

## **“The players last year all had part-time jobs”: Challenges, expectations and use of social media under the professional structure of the Women’s Super League**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the use of social media, specifically Twitter, in two English football clubs during their first season under the professional structure of the WSL. The study uses data from the clubs’ Twitter accounts and interviews with key employees. A total of 1088 tweets were analysed. Four themes emerged: player availability; status; cooperation and social media strategy. The findings showed that while women’s football has made great strides, the increased use of social media by players has not been supported by proper media training. Furthermore, the increase in status has not been matched by better funding. It is important that the increased awareness surrounding women’s football is matched by an increase in player well-being as this will impact the standing of women’s football.*

*Keywords: Soccer; Football; Professional sports; Social media; Women's sports.*

### **Introduction**

In 1921 the Football Association (FA), the governing body of football in England, prohibited women from using grounds associated with the organisation. This was a terrible blow for women’s football that until then had enjoyed fairly high levels of popularity post World War I. Nowadays, approximately 50 years since the FA lifted this ban (1971), there has been significant progress in improving the visibility of women’s football within England. The England Lionesses’ semi-final against the

United States at the recent 2019 Women's World Cup drew a record-breaking audience of 11.7 million viewers and became the most watched British television broadcast of the year (Waterson, 2019). Not only have strides been made in terms of interest and viewing figures, but also in England the domestic game has seen the Women's Super League (WSL), the elite level women's football league, become professional. However, while this has enabled some players to earn a living and make a career, problems still exist between the growing professionalisation of women's football and the precarious work conditions in which players operate (Culvin, 2019). Previous research shows that football has always been highly precarious and unpredictable as a career (Parker, 2000; McGillivray and McIntosh, 2006; Roderick, 2006; Wood et al., 2017). This is further exacerbated in women's football. Women are unprepared and unsupported for their new highly gendered careers as professional footballers. The roles, remits and expectations placed on players are increasingly complex and dynamic with little training or support offered to manage these changes (Culvin, 2019).

The increased ubiquity of social media has placed additional expectations on players. For example, an increased pressure to portray a certain image, be a role model, and an increased blurring of their personal and professional lives. Specifically, in women's football, high exposure on social media has resulted in strong accountability and surveillance on their bodies and lives. The vulnerabilities experienced by women are multifaceted and unexpected, eating and bodily disorders, work spillover and overtraining, with little guidance from managers or clubs on how to deal with these new pressures (Culvin, 2019). Football clubs place a strong emphasis on social media as a marketing tool where the focus is on developing the player as a brand and increasing the engagement between players and fans. There is little evidence of clubs providing media training in a way that does not turn women players into commodities.

In recent years there has been an increased interest in examining women's sports and social media communication. Recent research on the use of social media and women's sports has focus on the use of sexist and tone-deaf themes by sports' governing bodies (Grace and Muller, 2019), on how specific social media platforms influence women football fans interactions (Kunert, 2021), and the marginalisation experienced by women as sports fans (Gosling, 2007; Pope, 2017; Toffoletti and Mewett, 2012). For example, Schultz and Linden (2014) demonstrated that women were only welcome as spectators to American sports under strict conditions—either as moral agents to calm down the unruly men or as consumers filling up the stands. However, with the exception of Culvin (2019) there is to date little research on the expectations and use of social media, specifically Twitter, by professional women's football club teams. We propose to fill this gap by exploring the expectations and use of social media in two English football clubs during their first season under the new professional structure of the WSL.

### **Social media and the football industry and its use within the WSL**

The rapid growth of social media has transformed how organisations, including the sport industry, communicate with consumers (Belch and Belch, 2017). Social media

has been defined as 'new media technologies facilitating interactivity and co-creation that allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between organisations and individuals' (Filo et al. 2015, p.167). Created in 2006, Twitter is a social networking and micro-blogging tool that restricts the length of the message (tweet) to a maximum of 280 characters. Tweets are displayed on an individual's profile page and on the home page of each of their 'followers' (those who track the individuals' activity). Individuals can select to follow other Twitter users and view their shared posts and photos, effectively creating an audience for this content. Users who access the platform view a real-time rolling feed of messages posted by everyone they follow (Price et al., 2013). Twitter had a reported 321 million monthly users in 2019 (Shaban, 2019).

An effective social media strategy can increase the accessibility of sports that struggle to compete in the saturated sports market and are ignored by mainstream outlets (Clavio and Klan, 2010). The FA's vision for the WSL centred around constructing an identity for women's football that was distinct from the men's game. Social media was seen as an essential tool to support them in achieving a modern and distinct identity (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2018). To achieve this the FA sought to market the WSL as a family friendly 'product' to fans who were parents to 10-15-year-old children and to young girls who play football in schools and clubs. However, this narrowly defined target segment risked overlooking the existing audience of adult female players and older men (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2018).

Digital media platforms have been described as 'a challenge to the hegemony of television, which can be alternatively bypassed, undercut, and complemented by online media' (Hutchins and Rowe, 2012 p.5). Social media can increase the visibility of the WSL as the lack of profile of women's football is driving fans to social networks for their news. On social media, fans are being 'up to seven times more interactive than fans of the men's game' (FA, 2012 as cited in Fielding-Lloyd et al, 2018). Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) report that women athletes' use social media more frequently than men and see social media as a way to promote themselves and create work opportunities.

However, some critics see football clubs' embrace of social media as evidence of an increased commodification of football (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2016), for example the FA using the services of Wharton Consulting to develop their social media strategy. This new business model is dominated by global markets, profit maximisation, players as brands, and fans as customers. The growth of women's football has emerged alongside the hypercompetitive culture of men's football. Some scholars have suggested that women's football is suffering from the more negative aspects of men's football (Dunn, 2016) and reaping few of the rewards. While social media provides a more direct communication among fans and players, it can also offer fans 'unprecedented access to athletes' and their personal lives (Hambrick et al., 2010 p.455). While this level of access lets fans connect and feel closer to athletes (Pegoraro, 2013), some athletes feel pressure to showcase their personal life, creating a false sense of intimacy between fans and players. Social media helps players to build their brand, however, many times this brand is manufactured within a

hyper-sexualised culture with largely men agents advising women athletes (Culvin, 2019).

Research conducted by the FA highlighted that despite being the third-largest team sport in the UK, women's football lacked widespread recognition outside of major international tournaments. Lessons learned from the USA, highlighted the need for clubs to use social media and make players more accessible, something that is not required from men footballers. The increased use of social media prompted 'the digital ambassador initiative' launched at the start of the second season of the WSL (Dunn and Welford, 2015). The players selected as ambassadors were at the forefront of the club's engagement with the public. It was the first time that elite athletes in the UK wore their Twitter handles on their jerseys (BBC Sport, 2012). While Twitter does increase interactions between players and fans (Kassing and Sanderson, 2010), the value of this initiative to increase interest in the sport is questionable. Research shows that Twitter feeds of individual players predominantly feature content that revolves around their everyday lives and relatively few tweets that focus on their sports or teams (Hambrick, et al., 2010). Social media therefore, can further objectify female athletes by putting the focus on their private lives and away from their achievements as elite athletes. Moreover, the digital ambassador programme requires players to be present and active on social media, which leaves them open to online abuse, which is not uncommon on social media platforms (Parry et al., 2015).

The desire to increase the connectivity between WSL players and fans through initiatives such as the digital ambassador was driven by the goal of increasing attendance to games. However, as it is common on social media, the information on WSL's Twitter account is available only to those who actively seek it. Therefore it is not a very effective tool to reach new audiences or expand their fanbase (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2018). Furthermore, while increased connectivity between players and fans has its benefits, it also has its downsides, such as when players fail to conform to the values of their club, or encounter official messages from their club or sponsors. One ill-advised Tweet can stir up unnecessary controversy (Newman et al., 2013). Also, social media enables fans to share their opinion online, taking some of the control over the message away from the sport organisation. The potential for negative feedback has resulted in many football clubs being reluctant to allow supporters' comments on their official website (McCarthy et al., 2014).

## **Materials and Methods**

The study adopted an exploratory approach, based on the case study of two football clubs in England. It aimed to explore these clubs' expectations and challenges of the use of media to promote the clubs. Creswell defined a case study as an exploration of a bounded system through detailed, in-depth data collection (Creswell, 2007). Case-study methodology is commonly used in football-related marketing studies (McCarthy et al., 2014). In this research, two in-depth interviews with key employees of the clubs were conducted; the interviews were contextualised with a content analysis of the clubs' Twitter accounts. Twitter in particular is used by athletes, sports

teams and sports media outlets to provide updates on individual athletes, sporting clubs, sporting leagues and organisations and to report the results of sporting events as they happen (Litchfield and Kavanagh, 2018). In case studies, the data is strengthened through the analysis of multiple sources of evidence (Barrick, Mair and Potwarka, 2017). In this case the triangulation of the data led to particularly enriching insights about the participants and surrounding context of women football in England. As the various insights from the data analysis process emerged, nuanced and layered findings were uncovered (Yin, 2009). It allowed us to bring together multiple data sources to both enhance the credibility of the research and synthesize the findings, while also helping to clarify the research meanings (Barrick, et al, 2016). Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the University under permissions outlined in the Further Exploration of the Process of Seeking Ethics Approval for Research, Human Research Ethics Committee Document No: 7.

Initial contact was made by the first author to the Women’s Football Marketing Manager at the FA who facilitated contact with the eleven clubs in the WSL. Club A represents one of the original clubs from the WSL inaugural season and who have successfully maintained their inclusion within the league since. In contrast, Club B represents a club competing in their first season as part of the WSL. Both clubs are financially backed by the parent men’s club. This sample was selected as the varying experience level of both clubs within the WSL can provide insights into how clubs use social media in the league’s first season as a full-time professional entity.

**Table 1: Clubs’ characteristics**

<b>Example of table/picture</b>	<b>Club A</b>	<b>Club B</b>
Active on Twitter since	2011	2009
Professional since	2017	2018
Date joined the WSL	2011	2018

**Content Analysis**

Using an online tool Vicinitas, all public tweets were downloaded for both WSL teams for two separate periods. The first being, March 26th 2018 to May 21st 2018, which represented the final weeks of the 2017/18 WLS season. This was the last season before the league became entirely professional. The second period was the final weeks of the 2018/19 season between March 11th 2019 and May 13th 2019. This period corresponds to the last weeks of the first season of the league being professional. All data was downloaded to an excel spreadsheet. A six-step content analysis approach, adapted from previous research (Gibbs, O’Reilly and Brunette, 2014) was followed (See Table 2).

A total of 1088 tweets, covering the two time periods were analysed. A review of the Twitter accounts indicates that both clubs were very active during these periods. Club A has a separate profile for the women’s team. Whereas, Club B integrated

content within the main club’s Twitter account shared by all teams playing under the club brand. Tweets were analysed and assessed based on the content, structure and the general nature of the tweet. Each tweet was coded into a category and then a subcategory. Many of the tweets could have been categorised in more than one category. However, a decision was made to categorise the tweet in the most relevant category based on the actual content of the tweet. For example, many of the tweets contained a picture or a video, yet not in all cases these provided new information. The image or video was used to enhance the tweet. Based on the initial analysis, five categories were identified: in-game, news, promotion, interactive and other. The in-game category represented any tweets that happened during a game. Such tweets typically provided information such as score updates and substitutes. The news category consisted of tweets that provided fans with information related to the club. The promotion category consisted of tweets of the marketing variety and typically centred around the promotion of game and ticket sales. The final category labelled other, included tweets that did not fit into any of the above categories (See Table 3).

**Table 2: Six-Step Content Analysis Approach**

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Process</b>
1. Defining the problem	To explore how WSL clubs use social media for marketing and promotion
2. Selecting the media and sample	Tweets from the official Twitter feed from two clubs in the WSL
3. Defining analytical categories	Identified categories based on literature, interviews with team personnel and researchers experience: in-game, news, promotion, interactive, and other
4. Constructing a coding schedule	Develop Tweet-coding schedule
5. Piloting the coding schedule and checking reliability	Executing of the coding
6. Data preparation and analysis	Preparation of the data in an excel template

*Adapted from Gibbs et al (2014)*

**Table 3: Initial Tweet Coding**

<b>Tweet Coding</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Score updates, substitutes, examples of good play	In Game	Tweets composed during games that report what is happening during the game.
Coach/player interviews, squad updates, video/photo sharing, postgame, upcoming games	News	Tweeting a video/photo, squad updates (transfer, injuries), player/coach interviews postgame news etc.
Ticket sales, sponsors, merchandise, game advertisements	Promotion	Promoting games, ticket sales, merchandise.
Direct Communication/Retweets	Interactive	Retweet fans/WSL account/main club, communication with fans
Other	Other	Any that does not fit into any of the other categories.

*Adapted from Gibbs et al (2014)*

### **Interviews**

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author between May and June 2019. First, a joint interview with a marketing assistant and the social media executive from Club A and second, with a marketing executive from Club B. Semi-structured interviews enable participants to discuss their own experiences and elaborate on any areas of particular interest (Jones, 2015). Interviews lasted approximately 50-90 minutes; no participants are identified by name. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Firstly, the data was open coded, allowing the voices of the participants to emerge and then revisited to identify broader categories and developing themes (Bryman, 2012). Four themes emerged from the analysis of the transcripts: 1) player availability 2) status 3) cooperation and 4) social media strategy.

### **Limitations**

While the rigorousness of the methodology employed assures the reliability of the data gathered, this study does have limitations. The findings should be understood in the context of the two clubs in the WSL, as a result, the views represented in this paper provide only an insight into the overall trends of how the professionalisation of the WSL impacted the club's use of social media. Interviews were conducted with clubs' staff and a content analysis of their official Twitter pages was performed. The

views and Twitter accounts of the players were not part of the study. This was due to a range of factors, mainly the difficulty in accessing players and limited resources. Such information would have provided valuable insights. We recommend that further research be carried out with an exclusive focus on players' views on the role of social media within the WSL. Furthermore, the research was conducted at the end of the first season of the fully professional structure of the WSL. It is still challenging to fully understand what effect social media marketing will have on professional women's clubs in the long term.

## **Results**

The purpose of this study was to determine the use of social media within the context of the professionalisation of the WSL, with particular emphasis on Twitter. Twitter was identified by both clubs as their primary platform for their social media communications. Four themes emerged from the interview transcripts; these were: 1) player availability 2) status 3) cooperation and 4) social media strategy. First, both clubs highlighted that the WSL transitioning to entirely professional had increased the availability of the players to participate in the creation of content for social media. However, there was little evidence of extra support or training provided to athletes to deal with this new role and expectations. Second, both Club A and B commented that the status of women's football within the parent club had increased after the professionalisation of the league but this had not necessarily been matched by a bigger budget or resources. Third, both clubs commented that professionalism brought an increased level of cooperation between the clubs and the FA. Particular reference was made to media resources provided by the FA and how this could be leveraged with the use of social media. Finally, both Club A and B admitted that the first professional season had been very much a learning period for the staff involved with marketing the team on social media. Both highlighted areas of their social media marketing strategy where they felt improvements could be made.

### **Club A**

As illustrated in Table 4, the in-game category represented 55% (N=189) of the tweets shared by Club A in the 2017/18 season while this percentage decreased to 33% (N=128) of tweets shared for the 2018/19. While this is surprising it can be attributed to a higher number of games played during the 2017/18 period (7 games) compared to the 2018/19 period (4 games). The news category represented 32% (N=110) of Club A's tweets in the 2017/18 season. This percentage increased by 5% to 37% (N=143) of the total tweets for the 2018/19 season. The promotion category saw a small decrease from 6% (N=21) in the 2017/18 season to 5% (N=20) in the 2018/19 season. The interactive category saw an increase from 6% (N=21) in the 2017/18 season to 22% (N=85) in 2018/19. 35% (N=30) of the 85 tweets in this category in the 2018/19 season were retweets from the main club account and were primarily of the promotional variety. The other category represented 1% (N=2) and 3% (N=10) of tweets shared for the 2017/18 and the 2018/19 season, respectively.

**Club B**

Table 4 also shows that the in-game category represented 38% (N=67) of the tweets shared by Club B in the 2017/18 season. Like Club A, this percentage also decreased to 30% (N=55) of tweets shared for 2018/19. Club B also played fewer games over the eight-week period in 2018/19 (4 games) compared to a similar period in the 2017/18 (6 games). The news categories represented 33% (N=57) of Club B’s tweets in 2017/18. However, this category saw a 10% increase to 43% (N=79) in the 2018/19 season. The promotion category also saw a rise, it increased from 7% (N=13) in the 2017/18 season to 13% (N=24) in the 2018/19 season. The interactive category saw a decrease from 20% (N=34) in the 2017/18 season to 10% (N=19) in 2018/19. The other category represented 2% (N=3) and 4% (N=8) of tweets shared for the 2017/18 and the 2018/19 season respectively.

**Table 4: Initial Tweet Categories**

Stage	Club A		Club B	
	2017/18	2018/19	2017/18	2018/19
In Game	189 (55%)	128 (33%)	67 (38%)	55 (30%)
News	110 (32%)	143 (37%)	57 (33%)	79 (43%)
Promotion	21 (6%)	20 (5%)	13 (7%)	24 (13%)
Interactive	21 (6%)	85 (22%)	34 (20%)	19 (10%)
Other	2 (1%)	10 (3%)	3 (2%)	8 (4%)
Total	343	386	174	185

**Table 5– Tweet Categories**

Stage	Club A				Club B			
	2017/18		2018/19		2017/18		2018/19	
<b>In Game</b>								
In Game Updates	165	48%	105	-27%	54	-31%	30	16%
In Game Photo	17	-5%	13	-3%	13	-8%	11	6%
In Game Video	7	-2%	10	-3%	0	0%	14	8%
<b>News</b>								

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Team News	12	-3%	15	-4%	3	-2%	4	2%
Video Sharing	19	-6%	37	-10%	0	0%	7	4%
Photo sharing	26	-8%	36	-9%	17	-10%	14	8%
Player/Coach	1	0%	10	-3%	12	-7%	32	17%
Postgame	16	-5%	15	-4%	10	-6%	7	4%
Upcoming Game	28	-8%	24	-6%	14	-8%	8	4%
General Cub News	8	-2%	6	-2%	1	-1%	7	4%
<b>Promotion</b>								
Game Promotion	7	-2%	7	-2%	5	-3%	14	8%
Poll/Vote/Contest	6	-2%	5	-1%	0	0%	4	2%
Merchandise Promotion	1	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Ticket Promotion	7	-2%	8	-2%	8	-5%	6	3%
<b>Interactive</b>								
Player Retweet	0	0%	15	-4%	16	-9%	6	3%
Player Communication	5	-1%	13	-3%	3	-2%	4	2%
Opposition Retweet	1	0%	1	0%	5	-3%	6	3%
General Retweet	9	-3%	50	-13%	5	-3%	1	1%

Fan Communication	6	-2%	6	-2%	0	0%	1	1%
Direct Communication	0	0%	0	0%	3	-2%	1	1%
<b>Other</b>	2	-1%	10	-3%	3	-2%	8	4%

## Discussion

### Player availability: too much, too soon?

It is clear that the WSL's transition to professionalism has increased the availability of the players to the clubs. This enabled the players to support the clubs' marketing department in the development of content for social media channels and other marketing materials. Some clubs with the backing of the wealthy men's parent clubs were professional prior to it being a requirement to play in the WSLs 2018/2019 season. Prior to the league's full transition to professionalism, many players had work commitments outside of football, and this brought challenges when attempting to coordinate players participating in content creation. Club B's marketing executive highlighted the difficulties faced in the previous season, before the introduction of professionalism:

The players last year all had part-time jobs. They all had different training hours; they'd train in the evening when we would not be in the office. Not that we couldn't go to see them. It's just that they would usually be like: 'Oh I'll have to rush off after [training]'. (Marketing Executive, Club B)

This increased availability of the players stemmed from the requirement by the FA for clubs to have a minimum of 16 hours contact time with players (Garry, 2018). One interviewee stated that the players:

...(have) got [to participate in] the training, but then they are available [for promotional and marketing activities]. It's very easy to find time to come down to the training ground and do a bit of content with them. (Marketing Executive, Club A).

The increased availability of the players for marketing activities such as social media content creation was identified as beneficial by both clubs. Club B expressed that content involving the players would '*probably be the most popular of our women's content*' (Marketing Executive, Club B). Similarly, the Social Media Manager of Club A noted that content that enables fans to '*get to know the personality of the players and get to know their backgrounds stories*' was among the most popular features on

their Twitter account. Research has shown that the perceived social connection provided by social media is an important feature for fans of women's football (Coche, 2014). At the same time, women players have expressed that they feel their public persona is out of their hands and are concerned about fans knowing their personal lives too much, highlighting the pressures and expectations women footballers experience (see Culvin, 2019).

The increased availability also enabled the players to engage with more promotional activities. As the marketing executive from Club B explained '*we launched the kit yesterday, and we had women's players at that [the launch], as they could spend the day at the kit shoot*'. Promotional activities such as kit launches can provide clubs with opportunities for significant levels of fan engagement on social media (Reynolds, 2015). It was clear in the data that clubs were hopeful that the incorporation of players into activities that garner significant coverage on social media could help increase the visibility of the team and accelerate the growth of women's sport into the mainstream media (Vann, 2014). Triangulation with the Twitter content, and in particular the increased number of tweets categorised as Player/Coach, illustrated in Table 5 supports the finding that the transition to professionalism has increased the availability of players for participation in developing content for the clubs. This was particularly evident in the case of Club B as a significant number of Tweets within the Player/Coach subcategory focused on sharing quotes from interviews or press conferences conducted with the players and the coach.

### **Status: More status is not necessarily matched with bigger budget**

The marketing staff from both clubs noted that compared to the larger clubs (clubs backed by wealthy men's clubs), their resources would be '*quite short on numbers*' (Marketing Executive, Club B) and that they '*just don't have the budget or the resources*' (Social Media Manager, Club B). However, Club B's marketing executive expressed that the introduction of professionalism in the WSL has '*increased resources within the club*' to assist in the marketing of the women's football team. Before the introduction of this increase in resources, volunteers were required to support the club's media coverage of the women's team.

...before if one of our media team couldn't make a game, because they're covering the men's game then a student from the university would go out with the team to cover it...which obviously lead to inconsistency, which meant that the women's team just looked off brand within the entirety of the page (Marketing Executive, Club B).

The quote above clearly demonstrates that there is finite resource and if this is stretched, women's clubs are the first to suffer. It could be argued that women's teams are not really valued by the 'parent' club if a student is deployed, rather than a media or marketing professional. A reverse of this situation where the student is sent out with the men's team is unimageable, demonstrating that most female teams remain relatively under-resourced and below men's teams in club hierarchies. The

inconsistencies in the reporting and lack of proper budget affects the effectiveness of women's clubs' social media strategy. The slight increase in resources dedicated to the women's game in Club B since the WSL became professional was supported by an increased focus towards the women's team from the club's marketing department.

This will help to provide the consistency in communication that is vital for fan engagement (McCarthy et al., 2014) and can assist the clubs in meeting the FA target of doubling attendance by 2020 (Garry and Aloia, 2016). There is now *'more time allowed to it, as well as the increased productivity that comes with that'* (Marketing Executive, Club B). In contrast, Club A noted that while the staffing resources dedicated to the women's department did not necessarily increase, *'they have grown in terms of stature within the club'* (Social Media Manager, Club A). The increased status of the women's department within the club has meant that the women's team is now viewed as *'an integral part of the club, just as much as the men's team'* (Marketing Executive, Club A). A view that is shared by recent media coverage, who suggested that women's football is flourishing and on the verge of becoming mainstream (Edwards, 2018).

While both Club A and Club B acknowledge the status of women's football has improved within their clubs, a closer look shows that in reality women's football still continues to struggle globally. As discussed earlier on, recent studies highlight that many domestic women's football leagues are plagued with financial instability and seasons are not long enough to provide adequate playing opportunities (FIFpro, 2020a).

### **Cooperation between Clubs and FA**

A common trend that emerged from both clubs was that the WSL's transition to professionalism has brought an increased level of cooperation between the clubs and the FA. Particular reference was made to the increased media support from the FA. The broadcast rights to the games, negotiated by the FA has resulted in the games being available on a variety of platforms, including the WSL's own Facebook page (The FA, n.d). Moreover, clubs are also provided with the footage recorded by the FA. This has increased the opportunities to create shareable content for their social media platforms.

So, every one of our matches in the League is filmed by the FA, and they give us that package to use. We can clip it up, show highlights or good pieces of play, celebration shots or something like that, which you can then transfer onto social media... [and then say to our fans]: 'Did you see this... [during the] weekend? It was really good' ...and get traction that way, which hopefully then is picked up by the FA WSL site and other pages as well (Marketing Executive, Club B).

The current level of television coverage afforded to women's football is only a relatively recent occurrence (Baxter, 2019; Magowan, 2019). Highlight reels such as those available in men's football would previously have been difficult to produce

within women's football. The increased level of coverage of women's game and the sharing of the game footage has enabled clubs to utilise this *'to build up archives and highlights against certain teams and then you can share that in the build-up to games'* (Social Media Manager, Club A). For clubs this content can help ease the burden on marketing staff and provide significant benefits as these visuals (pictures and videos) on social media can provide greater opportunities for fan engagement (Clavio and Klan, 2010). Understanding the nature of fan engagement on their social media platforms is important for clubs, as there is a positive relationship between social media engagement and attendance to matches (Suresh, 2015). The Twitter content and in particular the Video Sharing subcategory shown in Table 5 highlight that the level of video output from the clubs has increased in the year after the WSL went professional.

### **Social Media Strategy: players as commodities?**

Unlike the well-established men's football industry, professional women's football is still very much in its infancy, with many clubs only now entering the domain of full-time professional sports. As acknowledged by the marketing executive from Club B *'there's staff still learning new things and they still want to find out what works best'*. The marketing executive from Club B accepted that their video content is an aspect of their social media strategy that could be improved as *'[we] didn't do as much as we should have or could have'*. Furthermore, it was recognised that there was a need to produce *'quirkier videos'* that will *'tell the story of the player'* which would allow fans to identify with players. Previous studies show that this connection with players is very important to women's football fans (Coche, 2014).

Both clubs recognised that access to the women's players is easier compared to the men's players so *'[the fans] can develop such relationships with the players on a personal level that you can't really do with the men's'* (Marketing Executive, Club A). This has been attributed to the fact that women's players *'know what it's like to have a normal life'* so they are very eager to *'try new things and be the professional footballer'* (Marketing Executive, Club B). The players have *'all faced adversity to play women's football'*, and they all realise they *'are a role model'* to the next generation of female players and they want to be able to inspire them (Marketing Executive, Club A). However, while these women may be working hard to improve their game and take advantage of their increased media profile to promote football to girls and young women, if they are to have a real impact, they need to be supported by the actions of clubs and by the game's governing bodies (Dunn, 2016). These supports include financial investment from the grass roots upwards, and consistent media coverage across outlets, enabling people to see the players in action.

The marketing executive from Club A also identified areas where improvements could be made and stated that they would *'quite like to develop our tone of voice a little bit more'*. Recognising this as an area for improvement can prove to be beneficial, as achieving the right tone of voice is essential for effective fan engagement (Achen, Lebel and Clavio, 2017). As the clubs prepared for their second

season in the professional WSL, Club B recognised that it was necessary to have a *'more robust content plan in place'* as not all the plans that were envisioned for the 2018/19 season came to fruition as *'gradually other things cropped up and got in the way'* and perhaps having a more *'month by month [plan]'* would help them achieve the goals' (Marketing Executive, Club A). Furthermore, the timing of the social media post was emphasised as being important for increasing clubs' visibility by being *'[clever] on, when you post, how you post and what sort of format [you] want to post it on'* (Marketing Executive, Club B). Understanding this and ensuring to keep the posts relevant to the fans is important as generally fans do not appreciate content that is overtly commercial in nature (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015). Such posts can be irritating and invasive to fans who consider social media to be their space (McCarthy et al., 2014).

Brands all over the world are beginning to recognise the commercial potential of women's football (Nielsen Sports, 2019). However, for both clubs in this study, exploring commercialisation opportunities through social media was *'more focused on the men's side of things'* (Social Media Manager, Club A). This was attributed to the opportunities being *'limited on the women's side compared to the men's due to the nature of audiences and obviously the media rights and the broadcasting'* (Social Media Manager, Club A). Before Covid-19 impacted the world of sports, the future of the league looked promising, with the announcement that for the first time, the WSL would have a title sponsor following a £10 million investment from Barclays (Garry, 2019). However, the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities faced by female athletes in the world of football and sports in general.

## Conclusion

This study explored the expectations placed on players' use of social media in two English football clubs during their first season under the new professional structure of the WSL. Both clubs recognised that the WSL's recent change to professionalism had positively impacted how they can use social media for marketing their brand. The players are now full-time professionals, meaning they have greater availability to participate in developing content for social media. The transition to professionalism has also improved cooperation between the clubs and the FA. As a result, the clubs have greater access to game footage. The women's football departments in both clubs now enjoy an increase in status and more time is allocated to marketing the women's team. Both clubs acknowledged that areas of their social media strategy could be improved and believed this would happen when staff became more experienced and familiar with what works. The research shows that for the WSL and its players who do not receive mainstream media coverage on a daily basis, social media can provide a space to generate publicity and promote the club, at the same time that allows athletes to build their personal brand.

However, there is still a lot of work to do, while this study shows that female footballers are willing to embrace their position as role models and promote women's football from the grass roots, they cannot do this without more support and resources. The broader lack of direction for the women's game is likely to negate

their efforts in the long run (Dunn, 2016). The world of full-time professional women's football is a relatively new addition to the football industry in the UK. It could, for example, change how women consume sports. Due to different social and cultural factors, in general women do not watch as much sports as men. However, the affordability and ease offered by social media to access sport content could potentially enable women's sports to become mainstream. This would help women players to build a fan base, gain media coverage (Guest and Luijten, 2018) and ultimately affect the stature of women's football with better budgets and working conditions. Some clubs in the WSL are further along in their journey as a professional team and some clubs in the National Women's Soccer League in the United States have been professional since the league's inception (Rossi and Rubera, 2018). This provides an opportunity to benchmark and learn from how other women's professional clubs are using social media to engage their fans, increase consumption of women's sports and build brand identity. Further research of a similar nature to this paper in a few years, once the professional structure of the WSL is more established may yield a more comprehensive understanding of the use of social media for marketing within women's professional football.

While the scope of this paper is limited, it does make clear that clubs must understand what type of content attracts the most fan engagement in order to build a robust social media strategy while also providing appropriate support to players. If women's football is to grow and develop further then the governing bodies globally must examine the provisions for women's football within their jurisdiction, acknowledge the shortcomings and seek to develop strategies that can combat the issues surrounding player well-being that might affect the future of women's football. Without first addressing this inequity faced by the women's game, it will be hard to create a convincingly friendly and welcoming narrative toward prospective female players and fans.

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