes in their work. This led to women often second-guessing, or double-checking, facts and figures in their work, and added pressure for women to be more cautious around the information that they used, whilst feeling pressured to justify their knowledge to male colleagues. Claire, for example, said:

“If [male colleagues] say something about sport, their word is taken for it. But if I say something sport-wise, I'm questioned on it. ‘I’ll have to double check’, or, ‘how do you know that?’ Or, ‘Are you sure?’ ...I feel like I need to check all my research and everything, like, again and again and again to make sure I get it right. Because if I get one thing wrong, ‘this is why women shouldn't be in sport’.

Sally also said that she had experienced this in men’s sport journalism, saying:

“If you asked a question in a press conference and often you were the only woman, your question would be questioned. Which was very strange, and nobody else had their question questioned or mocked. Ridiculed.”

Similarly, Chloe suggested that male colleagues are less likely to receive scrutinization because “people consider men an authority, an automatic authority. When you talk about sports, like if I'm watching a game with my [male] partner and people start talking, they start talking to him.”

The participants were also often scared to make mistakes within their work.

Particularly when working in men’s sport, women were conscious that mistakes made would

serve to promote the view that women did not belong in the industry. This intensified the stress of making mistakes, for young women sports journalists especially. Men, however, were said to be afforded much more leniency in making mistakes by audiences and colleagues. Katie, for example, said:

“But if a man was to make the same mistake [as a woman], it's just a silly mistake. So, it's kind of this whole ‘you have to prove yourself’ to be allowed a seat at the table. Whereas contrast that as a male. You might just walk into that role, which I think sometimes your experience as a male can get you a seat at the table. Even if you have the same experience as a female, you have to keep proving yourself.”

This added pressure led to Claire feeling that she had to be “extra careful whenever I do a report or whenever I go to the match to make sure I get all my facts right, because I feel like they'll listen to it and I'll be distrusted a bit more by audiences than a man would.” This led to a change in her behaviour whereby she would often search for statistics or previous matches to double check her accuracy, even if she was initially confident.

Laura outlined similar behaviours of fact-checking and making more of an overt effort to prove her knowledge on sport, whether that was in passing conversations with colleagues, or in her media outputs. Chloe explained that women had the added pressure of being experts in both men's and women's sports to prove themselves in the newsroom, and with audiences. Men, however, were not expected to know about their equivalent women's sport, and this lack of knowledge would not be frowned upon. She said:

“I had to watch really, really awful [men's] games, games that don't have anything for [the full duration], and you still have to watch that even though you're not interested because you have to be able to talk about it with them the next day. As a female journalist, you have to be aware of what's going on, not only in [men's] sports. And you know that's the thing that gets me the most in sport journalism. That people still

think that women are, you know, in this tiny little space and they're not part of the whole newsroom unless they agree to talk about the what the rest of the newsroom is talking about [men's sport]."

Kanter's (1977) notion of visibility suggests that tokens face pressure to perform their roles without error. To minimize their difference as the visible outsiders, participants in this study thus face additional labor pressures. Tokenism outlines that assimilation leads to individual tokens being seen as representative of the entire group, where some participants noted that mistakes by one woman sports journalist would negatively impact the perception of all women sport journalists. This resulted to changes in patterns of their behaviour, performing additional labor to minimise the impact of their heightened visibility.

It has been noted by Claringbould et al. (2004, p. 713) that during the application and hiring process, "women and ethnic minorities need to have something extra" compared to their white male counterparts in sports journalism. Twenty years later it seems not much has changed. Women's outsider status, reinforced by their lack of numeric representation, means there is an additional labor cost for women sports journalists who must perform additional tasks to be seen as insiders by their colleagues (Hardin & Shain, 2006; Organista & Mazur, 2020). However, previous research has looked at this topic homogenously referring to men's sport journalism. Interestingly, participants working in women's sport felt that they were automatically more trusted by their audiences, as noted by Chloe:

"Yeah, I'm quite privileged because I work with women's [sport] and I've only been working here with women's sports. People actually listen to what you have to say. Listen to your story."

Cultural Change?

Despite the problematic cultures outlined by the participants, it is important to acknowledge that participants also gave strong indications that there may be shifting cultures

within sport journalism. All the participants said they would recommend sport journalism as a career for other women. Journalists who discussed having problematic workplace experiences during their careers still spoke of a changing industry, one that is becoming more accepting of women in the workplace. The effects of this were noted by journalists who had less experience working in the industry and noted more positive workplace experiences. Sophie, who had less than 3 years of experience in the industry and worked in men's sport, noted:

“I think it's [sport journalism] changing. I think you're seeing more and more females. It's loads more accepting now than it would have been I think even ten years ago. Like, if I'd have come into the industry then, I probably wouldn't have been accepted, and wouldn't have been given the support that I have been when I came in.”

Key sporting events, like the successes of the Lionesses winning the 2022 European Championships, were said to have impacted male sport journalists' views on the importance of women's sport. Katie spoke about this changing culture and acceptance of women's sport more broadly:

“I've got colleagues who probably wouldn't have cared in the past or given two thoughts as to how women feel on desks like this, but now maybe they've got daughters that are teenagers. Thinking about that, they watch the Lionesses and they want their pathway [for their daughters]. If they decide to go into sports, they're wanting football to be different to what maybe it was previously. So I think once people start to grow up, and the whole industry changes, then attitudes change. But we've still got a long way to go.”

Abby also pointed to a wider cultural acceptance around women's sport, saying:

“I think the narrative has changed. That, you know, women do watch sport. Women do find sport interesting and they know what they are talking about. A female fan is just as knowledgeable of the game as a male fan.”

Perhaps the visibility of women in sport has contributed to the ‘proving yourself’ narrative; in the same way the women journalists perceive that it has taken significant success for women athletes for male journalists to value women’s sport, by association, it seems to have softened the perception of women in sport more broadly, including women working as sports journalists. Abby added:

“I think women are being more respected in the sports journalism space and I think people are understanding that if they have the knowledge and they're showing that in a written piece, and they've got the stats and the facts to back it up, then there's many more people out there now who are willing to not just criticise the writer because she's a woman. They see the bigger picture in a sense, it's now not as much of a narrow lens.”

This could indicate that the wider momentum of women’s sport has started to seep into wider societal attitudes towards it. This puts the context of the research in an interesting position and could serve to highlight that wider attitudinal changes to women’s sport could serve to benefit those working in women’s sport. Although previous research has identified negative attitudes from sport journalists towards women’s sports (Organista et al., 2017), this research could serve to highlight a growing sense of positivity from within the industry to working within women’s sport as a career option.

Conclusion

Although much of this research unfortunately confirms that women have challenging experiences within the sport journalism workplace, this research does highlight that problematic workplace practices increase in prominence in *men’s* sport journalism, with the androcentric cultures heavily reinforcing the outsider status of women in the workplace. This is fuelled by the persistence of numeric inequality which, despite signs of some improvements, serves to reinforce the outsider status of women in men’s sport journalism. As

such, it unfortunately seems little has changed since Chambers et al. (2004, p.84) noted that “sports news is home to one of the most intense and most historically enduring gender divisions in journalism.” When this is considered in relation to the historic context of a lack of numeric representation of women in the sector (Franks & O’Neil, 2016; Schmidt, 2018), this highlights the slow pace of change within the industry in the UK. The pervasive cultural issues that stem from this heavily male-dominated environment has numerous personal costs for women in the UK industry (Hardin and Whiteside, 2009), such as feeling isolated and uncomfortable in the workplace, and experiencing sexual innuendos and harassment, and gendered online abuse.

Physical spaces like press boxes, and online spaces such as social media, provide areas in which women sports journalists can be targeted for harassment and misogyny. Additionally, the numeric inequality and reinforced outsider status puts women in a vulnerable position where they feel they cannot raise issues or complain without jeopardizing their careers, thus further highlighting the precarious landscape that women in the industry must navigate to survive professionally in the UK. Additional vulnerability comes from numeric inequality by adding hidden labor costs, where women must do additional work to prove themselves, justify their knowledge, and fact-check due to gendered assumptions about their knowledge and ability. Kanter’s (1977) theory when applied to the context of sport journalism in the UK provides us with a useful lens to make sense of women sport journalists experiences. Women operating in these tokenistic positions try to minimize their visibility, so not to stand out, which leads to additional occupational performance pressures. Women’s gender difference is highlighted by their contrasting experiences, through overt and covert misogyny in online and physical workspaces. Additionally, women seemingly minimize their outsider status through assimilation by trying to fit into the dominant group - or not

challenging the dominant group - by not reporting issues of harassment or misogyny for fear of career jeopardy or negative ramifications for women.

In a new finding, there were suggestions that the increasing mediatization of women's sport was indicative of an emerging journalistic culture, and a different workplace environment for women sport journalists. In contrast to previous research which has highlighted the negative attitudes from both men and women sport journalists to working in women's sport (Organista et al., 2021), there were some indications that the wider successes of women's sport in the UK is possibly contributing to a change in the cultural norms within the sports media workplace, with women's sport journalism emerging as a (more) legitimate workplace. This puts the context of the research in an interesting position and could serve to highlight that wider societal attitudinal changes towards women's sport could serve to benefit women working in the sport media. However, although this could bring additional benefits to women in the industry, it also brings further challenges. Women focussing and specialising on women's sport specifically are expected to know about both men's and women's sport to be accepted within newsrooms, further adding to the extra workload burden. Additionally, that women in sport have had to 'prove themselves' through high-profile international achievements (Bowes and Culvin, 2021) further feeds into the narrative that women in sport must perpetually prove themselves in order to be seen as legitimate in a male dominated industry.

In line with the increasing cultural acceptance of women's sport, coupled with the calls for more equal media coverage, this research highlights a need for further academic inquiry into both women reporting solely on women's sport, and women's sport journalism more broadly. This would allow more attention to be focussed on the role of women working in the media production of women's sport, buoyed by wider developments and cultural acceptance of the legitimacy of (some) women's sport in the UK. Gender advances seen in

sport could play a role in the changing nature of women's sport journalism as outlined by the participants. This is significant, because sport journalism is yet to reach parity with other formerly male-dominated spaces such as politics and current affairs in the UK (Franks, 2013). However, beyond the UK context, this work should highlight the importance of understanding that sport journalism is no longer a monolithic culture, and that newly emerging spaces in women's sport journalism pose the possibility for sub-cultural differences compared to the wider sport journalism industry.

This study did have limitations. Firstly, anonymity was granted to participants which meant specific detail which could have enriched the data set had to be excluded. The low level of women working in sport journalism, particularly in men's sport, meant that it was necessary to omit information such as sports, specific job roles, and locations. Additionally, participant recruitment was challenging, beyond the low numbers in the profession. A number of journalists were reluctant to take part or declined due to the potential of career ramifications, which further highlights the jeopardy of women working in the industry.

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