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Gender Inequality in FIFA-Governed Football: A Sociocultural and Institutional Analysis

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Of

Master of Health, Sport and Human Performance

At

The University of Waikato

by

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

2026

Abstract

This thesis investigates the systematic reproduction and contestation of gender inequality in the global football ecosystem across three interconnected domains: institutional governance, traditional media representation, and digital social media discourse. Formal structural barriers to women's participation have been removed, yet profound disparities in resource allocation, structural visibility, and institutional recognition remain. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's sociological framework of field, habitus, and capital, this study aims to uncover how the global football field remains organized by patriarchal logics that systematically devalue female athletic legitimacy.

Methodologically, this study used qualitative methods and a multi-source approach, drawing on a total of 1,680 public documents. The data consisted of 1,200 social media posts from Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and 480 institutional and mainstream media documents, such as FIFA annual reports, governance documents, benchmarking documents, and news articles. Thematic coding, qualitative content analysis, document analysis, and critical discourse analysis were used for all data analysis with NVivo. Empirical results show how market-oriented football decision actors use rationales to create a deficit of economic capital for young women, and how the feminine relation to sport, typically taken for granted in traditional sports media production, does not grant symbolic capital to young women. At the same time, the digital space becomes a space of intense contestation, as the female athlete and the organic fan use cultural capital to make themselves known as alternative counternarratives to the conventional one, to push for institutional responsibility, and as actors of digital violence and performance-based deprecation, to enforce the conventional boundaries between the two genders. Ultimately, this thesis posits that policy changes alone are insufficient to attain gender justice in sport. Rather, achieving sustainable equity requires a holistic reconfiguration of capital distribution and institutional control.

Acknowledgements

I am writing to convey my sincere appreciation to my supervisor, Professor Will Roberts, for his faithful guidance, patience, and rigorous academic critiques throughout this thesis. His extremely helpful criticisms and encouragement were instrumental in developing this project and in elevating my scholarship to a better standard. My gratitude goes to the faculty and staff of the University of Waikato for offering a stimulating and supportive environment in which I have pursued my postgraduate study. Thank you to all those organizations, researchers, and activists who helped make this empirical study possible by mapping the actual situation of gender justice and global governance of sport. Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to my family and friends for sacrificing their time and continuously offering emotional support, understanding, and encouragement during these intense writing and revision periods of this project. This milestone would not have been possible without them.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Context

Contemporary football is undergoing a significant structural and cultural transformation. For a sport traditionally dominated by men, football has seen significant development in the participation of women, their professional career, the attention they receive from the public and the number of people that watch their matches in the last 10 years. In all of these, it was clear that women's football is taking a more prominent role in sports around the world. Raising participation and visibility, however, does not mean that gender equality has been realised in institutional and organisational structures that influence the sport. According to the figures released by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), some 16.6 million women and girls play organised football globally, an increase of 24% on the 13.3 million from 2019. Women make up 32% of the participants, girls make up 33% (compared with 23% in 2015). These statistics offer a glimpse of the growth of females in football and serve as a valuable backdrop to discuss the role of women in football. There has also been a rise in the level of audience engagement and commercial interest in women's football, as it becomes increasingly visible. The 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup is reported to have been watched by 543 million new fans across the globe by SVG Europe, cited in this thesis. Additionally, ComScore data indicated over 185 million social media interactions and a commercial analysis by Forbes estimated the net value of the tournament's sponsorship at $308 million. While these signposts indicate greater engagement, recognition and commercial awareness, they also highlight the possibility that institutional arrangements and the distribution of resources have not advanced as quickly. Women's football is not simply reaping the rewards of growth in terms of equal access to finances, power, employment, and recognition. Increased growth in women's football does not automatically imply equality in access to finances, power, employment, and recognition. As a result, the interaction between the increasing popularity of women's football in public and business arenas, and the ongoing problems in the regulatory bodies of women's football is an important area of sociological study. One aspect of this question is related to the institutional and economic arrangements in which football is organised and developed. Opportunities for groups within the sport are shaped by investment, allocation of resources,

sporting governance agendas and existing organisational practices. The decisions made regarding the development of women's football can also be influenced by economic considerations regarding the short-term revenue and investment. These arguments, however, must be taken into account in the context of the historical evolution of men's professional football, which was sustained in institutional support, promotion and investment for a long time. The historical evolution of men's sport is significant when exploring the inequalities in the present as existing institutional privileges are inseparable from the conditions under which they have been created; as Dworkin and Messner (2002) explain. This has led to the ongoing problems surrounding women's football in the professional and institutional setting. It has been largely portrayed as a side arm of the football system rather than as a fully-fledged part of the game. This situation is an example of the need to look at gender inequality beyond participation measures, or individual sporting success and failure. It demands attention to the institutional structure, allocation of resources, media portrayal and social expectations that affect the place and visibility of women's football. In this context, the present study explores gender inequality in the governance of football by FIFA, in the traditional media, and in the digital social media discourse, in a non-exclusive manner. The institutional governance framework presents a lens to consider the impact of organisational structures, policies, and decisions related to resources on gender relations in football. The relevance of traditional media is in the representation and evaluation of women's football, which helps to make it visible and to legitimate it as a sport. Gender perspectives, criticisms, support and challenges are also represented and shared through digital social media. The theoretical framework used is Pierre Bourdieu and his theories regarding the concept of field, capital and habitus. This helps to understand how the power relations and expectations are currently working in football and how this can be reproduced or challenged. The aim of this thesis is to move beyond the traditional sociological focus and incorporate the institutional, media and digital aspects into a connected analysis to develop a sociological understanding of how gender inequality persists in the football governed by FIFA, despite the increasing visibility and development of the women's game.

1.2. Problem Statement

While women's football is increasingly more visible, played by more women and commercialized, gender inequality still is a key issue in the institutional and cultural structures of the sport. Policy measures and commitments have been taken by football governing bodies to tackle levels of under-representation in decision-making and increase pathways for women in the professional game. Formal commitments do not guarantee equality in institutional influence, organisational practices or working conditions, however. There should be, therefore, a difference between a formal recognition of equality between women and men and a live implementation of it in football institutions. The academic literature has focused on various aspects of gender-based inequality in sport, such as institutional policies, representation in sport leadership, gender pay gap, and the experiences of individual athletes and sport managers. But, these areas are not always checked simultaneously. Specifically, research is required that examines how the institutional governance of football, media portrayals of gender, and digital social media discourses contribute to the production and challenge of gender inequalities in the governance of the game. Considering these dimensions in combination may give a more comprehensive picture of the ways in which power relations between the sexes are manifested in institutional relations and public communication. One of the key issues is the connection between formal institutional mechanisms and the organizational practices used to allocate opportunities and resources and to grant recognition. Policies aimed at increasing representation of women can coexist with organisational arrangements and practices that have a continuing impact on access and opportunities for leadership positions, and decision-making power. This poses questions about what happens when institutional commitments become translated to practice and what role power relations play after the introduction of equality-oriented policies. The theoretical framework developed by Bourdieu can help to analyse this issue. His notion of the field allows him to imagine football as a social space discursively organized and in which institutions and other agents are placed at various locations and have different forms of influence. The approach of capital can be used to analyse the distribution and recognition of economic, cultural, social and symbolic resources, whilst the concept of habitus can be used to consider how entrenched expectations and dispositions might be normalised in the sporting context. These ideas are applicable

to the way that gender inequality might be reproduced in institutional settings and cultural practices, and how they might be questioned or contested. Issues of institutional governance are not the only issues. Representations through the traditional media play a role in how women's football and the female athlete are described, evaluated and recognised. Concurrently, digital social media offers a platform to discuss, challenge, support and/or reinforce gender inequality in public discourse. The dimensions are related in that they all shape the broader social landscape where the legitimacy and status of women's football is being negotiated. The central problem this thesis focuses on is that of the continued masculinization of football and the contestation of gender inequality in the FIFA-governed sport in institutional governance, traditional media, and digital social media discourse. The study explores these dimensions with the already established documentary and media data set within the theoretical framework of Bourdieu and analyses how power relations of the female and the male are represented and negotiated. By doing this it aims to offer a sociological analysis of the link between institutional structures, forms of capital, set expectations, and the representation of women's football.

Table 1.1: Analytical Framework Examining Formal Mechanisms, Informal Barriers and Gendered Power Relations in Football

Institutional Level	**Formal Mechanisms (The Rhetoric)**	**Informal Reality (The Barrier)**	**Bourdieusian theoretical focus**
Macro (Global Policy)	Gender quotas on executive committees, standardized funding processes.	Women's exclusion from low-priority, low-paid portfolios and the possibility of symbolic compliance with equality commitments.	The relationship between formal structural progress and established gendered dispositions (habitus).
Meso (Organizational)	Transparent hiring process and	Glass-ceiling barriers in coaching and technical positions,	The conversion and distribution of capital, and gender-related

	professionalization based on merit.	and established recruitment networks.	gatekeeping within the organizational field.
Micro (Lived Experience)	Safeguarding policies, equal resource allocation, and professional respect.	Contract insecurity, female non-permanent employment, and hostility at work, both online and offline.	Resistance, negotiation and struggles over positions and recognition within the field.

The table points out that gender equality in football can only be looked at as a whole, and not through formal policies or institutional commitments. Global policies and equality measures should also be considered at the macro level, along with the allocation of institutional responsibilities and resources. From the organisational perspective, the issue of access to positions of authority, recruitment and professionalisation are important to the analysis of the operation of capital and institutional influence. On the lived level, safeguarding, employment status, professional status and the interaction with others (online and offline) are additional angles from which gender relations can be explored. These levels are not independent of each other but are analytically linked. Bourdieu's idea of field, capital, and habitus offer a framework for understanding connections between institutional positions, the distribution of capital, institutional expectations, and opportunities for resistance. These dimensions are explored in the empirical chapters, through the data gathered in the study, and are not necessarily presented in the table as an item of the issues.

1.3. Theoretical Anchoring: The Bourdieusian Lens

This thesis aims to analyse the dynamics of the reproduction and the contestation of gender inequality in FIFA's football. The concepts of field, capital, and habitus have been developed by Bourdieu and offer a sociological lens for the analysis of how power dynamics, institutional use of the sport and social norms influence participation, recognition, and opportunities in sport. This framework allows a sporting context to be explored and how inequalities in gender come to be entrenched in the structures and

routine of a sport. Field is a key element of Bourdieu's work. A field is an organized social arena where various actors and institutions are located, engage in interaction and competition for resources, influence and legitimacy. In this study, global football is treated as a field in which institutional and cultural stencils are imposed on the actions of governing bodies, national football associations, clubs, players, media organisations and other relevant actors. These actors need not be of equal authority, resource or influence. Their locations within the field are determined by what forms of capital they possess and the rules and practices which are used to exercise power. Therefore, the traditional power imbalance between men and women in football is examined in the context of the institutional structures and expectations that shape who is recognised for participation, authority and sporting success. The concept of capital is another way of exploring the operation of power in a field; it is a concept developed by Bourdieu. Capital is any resource which can give an individual or an organisation influence and advantages. In this thesis, I will explore four types of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Economic capital: financial resources and material assets which can affect the position of an actor inside the football field. For this study these aspects of the industry are relevant: broadcasting rights, financing, funding structure and disparities in the economic resources assigned to men's and women's football. These dimensions are applicable to the issues confronting financial resources and institutional priorities that can exacerbate disparities in sport. The thesis includes original empirical facts and results of financial inequality; the theoretical part does not add or replace any figures. Cultural capital is knowledge, competencies, skills, and types of expertise that are acknowledged as useful in a specific area. In football this could be technical, tactical, sporting knowledge, coaching knowledge and professional qualifications. It is significant that these competencies are recognised due to the ability and expertise in sport could be assessed and represented differently by men and women's football. This idea thus serves as a starting point for analysing the description, valuation or questioning of competence in relation to football in institutional or media discourse. Social capital is the resources that come from networks, relationships and connections that have the potential to access opportunities and influence. In football, professional relationships, institutional networks and between individuals and organisations can impact on access to decision making spaces, leadership opportunities and professional recognition. In this thesis, the concept of social capital is taken to be an analytical concept, and the documents and

media in the field yield evidence of relationships and networks that are socially relevant. The existence and influence of specific networks are assumed with no supporting evidence. Symbolic capital is prestige, recognition, authority, and legitimacy that are recognized in a field. Football can symbolize capital in the recognition received by governing organisations, leaders, teams, players and sporting achievements. The visibility, recognition and perceived value of sporting events can shape the way women's football is positioned in the broader sporting context and this is especially relevant to the representation of women's football in traditional and digital media. In this study it is therefore important to examine the role of institutional recognition and media representation in the process of establishing and challenging legitimacy in football. In Bourdieu's concept another important idea is 'habitus'. Habitus is a relatively durable perspective, disposition and ways of thinking that people have developed in their social experiences and environments. Such attitudes are important in shaping the comprehension and reaction to the perspectives and routines of a specific profession. As a concept, habitus can be used to think of how the assumptions that are historically rooted on the issue of gender, leadership, sporting ability and perceived value of men's and women's football can be normalised. It is pertinent to this study because gender inequality can be perpetuated in ways other than formal institutional policies; the embodied expectations and conventional measures of sporting participation and success also play a role. But the concept is used with prudence: the analysis does not make claims about the personal dispositions of individuals which are not supported by the material available. The concepts of field, capital, and habitus are related. The capitalist resource of an actor affects their position in a field, and the actor's field sense and reaction to the field is shaped by the actor's habitus. These relationships also enable understanding of the way that power systems can be maintained or disrupted. It does not depict the field as unchanging or that inequalities do not exist that can be challenged. Rather, it is intended to examine the role that institutional practices, media content, and discourses in the public sphere can play in reinforcing existing power relations and/or challenging them. The analysis of Bourdieu's framework throughout the three related fields in this thesis. First, the analysis of institutional governance includes the effects of FIFA's policies, institutional structures, resource allocation and institutional practices on positions and power dynamics in the football field. Second, the analysis of traditional media focuses on the representation and evaluation of women's football, the female athletes and sporting achievements,

especially the recognition and value given to them. Third, the analysis of digital social media discourse reflects on the discussion, challenge, support or contest of gender inequality in the online communication. These are seen as part of the same dimension of the football field and are not considered as separate problems. Therefore, this thesis centers on Bourdieu's theoretical framework. It allows for the study to explore a link between gender inequality and resource allocation, institutional status, professional recognition and entrenched social norms in FIFA-led football. The thesis aims to answer how the gender-perspective of power relations is reproduced and challenged in the existing documentary and media material through the lens of field, capital and habitus; and to interpret the aspects of institutional governance, traditional media, and digital social media discourse as a form of power relations.

1.4. Research Aim

The main aim of this master's thesis is to examine the reproduction of gender inequality in FIFA-governed football through institutional governance and traditional media framing, as well as the contestation and policing of gender inequality within digital social media discourse on football.

1.5. Research Question

How is gender inequality reproduced and contested within FIFA-governed football across institutional governance, traditional media, and digital social media discourse?

1.6. Thesis Structure

This thesis consists of seven substantive chapters, followed by the references and appendices. The chapters move from the background of the research and theory to the methodology, empirical analysis, and discussion and conclusion.

Chapter 1: Introduction introduces the research background and context, outlines the problem statement, and establishes the theoretical foundation through Bourdieu's framework. It presents the research aim and research question and explains the overall structure of the thesis.

Chapter 2: Critical Literature Review, reviews contemporary literature on gender inequalities in football. It covers history of gender inequality, institutional governance and power, financial inequality,

representation in the media, social media activism and intersectional aspects of exclusion. The chapter provides a review of existing literature and identifies the gaps in the literature as a basis for the current study.

Chapter 3: Methodology describes the methodological approach that has been taken in the research. It explains the research design, epistemological stance, operationalization of the theoretical framework, data sources, sampling strategy, data collection methods, coding and data analysis. Also, it deals with issues of trustworthiness, ethical issues and methodological limitations.

Chapter 4, The Gendered Field: A Bourdieusian Analysis of FIFA's Institutional and Policy Framework, discusses the institutional and policy aspects of gender inequality in football under FIFA's rule. It takes gender equality, governance, representation and leadership, resource allocation, transparency of financial flows and institutional commitments, formal policy commitments and implementation, into account. These issues are rethought in the light of the theory of Bourdieu.

Chapter 5: The Field of Vision: Governing Bodies, Sports Media, and the Battle for Symbolic Capital explores the image of women's football in sports media and its connection with the symbolic value and institutional power. It reflects on the visibility of media, quantitative and qualitative representations, dominant narratives, regional differences and the role of media framing in the reproduction and contestation of gendered meanings in football.

Chapter 6: Social Media Discourse Analysis looks at gender-related discourse in the social media platforms used in this study. It examines the themes of the dominant narrative, supportive and celebratory discourse, misogyny, online hostility, athlete self-representation, digital resistance and cross-platform patterns. The chapter examines the potential of digital communication to reinforce and challenge gender inequalities and discusses how these may be enacted in practice.

Chapter 7: Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations synthesizes and discusses the results of the three empirical chapters. It investigates the gender inequality as a structural problem and asks questions about the interdependence of institutional discourse, media representation and social media contestation. The results are explained with the help of the theories of Bourdieu and then the general

conclusion, recommendations, and implications and limitations of the research are discussed. The thesis is followed by the reference list and appendices (these are not required for this thesis) that contain the supporting materials that strengthen the transparency and auditability of the research process, such as the coding framework and extracts of data relevant to the research.

Chapter 2: Critical Literature Review

2.1. Chapter Overview

Over the past two decades, academic scholarship on gender inequality in football has expanded alongside the growing visibility of women's football, the development of international women's competitions, and increasing attention to gender inequality in sport (Pfister, 2015; Whannel, 2008). Existing research has examined several important dimensions of this issue, including women's participation and representation, leadership opportunities, institutional governance, financial inequality, media coverage, and equal-pay debates (Dworkin & Messner, 2002). This body of scholarship has established that gender inequality in football is not confined to differences in participation or sporting opportunities. It also concerns the institutional, economic, cultural, and representational conditions through which authority, resources, recognition, and professional opportunities are distributed.

Despite these contributions, the literature remains dispersed across different areas of investigation. Research on sport governance has examined women's underrepresentation in leadership and decision-making positions, while studies of the political economy of sport have considered unequal investment, sponsorship, broadcasting, and financial opportunities. Similarly, media scholarship has explored differences in the visibility and representation of women's sport, while research on digital communication has examined the ways in which gender-related narratives are reproduced and challenged through online platforms. Although these areas provide valuable insights, they are not always examined together as interconnected dimensions of gender inequality within FIFA-governed football (Pielke, 2013; Spaaij, Farquharson, & Marjoribanks, 2015).

This chapter therefore approaches the existing literature through a critical and interconnected examination of the mechanisms associated with the reproduction and contestation of gender inequality. Rather than treating institutional governance, financial arrangements, traditional media, and digital discourse as entirely separate subjects, it considers how these dimensions relate to the wider distribution of power and recognition within football. This approach provides a basis for examining how established institutional arrangements and cultural expectations may influence the position of women's football,

while also considering the spaces through which existing gender relations are questioned and challenged.

Bourdieu's theoretical framework provides the central conceptual foundation for this review. His concepts of field, capital, and habitus offer a way to examine how power relations, access to resources, institutional positions, and forms of recognition operate within a structured social environment (Bourdieu, 1984). Applied to football, this perspective helps connect institutional authority and resource distribution with the cultural and symbolic processes through which particular forms of sporting achievement and legitimacy are recognised. It also provides a framework for considering how media representations and digital discourse participate in struggles over recognition and the established values of the football field.

This chapter is organised in themed units. It first discusses how the gender inequality was formed in football, enabling the understanding of the historical context that has shaped women's role in football. It then examines the issue of governance and institutional power, financial inequality, and the political economy of football. The following sections analyse the media imagery and symbolism, social media, activism and digital contestations and the inter-sectional aspects of exclusion. Finally, the chapter highlights the gap in the present scholarship and provides an account of the relevance of the present study. In this pivotal review, the chapter's authors lay the academic basis for examining gender disparity in institutional governance, traditional media, and digital social media speech in FIFA-dominated football. It also serves as the conceptual foundation for the methodological approach and empirical analysis to follow in the coming chapters.

2.2. Historical Formation of Inequality

Gender inequality in football cannot be understood solely as a contemporary problem or because of the relatively recent development of women's professional football. Its origins are connected to the historical formation of modern football as a sporting institution in which masculine participation, authority, and sporting achievement became established as dominant norms (Korr, 1987; Messner, 2002). Historical scholarship demonstrates that women's participation in organised football developed

within conditions shaped by institutional exclusion and social attitudes that questioned the legitimacy of women as footballers (Bryson, 1987). Consequently, women's football did not develop under the same institutional conditions as men's football. Rather, its development frequently occurred despite institutional opposition and limited support, as discussed in the historical work of Hargreaves (1994).

This historical context is important because it challenges the assumption that contemporary inequalities simply reflect differences in the present-day development or popularity of men's and women's football. The historical organisation of the sport created unequal conditions in relation to participation, recognition, and institutional support. These conditions have implications beyond access to the game itself, since the historical position of women's football also needs to be considered when examining contemporary differences in governance, coaching pathways, financial resources, and sporting status (Hargreaves, 2000). In this respect, present inequalities should not be interpreted as isolated disadvantages or as evidence of a naturally slower development of women's football. They need to be considered in relation to the institutional and cultural histories through which opportunities and recognition within the sport have been unevenly established.

The historical formation of football also raises questions about how particular forms of sporting authority and legitimacy became normalised. Connell (2008) and Messner (2018) provide perspectives for understanding the relationship between sport, masculinity, and the cultural expectations associated with gender. These perspectives challenge the representation of football as a neutral sporting environment in which men and women have simply developed at different rates. Instead, they draw attention to the historical influence of masculine norms in shaping the organisation and cultural meaning of sport. Describing women's football only as a developing sector may therefore overlook the historical conditions that established men's football as the dominant reference point against which women's football is frequently evaluated.

Bourdieu's theoretical perspective provides a useful framework for interpreting these historical relationships. His concept of the field directs attention to the ways in which social spaces are structured through relationships of power, competition, and unequal access to valued resources (Bourdieu, 1984).

The historical development of inequality, in turn, affords a necessary context in which to think about the present-day FIFA-governed structure of football. It helps to illuminate the reasons why questions of institutional representation, financial investment, media attention, and sporting legitimacy are not the same and cannot be separated off. Dealing with these dimensions requires a historical awareness of the structures and expectations that have developed and changed in women's football. This section then explores the experiences of gender inequalities in the governance and institutional power of football, specifically looking at how power is distributed and decision-making power and institutional influence are allocated.

2.3. Governance and Institutional Power

A significant body of research on gender inequality in sport examines the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions and sports governance institutions. Although women's participation in sport has increased, their representation in organisational leadership and decision-making remains an important area of concern (Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016). Research in feminist sport management has demonstrated that formal commitments to gender equality do not necessarily eliminate the influence of masculine norms, established networks, and informal organisational cultures within sports institutions (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012; Hoeber & Shaw, 2003; Anderson, 2009). These studies suggest that institutional inequality cannot be understood exclusively through formal organisational structures or numerical representation. Attention must also be given to the informal practices and relationships that influence access to authority and opportunities within sporting organisations.

An important distinction in this literature concerns the relationship between women's representation and their substantive influence over institutional decisions. The presence of women in leadership positions does not necessarily indicate an equivalent distribution of institutional authority. Research on sport leadership has therefore moved beyond simply counting the number of women occupying organisational roles to examining whether representation translates into meaningful participation in decision-making (Darvin & Sagas, 2017; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). This distinction is particularly relevant to football governance, where influence over financial decisions, policy priorities, strategic planning, and organisational resources may remain concentrated among established institutional actors.

Consequently, an organisation may demonstrate progress in visible representation while existing arrangements of authority and decision-making remain relatively unchanged (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008). The distinction between descriptive representation and substantive influence is therefore essential when evaluating institutional commitments to gender equality.

The literature on gendered organisations provides further insight into how these inequalities may be reproduced through institutional arrangements. Feminist institutional scholarship highlights that organisations should not be treated as neutral structures in which individuals participate under equivalent conditions. Instead, organisational rules, expectations, routines, and informal practices may reflect historically established gender relations (Acker, 1992). This perspective helps explain why formal equality programmes and organisational reforms do not necessarily produce immediate changes in established patterns of authority. Institutional arrangements may continue to privilege familiar practices and dominant organisational actors even when equality is formally recognised as an organisational objective (Hovden, 2012). In this respect, the relationship between formal rules and informal organisational practices is important for understanding the persistence of gender inequality within football governance.

However, an important limitation in the existing literature concerns the extent to which these issues have been examined specifically within FIFA's global governance structure. A substantial proportion of the available research focuses on national sporting organisations or sport governance more generally, rather than examining the institutional processes through which global football governance operates (Hovden, 2006). Studies addressing FIFA have frequently considered symbolic appointments, organisational reforms, and institutional responses to gender equality (Ahn & Cunningham, 2020). Nevertheless, further analytical attention is required to understand how global governing institutions establish priorities, define institutional legitimacy, exercise decision-making authority, and influence the distribution of resources across confederations and member associations (Pielke, 2013). This distinction is important because FIFA's institutional influence extends beyond its internal governance

arrangements to the wider organisational structures through which international football is regulated and developed.

Bourdieu's theoretical framework provides a central perspective for examining these relationships. Rather than treating women's underrepresentation as an isolated organisational problem, the concept of the field directs attention to the structured relationships between institutional positions, competing actors, and unequal access to valued resources (Bourdieu, 1984). Within FIFA-governed football, governing bodies and their associated organisations can be examined as actors occupying different positions within a field in which authority, resources, and recognition are unevenly distributed. Access to leadership positions is therefore relevant not only because of representation itself, but also because such positions provide opportunities to influence institutional priorities, decision-making processes, and the recognition of interests.

This is further developed in the concept of capital. Economic capital relates to the access to and management of monetary finances and cultural capital relates to the knowledge, expertise and qualifications that are valued in football governance. Social capital highlights the social networks and institutional connections that can help bring opportunities and influence on an individual. Symbolic capital has to do with the legitimacy, prestige and recognition of specific actors, roles and institutional practices. The different types of capital are interconnected and are useful in understanding why access to formal leadership does not necessarily lead to an equivalent capacity to make decisions in institutions. Transfer and transformation of capital in the football field can thus help to sustain existing power dynamics. A similar point is made regarding the need to look at how institutional language and policies about equality are built and put in place. Formal commitments to gender equality can help to make the institutional responsibility visible to the public, but they need to be evaluated together with decision making processes and the mechanisms for implementing them, as well as the allocation of resources. The difference between formal and substantive institutional change is, therefore, crucial in understanding the potential for the reproduction or challenge of gender inequality in football governance. Overall, the literature shows that gender inequality in football governance is not simply a matter of the lack of female representation among football stakeholders. It is about how institutional

power is distributed, who has access to the valuable institutional capital, how organisations function and how legitimacy and influence are created. The current knowledge on gendered sport organisations and leadership has contributed to a deeper understanding of issues, but an integrated analysis of the interaction between global governance of football, institutional power, allocation of resources, and symbolic recognition is needed. This research seeks to fill this gap, looking at institutional governance and the policy discourse of FIFA-governed football, with the concepts of field and capital as its main theoretical underpinning.

2.4. Financial Inequality and the Political Economy of Football

Financial inequality represents a significant dimension of gender inequality in football. Existing research has examined differences in prize money, sponsorship arrangements, broadcasting agreements, player remuneration, access to facilities, and professional development opportunities (Women's Sports Foundation, 2020). These inequalities extend beyond differences in individual earnings and reflect wider disparities in the financial resources and commercial structures available to men's and women's football. From a political economy perspective, financial arrangements within sport need to be examined in relation to the historical and institutional conditions that influence how resources are generated, distributed, and prioritised. Fink (2015) highlights the importance of examining women's sport within broader market structures rather than treating financial disadvantage as an isolated or accidental outcome. Similarly, Cooky, Messner, and Hextrum (2013) draw attention to the historical and cultural conditions through which men's sport has acquired greater commercial visibility and symbolic prestige. Consequently, existing differences in commercial value should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of an inherent difference in the sporting worth of men's and women's football.

A key aspect of the literature, of course, is the relationship between cultural visibility and economic resources. Financial investment has the potential to impact the infrastructure needed for professional development, such as facilities, coaching availability, player support, competition organisation, and promotional opportunities. Meanwhile, the level of media coverage and public exposure may have a bearing on commercial interest, sponsorship and the market value of a sporting event. This connection can give rise to a vicious cycle: Limited commercial investment limits opportunities for visibility,

limited visibility limits commercial investment. This relationship highlights the importance of understanding the financial inequality in relation to the cultural and institutional frameworks in which the sporting value is created.

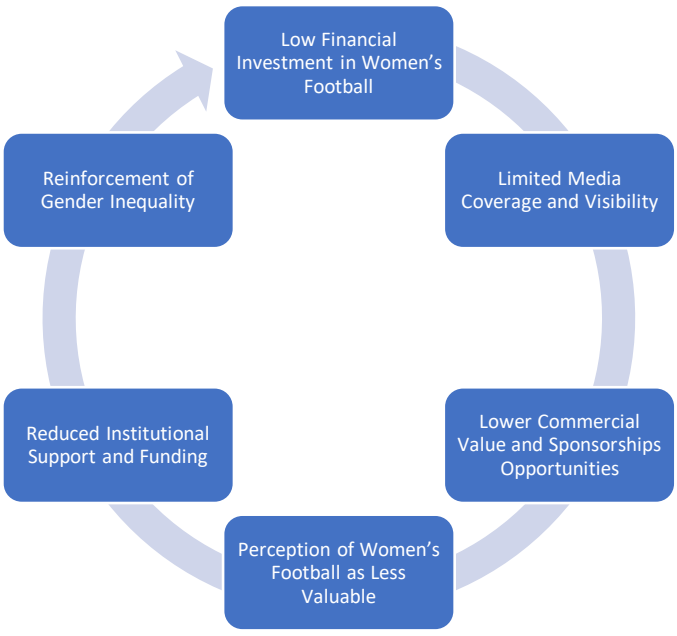
Bourdieu's concept of capital provides a useful framework for interpreting this relationship. Economic capital concerns the financial resources available to institutions, competitions, clubs, and players, while symbolic capital relates to prestige, legitimacy, and recognition within the sporting field (Bourdieu, 1984). These forms of capital are interconnected rather than operating independently. Established recognition and prestige may contribute to the commercial attractiveness of a sporting product, while financial investment can strengthen the institutional and material conditions through which recognition is produced. Applied to men's and women's football, this perspective helps explain how historically established advantages may be maintained through the relationship between financial resources and symbolic value. It also directs attention towards the institutional processes through which certain competitions and forms of sporting achievement are prioritised and recognised.

Research on equal pay has brought these inequalities into greater public and institutional focus, particularly through cases in which women's national teams have challenged football federations through public campaigns and legal action (Women's Sports Foundation, 2020). However, an exclusive focus on elite player remuneration may provide an incomplete understanding of financial inequality. The distribution of resources also concerns development funding, travel arrangements, healthcare provision, coaching programmes, grassroots participation, facilities, and promotional infrastructure (Sport New Zealand, 2020). These dimensions are important because they influence the conditions under which players and teams can participate, develop, and compete. Financial inequality should therefore be examined across different levels of the football system rather than being reduced to comparisons of salaries or prize money.

Within FIFA-governed football, this broader perspective makes it necessary to consider how institutional priorities and resource distribution influence the development of the women's game. FIFA's role in global football governance provides an important institutional context for examining the

relationship between formal development commitments, financial support, and the distribution of opportunities across the wider football structure (FIFA, 2020). The relevant question is not only whether financial resources are made available, but also how priorities are established, how support is allocated, and how institutional commitments are translated into opportunities for women's football. This perspective connects financial inequality with the governance issues discussed in the previous section.

However, there are parts of the current literature that are limited in that they only compare wages, prize money, sponsorship or broadcasting income. These comparisons can help reveal differences, but they may not provide a complete understanding of the relationship between financial systems and institutional decision making, media portrayal, and the creation of commercial value. To understand the relationship between economic resources and symbolic recognition within the soccer field more comprehensively, an integrated approach is needed. This is especially pertinent to the present study, which takes institutional documents and media discourse into account, as well as digital social media material. By using Bourdieu's lens, financial inequality may thus be analysed not only as a difference in resources but as part of a larger set of relationships in which economic and symbolic capital is both given and recognised in the context of football, and FIFA's governance.



2.5. Media Representation and Symbolic Value

Media representation plays an important role in shaping how women's football is understood, valued, and recognised within the wider sporting environment. Existing research indicates that gender inequality in football is not limited to differences in financial investment, institutional representation, or access to professional opportunities. It is also reflected in the amount of media attention given to women's football and, importantly, the ways in which women's participation and achievements are presented. Research by Cooky, Messner, and Hextrum (2013), UNESCO (2021), and Tuchman (1978) highlights the unequal representation of women in sports media, including differences in coverage, visibility, and the prominence given to women's sporting activities. These patterns suggest that media representation should be examined not only in terms of how frequently women's football appears in the media, but also in terms of the status and recognition attached to that coverage.

Numerical visibility, however, does not necessarily translate into equal recognition. Qualitative research suggests that women's football has frequently been represented through narratives that emphasise novelty, emotion, selflessness, or comparisons with men's football (Creedon, 1994). Similarly, Kane (2013) argues that women's sporting achievements may be framed as unexpected, extraordinary, or inspirational rather than being treated as evidence of established sporting excellence and technical authority. Although such descriptions may appear positive, they can reproduce assumptions that women's achievements are unusual or exceptional. Consequently, the representation of women's football may continue to position it differently from men's football, even when the coverage itself appears supportive.

This distinction is significant when examined through Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital. Symbolic capital concerns the recognition, legitimacy, prestige, and authority that are socially attributed to individuals, groups, and institutions. Within football, media organisations contribute to the production and circulation of symbolic value by deciding which competitions, athletes, performances, and achievements receive attention and how they are interpreted. Sherry, Osborne, and Nicholson (2016) highlight the role of media representation in the creation and dissemination of symbolic capital. From a Bourdieusian perspective, media coverage is therefore not simply a neutral reflection of sporting

importance. It can also contribute to the processes through which certain forms of sporting achievement gain recognition and legitimacy, while others receive comparatively less status.

The language used in sports journalism is particularly relevant to understanding these processes. Fairclough (1995) emphasises that critical discourse analysis moves beyond counting representations or identifying the presence of particular images. It also examines how language constructs meaning and how discourse can reproduce wider relations of power. Applied to women's football, this approach makes it possible to examine how media narratives construct ideas about professionalism, sporting seriousness, spectacle, and merit. Hardin and Greer (2009) similarly demonstrate the importance of examining the language through which women's sport is presented and understood. Such analysis is relevant because the terminology used to describe women's football may influence whether it is represented as a legitimate professional sporting field or as a secondary form of entertainment.

Another important issue concerns the relationship between media visibility and major sporting events. Research indicates that coverage of women's football can increase during major competitions, although this attention may be event-driven rather than sustained throughout the wider sporting calendar (Pope, Allison, & Petty, 2024; Desjardins, 2021). Lenskjold and Hovden (2016) similarly discuss how media visibility can increase around flagship sporting events before declining afterwards. This pattern raises questions about the extent to which increased attention represents a lasting change in the position of women's football within sports media. Temporary increases in coverage may provide important opportunities for recognition, but they do not necessarily indicate that women's football has achieved consistent visibility or an equivalent position within established media priorities.

The framing of women's football in relation to men's football is another significant concern. Wensing and Bruce (2003) identify how comparative representations can maintain men's sport as the standard against which women's sport is evaluated. When women's football is repeatedly discussed through comparisons with men's football, its value may be assessed according to standards and expectations established within the historically dominant men's game. This can limit the recognition of women's football on its own sporting terms. Bruce (2016) further highlights that increased media visibility does

not automatically produce gender equality, particularly when the narratives accompanying that visibility continue to reproduce gendered assumptions. The distinction between visibility and meaningful recognition is therefore central to understanding media-related inequality in football.

These arguments can be brought together through Bourdieu's understanding of the relationship between symbolic capital and the structure of a field. Football is a competitive social field in which different actors and institutions struggle for recognition, authority, and legitimacy. Media organisations participate in these struggles by selecting and presenting sporting events, athletes, and achievements in ways that can influence their public value. When men's football continues to occupy the dominant position within media representation, its established status may be reinforced. Women's football, even when receiving increased attention, may continue to encounter unequal conditions of symbolic recognition if its achievements are framed as exceptional, secondary, or dependent on comparison with men's football. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) further underline the importance of cultural and symbolic capital in understanding gender inequality in football.

The literature also indicates that the inequality of the media should not be measured only in terms of the amount of coverage. It also calls for consideration of language, framing, prominence and forms of recognition of women's football. The distinction is relevant to this study as it offers a means to consider the representation of gender, sporting achievement, institutional authority, and the value of women's football in the mainstream media. It also links institutional power and public representation: inequalities explored in the governance of football and the distribution of resources could be represented, reinforced or contradicted in media narratives. While much theoretical work has been undertaken to account for the experiences of women in sports media, the connection between institutional governance, the framing of the mainstream sports media, and the experiences of women and girls in digital social media needs to be investigated more sensibly and thoroughly in the context of FIFA-governed football. To discuss this relationship, the present study looks at institutional and mainstream media documents, as well as social media documents. The analysis is based on Bourdieu's ideas of field and symbolic capital to understand the representation and contestation of gendered sporting value and legitimacy in these

interconnected contexts. This is further explored in the next section, which looks at social media as a platform to directly engage in discussions regarding gender inequality and the role of women's football.

2.6. Social Media, Activism, and Digital Contestation

Social media has become an increasingly important arena in which gender relations, representation, and power within sport are negotiated. Unlike traditional sports journalism, where editorial organisations and professional gatekeepers exercise considerable influence over the selection and presentation of sporting content, digital platforms provide athletes, supporters, advocacy organisations, and other users with opportunities to participate directly in public discussions. Research has consequently examined social media as a space in which established media and institutional hierarchies can be both challenged and reproduced (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). In women's football, digital communication has enabled greater circulation of discussions concerning equal pay, gender discrimination, media representation, harassment, and institutional accountability. These developments demonstrate that social media is not simply an alternative communication channel but an important arena in which the cultural legitimacy and public recognition of women's football are contested.

Digital activism has contributed to the visibility of issues that have historically received limited attention within mainstream sporting institutions and media. Campaigns concerning equal pay, professional recognition, and discriminatory treatment have enabled athletes and supporters to communicate their concerns to wider audiences and challenge established assumptions about women's participation in football. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) highlight the significance of digital media in women's sporting experiences and the negotiation of gendered identities. Similarly, research examining the United States Women's National Soccer Team's equal-pay campaign demonstrates that athlete activism can bring questions of gender inequality into wider public and political discussions, although increased visibility does not necessarily translate into broader policy transformation (English, 2021). From a Bourdieusian perspective, these activities can be understood as struggles over symbolic capital, as athletes and advocacy networks seek recognition, legitimacy, and authority within a sporting field historically shaped by unequal distributions of power and resources (Bourdieu, 1984). Digital platforms may therefore provide opportunities to challenge established hierarchies, although the recognition

generated through online activity does not automatically produce institutional influence or material equality.

However, the empowering potential of social media must be considered alongside the inequalities reproduced within digital environments. Women athletes who gain public visibility can also become targets of misogyny, sexualisation, trolling, and gender-based harassment. Kavanagh, Jones, and Sheppard-Marks (2019) draw attention to the gendered nature of online abuse directed towards women athletes. More recent research by Fenton et al. (2024), examining online discussions surrounding English women's football clubs, identifies recurring forms of sexism, misogyny, sexualisation, and resistance to women's presence within football-related digital spaces. Their findings demonstrate that social media can reproduce exclusionary attitudes even within spaces where women's football receives visibility and promotional attention. This suggests that increased digital participation does not necessarily challenge the established gender hierarchy; it may also provide new channels through which that hierarchy is defended and reinforced.

The relationship between online visibility and inequality is further complicated by the ways in which athletes experience and respond to digital environments. Social media can provide opportunities for athletes to develop their public profiles, communicate with supporters, and promote their professional achievements. Nevertheless, exposure to online abuse can influence their participation and willingness to engage publicly. Toffoletti, McGrane, and Reddan (2026), examining online harm experienced by elite women athletes, identify consequences for athletes' wellbeing, sporting performance, and economic opportunities. Their research also highlights the importance of athlete perspectives in understanding the effects of online abuse, rather than examining harmful comments alone. Although their study considers women's sport more broadly rather than football exclusively, it provides a useful recent contribution to understanding the consequences of digital inequality for women athletes. These findings reinforce the importance of examining online spaces as environments in which recognition and visibility can coexist with exclusion and unequal conditions of participation.

The Bourdieusian perspective provides a useful way of interpreting these competing processes. Social media can be understood as an arena connected to the wider field of football, in which different actors compete to influence public meanings, establish legitimacy, and gain recognition. Athletes, supporters, advocacy organisations, media institutions, and governing bodies do not possess equal resources or influence within these struggles. Digital networks may contribute to the development of social capital by connecting individuals and groups, while online recognition can potentially contribute to symbolic capital. However, the conversion of online visibility into wider institutional recognition, economic opportunities, or decision-making influence is neither automatic nor equally available to all actors. The value attached to forms of sporting knowledge, public communication, and visibility remains shaped by the power relations operating within the wider football field (Bourdieu, 1984). Consequently, digital platforms should not be treated as inherently equal spaces, but as arenas in which existing hierarchies may be contested, negotiated, and reproduced.

One of the key gaps in the literature is the connection between institutional communication, mainstream media representation and user-generated social media communication. Previous studies have focused on aspects of digital activism, online abuse, athlete representation and gendered participation, but these aspects are often studied in isolation. There has been less focus on the interactions between institutional messaging on gender equality and dominant media messages and outcomes generated by media users across digital platforms. This is especially true in football, which is largely under the jurisdiction of FIFA, as institutional agreements, media coverage, and public reactions play a role in the broader building and challenging of gendered legitimacy. Taking a multi-layered approach to these dimensions can help to gain a more holistic picture of the factors that support the reproduction of gender inequalities and the potential for challenge across various but interdependent aspects of the football field. This gap is a significant baseline for the current study that investigates institutional governance, traditional media and digital social media discourse from a Bourdieusian analysis perspective.

2.7. Intersectionality and Uneven Experiences of Exclusion

Gender inequality in football cannot be understood as a uniform experience shared by all women. Women's experiences of participation, representation, and access to opportunities are shaped by the

interaction of gender with other social and structural factors, including race, nationality, class, sexual orientation, religion, and geographical location. Crenshaw (1989) introduced intersectionality to demonstrate how multiple systems of disadvantage can interact, producing experiences of exclusion that cannot be adequately understood by examining one dimension of inequality in isolation. In the context of sport, this perspective is important because women involved in football occupy different social and institutional positions, and their access to resources, recognition, and professional opportunities may vary considerably (Cox & Thompson, 2000; Elling & Knoppers, 2005; Dadswell, Mandicos, Flowers, & Hanlon, 2022).

The global structure of football makes this issue particularly significant. Opportunities available to professional women athletes in well-resourced European football environments cannot automatically be treated as representative of the experiences of women from other geographical and socioeconomic contexts. Athletes from resource-constrained environments, migrant backgrounds, and marginalised communities may encounter additional barriers relating to infrastructure, financial support, institutional representation, and social acceptance. Similarly, the experiences of LGBTQ athletes may involve forms of exclusion that are not adequately captured through a gender-only analysis. These differences demonstrate why research on gender inequality in football needs to consider the wider social and geographical conditions in which participation and professional development take place (Bairner, 2015; Harry & Graves, 2024; Smith, 2012).

The geographical concentration of existing football scholarship also raises questions about the distribution of academic attention and legitimacy. Research based predominantly on Anglophone and Euro-American settings may provide valuable insights, but it cannot necessarily explain the institutional and cultural conditions affecting women's football in other regions. The prominence of particular countries and competitions within academic research is also influenced by the availability of published material, institutional documentation, and media coverage. Consequently, experiences and inequalities within less extensively documented football environments may receive comparatively limited scholarly attention (Smith, 2012). This limitation is relevant when examining FIFA-governed football because its

international structure encompasses national associations and sporting contexts with substantially different resources, institutional arrangements, and social conditions.

Intersectional perspectives have also contributed to critiques of sports governance by drawing attention to the unequal distribution of representation, opportunities, and institutional influence. Research on gender and sport governance highlights that access to leadership and decision-making positions cannot be understood solely through formal equality policies; broader organisational and social relations also influence whose experiences and perspectives receive recognition (Spaaij, Farquharson, & Marjoribanks, 2015). Similarly, Cunningham (2014) demonstrates the importance of considering intersecting dimensions of diversity when examining organisational inequality in sport. However, further attention is needed to understand how international football organisations, including FIFA, distribute resources, establish eligibility requirements, determine leadership representation, and shape the visibility of different groups within the sport.

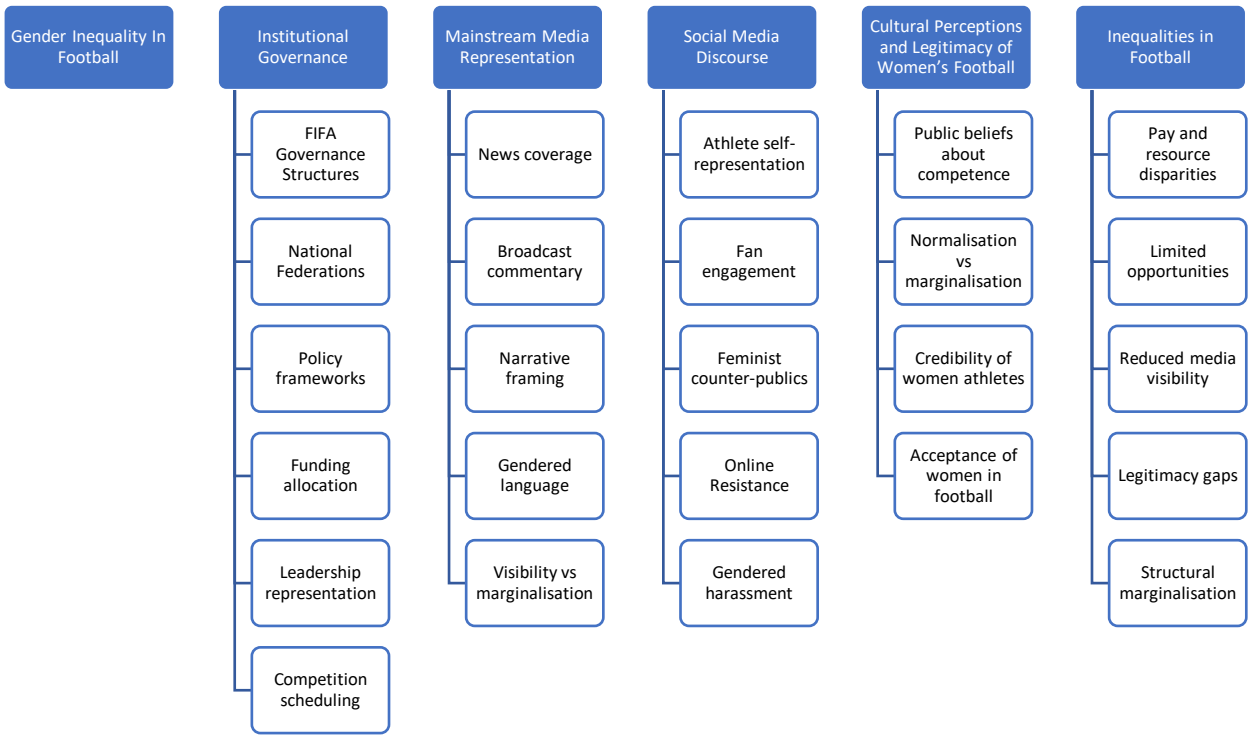
Bourdieu's theoretical perspective provides an additional way to examine how these inequalities are reproduced within the wider football field. The distribution of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital is not necessarily equal among individuals and organisations occupying different positions within this field. Access to financial resources, professional networks, institutional recognition, and opportunities to influence decision-making can shape the extent to which different actors are able to participate and exercise authority. These unequal distributions may interact with gender, race, class, and geographical location, influencing whose participation is valued and whose experiences receive institutional and public recognition. From this perspective, intersectional inequalities can be considered in relation to the unequal positions occupied by actors and the different forms of capital available to them (Bourdieu, 1984). This does not mean that all forms of exclusion can be reduced to capital alone; rather, the Bourdieusian framework helps explain how unequal resources and recognition contribute to the reproduction of power relations within football.

Overall, the literature shows that gender disparities in football are interwoven with other social and institutional inequalities. Yet the current literature offers room for exploration on the other side of the

argument, that is, the relationship between these inequalities and FIFA-governed football's governance framework, resource allocation, media coverage, and public dialogue. In the present study, women's experiences are not assumed to be uniform, and the significance of these wider inequalities is taken into account in analysing institutional and media representations. It continues to analyse evidence available from the chosen documentary, mainstream and social media materials. This is significant because understanding football inequality at an intersectional level should contribute to understanding the broader picture but should not be used to infer experiences and characteristics of individuals where the data on which they are based are not established.

Figure 2.2 provides a conceptual map of the dimensions in which gender inequality can be reproduced and challenged in the FIFA governed football, showing their interconnections. Combines institutional governance, mainstream media portrayal, social media discussion, and cultural perceptions that enable the legitimacy of women's football. These dimensions are viewed through the lens of how they might relate to inequalities in pay, resources, opportunities, visibility and representation. A Bourdieuian perspective on the framework centres on the ways in which power and various types of capital play out through the football pitch, influencing which parts of the game are acknowledged, and who is given credit for them. The framework thus affords a structure for the analysis of the interplay between institutional practices, media images, and public discussions.

Figure 2.2: Conceptual Framework of Gender Inequality in Football



2.8. Gaps in the Existing Knowledge

The literature reviewed in this chapter demonstrates that gender inequality in football has been examined through several important perspectives, including institutional governance, financial arrangements, media representation, and social media discourse. However, these areas are often discussed separately, making it difficult to understand how they interact in the wider football environment governed by FIFA. The following gaps identify areas where further integrated examination is needed and establish the rationale for the present study.

2.8.1. Lack of Integrated Analysis of Structural, Financial, and Cultural Factors

There has been some existing literature on the topic of gender inequality in football, from various angles such as cultural barriers, financial disparities, institutional governance etc. While these studies offer useful insights, studying the dimensions separately will not yield the full picture of how these dimensions are interacting in the creation of gender inequality. The opportunities and recognition for women in football may be mutually reinforcing with institutional arrangements, economic inequalities,

and existing cultural perceptions. Thus, there is a need for a more comprehensive analysis of these dimensions, especially in the context of FIFA-managed football. The relationships examined here can be analysed using Bourdieu's theoretical framework as a lens, since football is a space in which various actors have and fight for economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. The current study seeks to fill in this gap with a comparative case study that explores institutional governance, mainstream media representation and social media discourse as mutually dependent spheres in which gender inequalities are perpetuated and challenged.

2.8.2. Limited Examination of FIFA Governance and Financial Structures

Previous studies have reported on pay, prize money and resource allocation disparities between men's and women's football. It is, however, essential to be mindful of institutional arrangements and decision-making processes that shape resource and opportunity distribution to understand those disparities. There is thus a need for a deeper understanding of the role of FIFA's governance bodies, financial policies, leadership representation and institutional priorities in terms of gender equality. Especially, the linkages between formal policies and institution-based commitments on gender equality and the distribution of resources and representation within football should be taken into account. FIFA can be studied from a Bourdieu's point of view as an important player in the football field which has the power of institutional authority and symbolic power, influencing priorities and in defining what is recognised as valuable in football. The current research is thus focused on the analysis of institutional documents and arrangements of FIFA to understand the distribution of institutional power and the representation of gender equality in the context of institutional power and resource distribution.

2.8.3. Insufficient Attention to Media and Social Media Discourses

Women's football has been discussed at length and is known to be underrepresented and not seen often in comparison with men's football. The way that women's football is narrated, the language used to discuss it and the way that it is covered in news media all impact how women's football is presented in traditional media. Meanwhile, social media offer the opportunities for audiences to interact with women's football, to show their support, to question and challenge prevailing views, and, occasionally, to reinforce gender stereotypes. Although both these types of communication are important, the

relationship between these two and institutional inequality in the broader football is worthy of study. Specifically, there is a need for increased focus on the interaction and impact of institutional and media messages and user-generated social media discourse. Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital applies to this as it could be argued that visibility, recognition, and legitimacy can affect the valuation of women's football in the field. This study seeks to fill this gap by analysing documents of traditional media, social media and institutional documents that will be considered within a connected analytical framework.

2.8.4. Limited Evaluation of Gender Equality Policies and Reform Initiatives

FIFA and other football governing bodies have adopted measures and development programmes for women's football with the aim of promoting its development. Policy and institutional commitments, however, cannot be used to determine the level of structural inequalities that have been addressed. Thus, it is important to look not only at the explicit goals of such initiatives, but also at how gender equality is manifested in institutional documents, and at the links between these commitments and overall patterns of governance, resource allocation and representation. The literature analysed in this study suggests that there is a need to investigate the link between policy pledges and the institutional environment in which women's football is played further in a critical manner. A Bourdieusian perspective allows us to think about how institutional policies can affect the field of capital distribution and the recognition of women's football in the broader field. Therefore, in this paper the institutional material as well as the mainstream and social media are analysed to understand the presentation, recognition and contestation of gender equality. It does not take for granted that policy statements are evidence of successful reform but rather looks at them in relation to the wider patterns revealed in the documentary sources of the study.

2.9. Summary

The findings from the reviewed literature in this chapter show that the gender equality in football is a multifaceted and entrenched phenomenon, influenced by institutional, economic, cultural and media-related processes. Previous studies have explored these aspects in various ways and identified disparities in the governance and leadership structures, financial systems, media coverage, and opportunities for women in football. The areas of analysis, however, tend to be looked at individually, which prevents

understanding how these are interrelated when it comes to reproduction and contestation of gender inequalities. The literature also suggests that inequalities can be found outside institutional frameworks. It is seen in the way that economic resources are allocated, how women's football is represented and valued in the mainstream media, and how attitudes and inequalities towards women's football are formulated and contested in social media discussions. These interrelated dimensions offer a valuable perspective on the working of gendered power relations in FIFA-led football. Bourdieu's theoretical framework can be useful for analysing these relationships. It offers ideas of field, capital and habitus that can help to conceptualise the distribution and contestation of power, recognition, legitimacy and resources in football. The use of this framework allows the analysis to look beyond participation and representation to gender inequality as it relates to the distribution and recognition of various capitals within the football field. The need for the current study stems from the gaps in the literature, especially in regard to the lack of integration between institutional governance, financial systems, traditional media and digital discourse. Thus, the aim of this research is to explore the reproduction and contestation of gender inequality in FIFA's football politics in institutional governance, traditional media and digital social media. These dimensions have been investigated by employing a research design, data sources, sampling techniques, and analysis of the data, as detailed in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the research methodology used to examine gender inequality within FIFA-governed football. It explains how institutional governance, mainstream media representation, and social media discourse contribute to the reproduction and contestation of gender inequality. To investigate these interconnected dimensions, the study adopts a qualitative and theory-driven approach, drawing on thematic analysis, critical discourse analysis, qualitative content analysis, and document analysis.

The chapter outlines the research design and epistemological position, followed by the theoretical operationalisation of Bourdieu's concepts. It then explains the data sources, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, coding and analysis processes, and the approaches used to establish trustworthiness. Finally, the chapter addresses ethical considerations and research limitations to provide transparency regarding how the study was conducted.

3.2. Research Design and Epistemological Position

This study uses mixed sources of research in the form of qualitative-dominant, descriptive quantitative content analysis to explore gender inequality in football managed by FIFA. The research explores the representation, reproduction, and contestation of gender inequality through the use of institutional documents, mainstream media articles and public social media posts across various aspects of football. The combination of these sources enables the study to explore the institutional priorities, media representations and public discourse under a shared analytical lens. The analysis process consisted of systematic coding of the total data set conducted with NVivo. Numerical coding frequencies was adopted to mark the recurring themes and patterns in the material collected. The frequencies they obtained were descriptive, not independent statistical evidence of the prevalence of attitudes or behaviours in the wider football population. Coding frequencies are not the number of unique documents but represent the number of times they are coded on the individual document/ posts. Finally, the numerical patterns were analyzed qualitatively to explore the meanings, representations, language,

and power relations of the themes discovered. The material was systematically classified and interpreted using qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in the three sources of data. A document analysis was conducted to analyse institutional publications and their portrayal of priorities in governance and equality campaigns. CDA facilitated deeper analysis of the construction and/or contestation of conceptions of women's football, legitimacy and institutional authority in the language, framing and representation. The study is based on the theoretical lens of the Bourdieusian approach, which forms the core of the analysis of the distribution and contestation of capital and power in the FIFA-regulated terrain of football. Accordingly, the frequencies of the numbers were not interpreted as such without taking into consideration the content and context of the material being used and the theoretical concepts used in the research.

The study adopts an empirical approach to documentary and digital material, treating institutional publications, mainstream media articles, and publicly available social media posts as records of the content produced by their respective sources during the period under investigation. These materials provide the evidential basis for examining how gender inequality is addressed, represented, and discussed within FIFA-governed football. The analysis does not assume that these documents provide direct access to the intentions or personal beliefs of their authors. Instead, it focuses on their observable content, recurring patterns, language, and representations. Numerical coding frequencies are used to identify the distribution of themes within the collected dataset, while subsequent qualitative interpretation examines their significance through Bourdieu's theoretical framework. This approach allows the study to combine systematic empirical examination with theoretically informed interpretation.

3.3. Theoretical Operationalization

The choice and analysis of data is mainly based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory, especially the notions of field, capital, habitus and symbolic power. These ideas offer an analytical base for discussing the 'production' of gender inequality in FIFA-dominated football, its reproduction, its legitimation and its contestation. The study does not view institutional documents, mainstream media article and social media posts as disconnected or distinct sources but instead looks at how all of these forms of discourse

align with broader discourses of power, recognition, resource, and representation in football. The idea of the field, associated with the concept of structuration developed by Bourdieu, is adopted to explore the football field as a social space structured by different actors and organisations that occupy different positions and exert different levels of influence. This study focuses on institutional governance documents and organisational policies which are analysed to determine how the notions of authority, decision making, organisational priorities and gender equality initiatives are represented. The analysis takes account of institutional inclusion/exclusion, market-oriented rationales, bureaucratic action, policy action, and structural reform. The research is document and web-based, so it analyses the representation of relationships of power and institutional positions in the available documents and not attempts to reconstruct the complete relational structure of the football field. The idea of capital offers another opportunity to look at inequalities in the distribution and recognition of resources. The term economic capital is used by referring to financial resources, investment, funding and the economic value of women's football. The representation, evaluation and legitimacy of women's football, its players and its successes are examined as cultural capital. Social capital is explored in terms of access, networks, relationships and opportunities to engage in influential structures. The symbolic capital is considered regarding the aspects of recognition, prestige, authority, visibility, and legitimacy. Additionally, the study will investigate the potential for transformation, limitation or degradation of these forms of capital in the football context. These concepts are applied throughout the material collected, not just to one source. In this way, Bourdieu's notion of the ‘habitus' helps to explain the reoccurrence of certain representations and assumptions that can become normalised and consequently contribute to gendered hierarchies in football. This research focuses on the role of language and media representations in reproducing or challenging the dominant notions of masculinity, femininity, sporting competence and the value of women's football. The analysis is concerned with the "how" rather than the "why": it is based on discernible patterns in the material collected, but not on the personal dispositions or intentions of the people who created the documents or the Internet. These ideas were reflected in the NVivo Coding Framework as they were developed. The framework came in 4 broad categories: Institutional Field and Governance Logics; Capital Disparities and Devaluation; Mediated Habitus and Hegemonic Representation; and Digital Discursive Power and Platform Affordances. Codes under the institutional

category included institutional exclusion, market-oriented rationales, policy tokenism, patriarchal bureaucracy and structural reform. Economic, cultural, social and symbolic inequalities and barriers to the conversion of capital were included in the capital category. The mediated habitus category dealt with the themes of hegemonic masculinity, trivialisation and infantilisation, the framing of the deficit model, and the promotion of progressive media advocacy. The digital category focused on a range of issues including platform-specific moderation concerns, aesthetic labour expectations, algorithmic bias and amplification, digital counter-publics and resistance, and overt online misogyny. The entire coding structure is included in Appendix A. Note that the four categories are not theoretical constructs and do not imply that each coded pattern had to be present in each source. Digital discursive power and platform affordances are especially salient as an empirical field of analysis to investigate the ways in which online representations, interactions and contestation take place. In Bourdieu's theory they are not considered a separate mode of capital. In addition, the analytical approach is based on critical discourse analysis, which specifically focuses on the processes by which language, framing, reoccurring expressions and patterns of representation construct or questions gendered meanings in institutional, media and digital texts. This is not a theory-driven coding system, but rather an analytical method that is used in addition to the theory-driven coding system. The reading of the coded material was therefore brought back to the concepts of Bourdieu and the language and representations of the sources gathered. In general, Bourdieu's conceptual framework that defines the institutional power, unequal access to resources, cultural valuation, representation and legitimacy in the regulated and controlled sport of football are the central concepts that guide the study. The coding framework is a way of unpacking these general theoretical questions into specific areas of analysis where the three sources of material can be examined, but where the empirical content of the dataset can be kept separate from its theoretical interpretation.

3.4. Data Sources

The 1,680 publicly published data items were analyzed. The three types of sources used were institutional documents, articles in mainstream media, and social media posts that are available to the public. The data consisted of FIFA annual reports, governance guidelines, women's football strategy

documents, benchmarking and development reports, articles by eight sports news organisations and over a 1200 social media posts on TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter/X and Instagram. A retrospective method was used for selection and analysis of the material published during the given period. The dates between January 2015 and March 2026 are not the dates the researcher collected or analysed the material, but the dates it was published. The material was gathered posteriorly after the appropriate research ethics clearance was obtained. This distinction is significant because the study involves data collected a posteriori from institutional documents, media articles and publicly available online resources, rather than the prospective collection of the data from human resources. The first category were institutional documents; such as FIFA annual reports, governance regulations, documents pertaining to women's football, development and/or benchmarking documents from selected Confederations. The documents have been attached to analyse the different aspects of gender equality, governance priorities, resource allocation, and development of women football in institutional publications. The second category consisted of articles in mainstream media from eight news and sports organisations: The Guardian, New Zealand Herald, Al Jazeera, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Times of India, Fox Sports and BBC Sport. The publications were chosen to explore the representation, framing, visibility and perceived value of women's football in the selected media outlets. The third category comprised over 1200 public social media posts from Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and YouTube. These posts were analyzed to investigate public conversation and responses about women's football, and also to observe public activism and criticism on the issue of gender equality in football. The social media content was used to explore the processes of the dissemination, contestation, and reflection of institutional and media narratives in online contexts. The three categories of sources were chosen due to their complementary aspects of the research problem. Formal governance documents evidence priorities; material for public representation and cultural valuation comes from mainstream media articles; material for online discussion, contestation and resistance comes from social media posts. The sources were therefore analysed in conjunction with each other to examine an issue of gender inequality in institutional, media and digital contexts.

Table 3.1: Overview of Data Sources

Data source	Material examined	Scope and focus
Institutional documents	FIFA annual reports, governance regulations, women's football strategy documents, and selected confederation development and benchmarking reports	Institutional priorities, governance, gender equality policies, resource allocation, and women's football development
Mainstream media	Articles from BBC Sport, The Guardian, ESPN, New Zealand Herald, Al Jazeera, Fox Sports, The Times of India, and The Sydney Morning Herald	Media visibility, representation, framing, and the perceived value of women's football
Social media	More than 1,200 publicly available posts from Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube	Public discussion, online representations, reactions, activism, criticism, and resistance
Total dataset	**1,680 publicly available data items**	**Material published between January 2015 and March 2026**

3.5. Sampling Strategy

Purposeful sampling was used throughout the investigation, as it did not require statistically representative data. Relevance, visibility, institutional authority, and discursive significance served as

the guidelines for sampling. The aim was to create a set of texts that could be analyzed in detail to identify the main platforms for expressing gender inequality in the football sphere. To be included, institutional content had to be published by FIFA or a relevant confederation, relate directly to one of the following categories: governance, equality, women's football, finance, development, or representation, and be published between 2015 and 2026 and readily available in English. No substantive policy or evaluative text, no duplicate releases, and no purely technical material not related to equality or governance were included. Media content was defined as articles focusing primarily on women's football, FIFA governance and equality issues, key football tournaments, equal pay, media coverage, and/or institutional conflict. Articles that mentioned women's football only in passing were duplicates, and brief news summaries were excluded as they were under the word limit. Social media content was included if the post was public and closely tied to some of the following themes: tournament visibility, equal pay, criticism of institutions, athlete advocacy, or public opinion on gender. Posts that lacked substantive relevance to the research objectives were excluded, as were non-football and private content.

3.6. Data Collection Procedures

Institutional documents were downloaded from FIFA and confederation websites and stored as PDFs for coding. Media texts were collected using a consistent set of search terms, including combinations of "women's football" and "FIFA" as well as "Women's World Cup," "equal pay," and "gender equality." Each article was documented with outlet, date, title, URL, and tentative topic tag. Social media content was gathered through official accounts, platform searches, campaign hashtags, and browsing around the events during the time set aside for this research. Where applicable, screenshots or archived links were retained to maintain the stability of the data. A sample log documented the source type, date of access, reasons for inclusion in the sample, and file-naming rules. The log is especially important for methodological transparency as it enables an examiner to gain insight into the analyzed material and the construction of the sample. A master dataset was maintained during the analysis and included details of the platform, date of publication, source, thematic focus, and the purpose of including each sampled

item. This audit trail provided methodological transparency and allowed all coded material to be traced throughout the analysis.

3.7. Coding and Analysis

All of the data (1680 data items) was organised, coded and analysed in NVivo. A hierarchical coding system was employed to analyze common themes in institutional documents, in mainstream news reports and in social media content available to the public. The framework was based on theory-informed coding, mainly using the concepts of field, capital, habitus, and symbolic power, from Bourdieu, and inductive coding which enabled further patterns to be discerned from the content of this collected material. There were four stages of the analytical process. The data were read again and again to gain familiarity with the data and to determine the initial focus of the research. This, familiarization process, was used as a foundation for later coding. Secondly, NVivo was used to code the materials, both deductively, from the theories, and inductively, from the data. The theory-led process brought to the forefront concepts that are relevant to the study such as economic capital, symbolic capital, institutional authority, market logic and gendered representation. Inductive coding also allowed for the identification of patterns and problems within the content that were not predetermined in the theory, thus allowing for an analysis without being limited to specific theoretical categories. This mixture of theory-driven and data-driven coding is in line with the flexible process of theory-guided data-driven qualitative pattern identification outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thirdly, the codes were expanded to encompass the more general categories of analysis and subcategories. An NVivo framework was created with four key overarching categories: Institutional Field and Governance Logics, Capital Disparities and Devaluation, Mediated Habitus and Hegemonic Representation, and Digital Discursive Power and Platform Affordances. A structured framework for the analysis of institutional practices, of inequalities in various forms of capital, of genders and representations, of online discourse was provided by these categories, which included 19 subcategories. The categories and subcategories are given in Appendix A. The framework highlights the theoretical approach of the study and the patterns that emerged in the analysis of the gathered data. Fourth, the coded material was analyzed with regards to the research objectives and the Bourdieu's theory. The analysis examined institutional practices and the

distribution of institutional authority in football, the distribution of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital, and the representation and assumptions in the field that contributed to the legitimacy or marginalisation of women's football. The role of digital platforms in creating spaces for the reproduction and contestation of gendered discourse received special focus. These interpretations have been based on the coded material and not the coding categories as evidence of certain types of inequality. As a means of interpretation, critical discourse analysis was utilized to analyze the meanings and power relations conveyed by language and representation in the chosen content. Based on Fairclough's (1995) perspective, the words, the repeated expressions, metaphors, contrasts, framing, aspirational language, and the omissions in the institutional documents, in the media headlines and articles, and in social media posts were analyzed. Specific focus was paid to the representation of women's football in the context of sporting value, professionalism, legitimacy, authority and recognition. This allowed the analysis to extend beyond determining the themes addressed in the material, and to examining the way that themes are presented and conceptualized. During the analysis, NVivo also facilitated the descriptive coding frequency. These frequencies were used to explore the distribution of coding throughout the structure, and to support the interpretation of patterns that recurred. Coding frequencies, however, are the frequency of coding to categories and subcategories, rather than the number of unique documents or posts. Where the information within individual data items was relevant to more than one analytical category, then the same data item might be assigned more than one code. As a result, the overall coding frequencies can be more than 1,680 data items. These numerical indicators have been taken into account in combination with the qualitative interpretation and are not viewed as separate indicators of the prevalence of gender inequality. The complete hierarchical coding framework along with the coded examples and the aggregate coding frequencies are included in Appendix A and Appendix B respectively contain eleven illustrative coded examples which show how the coding framework was applied to selected material. We provide these examples to make it easier to understand how coding is done, but they are not meant to be part of the data set. The analysis of the entire coded data set is presented in the following chapters 4–6, not just the eleven examples.

3.8. Example Coding Logic

Raw Extract Type	Illustrative Code	Analytical Category	Capital Dimension
Policy Phrase such as "grow the women's game"	Developmental rhetoric	Institutional framing	Symbolic/Cultural
The report language justifies unequal investment through "market value"	Market rationalization	Resource Inequality	Economic
Headline comparing women's football to men's football	Comparative framing	Legitimacy hierarchy	Cultural/Symbolic
Post criticizing FIFA over equal pay or funding	Institutional contestation	Digital resistance	Economic/ Symbolic
An article focusing on inspiration over tactical quality	Emotional framing	Gendered representation	Cultural

3.9. Trustworthiness

Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were used as criteria to assess the trustworthiness of this study. The following criteria are suitable for qualitative and theory-based analysis of institutional texts, mainstream media texts and social media posts that are openly available. The study focused on the analysis of observable documentary and digital material without collecting participants' accounts, which was addressed by systematic examination of the sources, transparency in the analytical process and theoretical informed interpretation, to ensure trustworthiness.

Credibility was further established by comparing the themes that emerged in the three categories of data sources: institutional documents, mainstream media, and social media to see if there were similar

themes. This allowed the analysis to analyze the presentation of gender inequality in various contexts, instead of just one source category. It also assisted in highlighting similarities and differences in how the discussion around gender equality, representation and institutional responsibility unfolded.

An audit trail of the process of source selection, sample logs, coding stages, and analytical decisions supported Dependability. By documenting these aspects, the research process was made transparent and there was a record of the organisation and analysis of the material collected.

Reflexive memo-writing addressed the issue of Confirmability during the coding process. This practice enabled the researcher to track any assumption and prompted the researcher to stay focused on the information presented in the data and not on speculation. The concepts of field, capital and habitus, which were central to Bourde's work, also gave a coherent theoretical framework to the coded material.

To ensure that the research material was transferable, contextual descriptions were offered of both the research sources and the period covered and the institutions, media and social media contexts out of which the material was drawn. The intent here was not to suggest that the results are generalizable to the entire scope of football-governance contexts, but rather to give the reader a context that would allow him/her to evaluate whether the results can be informative to other sport-governance contexts.

3.10. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Waikato (ethics reference number: HREC(Health)2026#61) before any data collection and analysis commenced. All research activities were conducted in accordance with the approved ethical protocol and University of Waikato ethical guidelines. There is no direct recruitment of volunteers for the study, as it is based on publicly available data. Ethical issues are still crucial, however. Media and institutional texts were analyzed as public records and interpreted sensibly and truthfully. No secret or private content was used on social media—only public content was used. Various strategies were used to analyze the publicly available data, given the nature of the source. Wherever the identity of an official institutional organization (e.g., FIFA), a well-known media organization, or a verified public figure was part of the analytical context, these were identified. By contrast, the names and

identifying information of typical social media users were anonymized or omitted to reduce the extent to which they could be traced, even if the content they authored was open to all. The eleven illustrative cases in the appendixes were chosen to show how the coding framework is applied to the data. Screenshots were redacted, usernames removed, and text paraphrased when necessary to protect individual users, without compromising the analytical meaning of the data. Quotations from more typical social media users were used for analysis; names and other identifying details were removed, and content was paraphrased as appropriate to limit the ability to trace. Only direct quotations were kept if they were necessary to retain the analytical meaning of the data. Direct quotations were used for public institutional documents or officially verified organizational accounts. However, it is acceptable to quote from public institutional or celebrity accounts when this is essential for analytical clarity. Further, the study adopts an ethically reflexive position. Gender differences in football are so controversial that they cannot be treated as an objective transcription. Reflexivity was used to monitor possible preconceived ideas that could affect coding and reasoning. This is particularly important when looking at culturally specific content on women's sports, misogyny, or harassment.

3.11. Limitations

This study has three principal limitations. First, it is based on secondary data and cannot directly tap into the minds of journalists, policymakers, or platform users. Second, the media sample is English language, which means that it is not representative of the diversity of football conversations around the world. Thirdly, it is not a digital archive, but rather a placed sample, as content on social media is created by platform algorithms and changing visibility conditions. Although these limitations do not invalidate the study, they should be made clear to ensure that the claims are consistent with the data.

3.12. Summary

This chapter provides a methodology for analyzing gender inequality in FIFA-governed football that is qualitative and critically based. This thesis aims to track the relationship between material inequality, cultural valuing, and symbolic legitimacy using institutional document analysis, media analysis, and social media discourse analysis in a way that links them together in a Bourdieu-centered framework.

Chapter 4: The Gendered Field: A Bourdieusian Analysis of FIFA's Institutional and Policy Framework

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, 120 official institutional documents, such as FIFA annual reports, governance rules and regulations, women's football strategy documents, benchmarking documents, and policy publications were examined. It critically reflects on the institutional processes, policy promises and governance structures that shape gender relations in international football. The chapter analyses these documents not just as administrative documents but as a field of institutional power, resources, recognition and legitimacy from a negotiated perspective. This analysis is based on the central theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological approach. He employs the concepts of field, capital and habitus to understand how institutional positions and practices affect the recognition and realization of gender equality. Specifically, the analysis examines the distribution of economic, social and symbolic capital in football governance and the role institutional language might play in the legitimization of power dynamics. The symbolic power can also be used to analyse how FIFA's public pledges for inclusion relate to what is put in place in its institutional documents. The chapter makes a clear conceptual separation between "what" is committed to gender equality and "how" it is implemented. It considers the language in institutional policies, the strategic aims set out by the FIFA, the governance arrangements and informal norms evident in the documents, and the presence of women in leadership. The link between institutional commitments, resources allocation, representation and accountability is given special attention. The chapter focuses on these interrelated areas. It first looks at the institutional aspects of gender equality and the language of communicating their goals at FIFA. It then explores strategic objectives, means of achieving them, culture of governance, informal norms and representation of women in governance positions. The next analysis looks at the allocation, accountability, and documentation of policy commitments. In the final part of the chapter, the chapter synthesises these results and looks at how institutional power relations affect the progress of gender equality in the governance of football by FIFA.

4.2. Institutional Commitment to Gender Equality

FIFA's narrative is clearly articulated in its rhetoric of gender equality, inclusion, and diversity. The overall objective of the Women's Football Strategy (2020) is clear. "Empower all women and girls through football" and "Double the number of women and girls playing football by 2026". Likewise, the FIFA 2022 Annual Report calls gender equality a key strategic pillar to "modernize football governance".

4.2.1. Policy Language and Framing

Through critical discourse analysis of these policy documents, these points can be revealed, presenting FIFA's commitment mostly in aspirational, promotional language, as manifested in recurring words like empowerment, growth, development, and leadership. Such a linguistic decision is not just about rights but also about equality as an administrative and/or development goal. For example, empowerment is often intertwined with economic opportunity in a 2020 strategy paper developed within a neoliberal framework, in which institutional equity is put in abeyance to promote market growth (Pielke, 2021). This rhetoric can mean that gender disparity starts to appear at a fleeting, almost superficial level. However, it also runs the danger of depoliticizing as it attempts to focus on achieving a 'right to perform' rather than targeting broad systemic inequality. The goal of "growing the women's game" suggested by this discursive approach is driven by gross numbers of women's participation and commercial success, which subsidizes and/or neglects structural issues such as the gender pay gap, institutional harassment, and the systematic governance exclusion of women. This stance in rhetorical moves can be described as "strategic feminism," a business solution for gender equality that seeks to create the maximum institutional brand equity (Knoppers & McLachlan, 2019). In the FIFA 2022 Governance report, for instance, initiatives for gender equality are included on a par with those to combat corruption, creating an environment that fosters digital innovation. The optimization demonstrates the push to corporate social 'branding' within the rationale of the neoliberal government, which uses moral conditions and arguments for market and reputational benefit (Darnell & Field, 2020).

Furthermore, the persistent focus on "empowerment through football" indirectly shifts accountability from institutions to individuals. FIFA constructs gender inequality as a technical problem that can be solved through participation programs rather than a political issue requiring systematic transformation.

4.2.2. Strategic Goals and Implementation Mechanisms

FIFA's strategic objectives for the years 2015-2026 were categorized under five recurring policy goals: Participation growth (a rise in registered female players), capacity-building (coaching and leadership programs), increased visibility (promoting women's tournaments), investment (financial and infrastructure help), and governance reform (including women in decision-making). However, implementation procedures remain ambiguous and non-binding. Most documents employ modal verbs like "encourage," "support," or "aim to," rather than firm promises like "require" or "mandate." The verbal ambiguity undermines institutional responsibility. For example, the FIFA Governance Regulations (2022) state that "Member associations are encouraged to ensure gender balance," but do not provide an enforcement system or sanctions for noncompliance.

4.2.3. Governance Culture and Informal Norms

Beyond policy language, institutional culture is still a substantial impediment. The persistent dominance of male networks in FIFA's leadership shows what feminist researchers refer to as the "gendered logic of appropriateness"- an unwritten standard that links leadership to masculinity (Chappell & Waylen, 2013). Even while equality rules are incorporated into legal statutes, informal norms and socialization processes perpetuate exclusion. The findings suggest that documents rarely address internal gender bias or harassment mechanisms directly. Instead, the terms "respect" and "inclusivity" are vague, avoiding an open examination of systematic discrimination. This discursive avoidance represents a purposeful silence intended to sustain organizational coherence while avoiding politically contentious topics (Hovden & Pfister, 2018).

4.2.4. Representation and Leadership Structures

Gender representation in decision-making roles has long been used to assess equity in sports governance. Although FIFA has introduced measures to increase women's representation on key committees since 2016, the data examined in this study indicate that structural disparities persist.

As of 2023, women held approximately 19% of positions on FIFA's standing committees and 8 of the 37 seats (22%) on the FIFA Council, the organisation's highest decision-making body. Although these figures indicate progress compared with earlier years, women remain substantially underrepresented in football governance. Their leadership responsibilities also remain concentrated in areas relating to women's football, communications, and social responsibility (Adriaanse, 2020). Similar representation challenges are identified in other confederations, although the extent of representation varies.

The Oceanic Football Confederation (OFC) recorded 33% female representation on its executive committee, while the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) recorded 10%. The analysis also identifies differences in women's access to influential governance portfolios, including finance, governance, and tournament operations. These patterns raise questions about whether increased numerical representation is accompanied by equivalent access to institutional authority and decision-making power.

Table 4.1 presents selected indicators of women's representation and participation in football governance. The figures include women's representation in FIFA's decision-making structures, the participation of women as federation presidents, and the presence of women in executive committees and coaching positions. Taken together, these indicators provide a broader picture of women's participation across different levels of football governance.

The figures suggest that progress in formal representation does not necessarily translate into equal access to influential leadership positions. From a Bourdieusian perspective, this distinction can be understood through the unequal distribution of institutional and symbolic capital: numerical inclusion may increase visibility without necessarily changing the distribution of decision-making authority.

Table 4.1: Selected Indicators of Women's Representation in Football Governance

Source: FIFA Women's MA Survey Report 2023; FIFA Benchmarking Report 2023; Women in Football (2024)

Indicator	Figure	Source
Total FIFA Member Associations	211	FIFA (2023)
MAs responded to the 2023 survey	203 (96%)	FIFA MA Survey (2023)
Female Presidents among 211 MAs	10 (4.7%)	FIFA (2023)
Female Federation President at 2022/2023 WC	4 of 47 nations	The Telegraph (2023)
Female FIFA Council members	8 of 37 (22%)	FIFA Council (2023)
Female head coaches across 86 women's leagues	22%	FIFA Benchmarking (2023)
MAs with a women's football strategy	88%	FIFA MA Survey (2023) (up from 64% in 2019)
MAs with ≥ female executive committee member	83%	FIFA (2023)
Female executive committee members across MAs	22%	FIFA MA Survey (2023)

4.2.5. Leadership Development Initiatives

To enhance the representation of women in executive and decision-making positions, FIFA has launched a series of leadership programmes such as the Women in Football Leadership Programme and leadership development workshops on governance-related aspects. The purpose of these initiatives is to offer opportunities for women who work insider football structures to build leadership capacity and network and enhance their opportunities to move into decision making positions. Leadership development does

not, however, ensure that women are more represented in leadership roles or decision-making power. These are the actions that can be seen as aiming to improve women's cultural and social capital in the institutional field of football from a Bourdieusian point of view. However, the extent to which this capital can be transformed into positions of power also relies on the organising structures and power dynamics that participants work with.

The indicators listed in Table 4.2 offer more of a snapshot of the role of women in football and their representation in a pro-occupation. There are also significant improvements in the number of women and girls using organised football, and there are ongoing disparities in numbers of women at coaching and official positions. These numbers matter, as the percentage of participation does not necessarily equate to the same access to jobs or leadership.

Table 4.2: Global Indicators of Women's Participation and Representation in Football

Source: FIFA MA Survey Report 2023; UNESCO (2024); FIFA 2023 Global Survey

Indicator	Figure	Source
Women & girls in organized football globally (2023)	16,600,000 (+24% from 2019)	FIFA (2023)
Women & girls as % of all registered players (2023)	32% (up from 23% in 2015)	FIFA (2023)
Women & girls as % of all registered players (2015)	23%	FIFA (2015)
Total number of women's football clubs globally	55,622 (59% in Europe)	FIFA (2023)
% of coaches who are women	5% (of 901,000 coaches)	FIFA (2023)
% of referees who are women	9% (of 731,500 referees)	UNESCO (2024)
Nations with female registration below 5%	14 FIFA Member Nations	FIFA (2023)
Female youth participation	Above 48%	FIFA (2023)

The indicators provide a crucial difference between the increasing involvement of women and the increase of women in professional football processes. Progress in participation and development of the women's game is reflected in the rising number of women playing football in an organised way (16.6 million) and in the growth of the number of women's football clubs. The percentage of women coaches and referees, however, are still significantly lower at 5% and 9% respectively. The difference highlights that participation does not necessarily lead to representation in professional and technical positions. Likewise, the fact that 88% of the Member Associations surveyed had a women's football strategy, shown in the previous governance indicator, needs to be taken into account when analysing the representation of women in executive structures. Having a strategy or development programme does not mean that women have in fact gained a similar influence over organisational decisions or the allocation of resources. Formal recognition and capacity building opportunities can lead to the accumulation of cultural and social capital, and the transition of cultural and social capital to institutional authority still relies on the distribution of power within the field in Bourdieusian terms.

4.2.6. Symbolic versus Substantive Leadership

The appointment of Fatma Samoura as the Secretary-General of the FIFA in 2016 was seen as an important event in the history of the governance of the FIFA. The new appointments do also, however, point to an important difference between symbolic representation and substantive institutional change. While the presence of one woman in the leadership of FIFA has made it easier for women to be seen in the decision-making of the governance structure, one appointment alone does not mean a broader shift in institutional power and decision making. This appointment is hence an example of the difference between personal representation and change within the organisation. This study examines the FIFA Governance Progress Report (2023), which points out the institutionalisation of gender equality and the increased visibility of women. Representation, however, is not a measure of whether there has been a redistribution of authority, resources, and decision making. In Bourdieu's terms, leadership is endowed with symbolic capital and institutional recognition, but the actual value of both increases or decreases as it can be translated into some kind of influence inside the organisational field. Therefore, gender-based quotas, gender-responsive budgeting, and participatory monitoring can be important to go beyond

symbolic representation. If there is no mechanism to address distribution of resources and decision-making authority, then the visibility of the leader may be largely symbolic and not result in broad structural change.

4.3. Resource Allocation and Financial Transparency

Financial statistics from FIFA Annual Reports and Development Program Accounts reveal systematic disparities in resource allocation between men's and women's football. While FIFA's earnings totalled USD 7.6 billion from 2019 to 2022, only USD 1 billion (about 13%) was allocated to women's football programs, including tournaments, development funding, and promotional campaigns.

4.3.1. Disparities in Investment

Expenditure patterns demonstrate the disproportionate priority of men's tournaments over women's competitions. The 2022 Men's World Cup in Qatar got more than USD 440 million in prize money, compared to USD 110 million for the 2023 Women's World Cup- a significant improvement over prior cycles but resulting in a 4:1 financial imbalance. FIFA's language characterizes such differences as the result of "market value differentials" (FIFA Annual Report, 2023), claiming that revenue generated determines investment levels. However, this argument promotes a self-reinforcing cycle of inequality, in which restricted investment leads to lower visibility, which justifies continuing underfunding (Cooky & Antonovich, 2022). The Women's Football Development Fund, formed in 2020, represents a meaningful policy shift; yet data show that only 60% of the allocated funds were fully disbursed by 2023, and regional discrepancies remain. Confederations with limited administrative capability, particularly those in Africa and Asia, reported low utilization rates due to bureaucratic barriers and a lack of local co-funding.

Source: FIFA Official/Economic Times (2022)

Position	Prize Money (USD)
Winner (Argentina)	$42,000,000
Runner-up (France)	$30,000,000
3rd Place (Croatia)	$27,000,000

4th Place (Morocco)	$25,000,000
Quarter-finalist(x4)	$17.000,000 each
Round of 16 (x8)	$13,000,000 each
Group Stage Exits (x16)	$9,000,000 each
TOTAL PRIZE POOL	$440,000,000

Source: ESPN (2023); FIFA Official Records

Year	Total Prize Fund (USD)	Winner's Share (USD)	Per Player (Winner)(USD)
2015	$15,000,000	$2,000,000	Not Disclosed
2019	$30,000,000	$4,000,000	Not Disclosed
2023	$150,000,000	$4,300,000	$270,000

4.3.2. Transparency and Accountability

Although FIFA's financial statements are externally audited, gender-disaggregated reporting is neither mandatory nor consistent. Budget summaries include male and female development together under the generic "football growth" category, making it difficult to track gender-based investments precisely, which makes transparency a significant problem.

Furthermore, the audit processes under FIFA Forward 3.0 are based on self-reported data from member associations, many of whom lack internal auditing expertise. This leads to uneven monitoring and unreliable data dependability. As a result, gender equity measurements frequently remain stories rather than evidence based. Scholars suggest that such opacity represents the logic of "symbolic accountability"- a technique in which institutions use the language of openness without allowing for public inspection (O'Boyle & Shilbury, 2016). The absence of effective audit procedures erodes FIFA's credibility and promotes structural inequality.

Source: FIFA Annual Report 2022/ FIFA Publications

Investment Category	Amount (USD)	Period

Women's football Development programs	$71,000,000	2020-2023 cycle
Support services for women's football promotion	$8,400,000	2022
Support service for women's football promotion	$3,300,000	2021

4.3.3. Political Economy of Investment

FIFA's investment structure represents a marketized notion of equality in terms of vital political economy. The organization promotes women's football as a commercial growth opportunity rather than a rights-based subject. Funding priorities are based on economic factors such as broadcast reach, sponsorship appeal, and fan involvement, rather than equal dispersal. This model effectively integrates gender equality into the logic of capital accumulation. Henne and Pape (2018) propose that "global sport governance converts social justice into brand equity." FIFA's growing collaborations with corporate sponsors like Visa and Unilever under the umbrella of women's empowerment highlight this trend. While these collaborations increase visibility, they also risk turning equality into a consumer identity, commodifying empowerment for profit.

4.4. Rhetoric Versus Implementation: The Policy-Practice Gap

The disparity between rhetorical commitment and real implementation is the phase's most notable discovery. Gender equality is presented as a key organizational principle in every document examined; nevertheless, there is still no proof of its implementation, accountability, or quantifiable results.

4.4.1. The Symbolic Politics of Equality

The major finding of this phase is the rhetorical inflation of equality in FIFA's governance language. Policy rhetoric is full of commitment, but institutional practice lags. This pattern is consistent with what Sara Ahmed (2012) refers to as the "non-performativity" of diversity statements- in which assertions of inclusion serve symbolically to convey virtue rather than enact change. This problem is reflected in the

frequent use of “empowerment narratives” that celebrate progress through representation, involvement, and visibility while ignoring the redistributive aspects of power. Gender equality is portrayed in policy as a moral and commercial necessity, but rarely as a structural shift that necessitates accountability and sanctions.

4.4.2. Structural Resistance and Power Preservation

FIFA's multi-layered governance structure involves distributing the power between the confederations and national member associations, making it difficult to implement gender equality reforms uniformly. A decentralised structure poses questions of institutional responsibility, monitoring and accountability at the national and regional level when policies are applied. For instance, the analysis of the thesis shows that, as of 2023, only 58% of the member associations contain a Women's Football Development Officer (FIFA Development Survey). This means that there is a mismatch between the formal commitments made to support women's football and how this is being done in member associations. The discovery also has implications for the level of institutional support and the ability of the country's bodies to implement FIFA's goals. The original analysis also points to the role of informal networks of men in the decision-making in football. This must be related to the institutional practices and power relations found in the sources studied and not be interpreted as a generalisation about all football organisations. In a Bourdieusian sense, established professional networks can be considered as social capital, shaping access to information, opportunities, and authority. In cases of unequal access to such networks, the already existing power relations can be reproduced, despite the existence of formal equality policies. This reflects the need for institutional changes to be not just a question of the formal rules, but also who has what kind of social and symbolic capital in the football governance field.

4.4.3. Regional Variability and Positive Developments

Despite the problems outlined in institutions, the analysis shows that there is variation among the regional confederations in their approach to the problem. For instance, the Oceania Football Confederation (OFC) is linked to 33% of women in executive positions, as reported. This is one of the instances of the advancement of women in a regional football governance system. The finding should also be viewed in the light of New Zealand's Women and Girls in Sport Strategy (2020) which offers a

national policy framework for encouraging the participation and representation of women in sport. The initial analysis also highlights issues surrounding women's representation and institutional accountability in other regional systems, such as the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) and CONMEBOL. Observations should not, however, be taken as an indication that these are one and the same conservative areas in society. Instead, they emphasize the importance of taking into account the distinctive institutional, cultural and organizational realities in different settings in relation to the implementation of the gender-equality agenda. In order to explore the regional disparities, one can analyse the allocation of capital and the existing power dynamics in football governance bodies from a Bourdieusian lens. The impact of women's participation and leadership initiatives on actual change is influenced by the extent to which women have access to social networks, institutional recognition and decision-making resources that would enable them to have influence on the field. So it is essential to assess regional advances beyond formal agreements and arrangements, in terms of the degree to which these pledges are reflected in representation and institutional power.

4.5. Theoretical Integration

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of field, of capital, of habitus, and of symbolic power can provide an understanding of the findings of this chapter. FIFA and its governance bodies is an institutional field with competing actors holding different positions of power and resources. It shows a mismatch between FIFA's policy on gender equality and the ongoing gender disparities in leadership representation, resource allocation and institutional accountability. It is especially important to the understanding of the economic inequalities cited in this chapter to understand the distribution of economic capital. The variation in investment and resources allocation affects the opportunities for the development and promotion of women's football. Concurrently, cultural and social capital also hold significance when it comes to understanding access to leadership roles, professional networks, and recognition in institutions. The disparity of women's representation in decision making processes as highlighted in previous sections highlights how equality policies may not be effective in creating equal access to institutional influence. In addition, symbolic power is important to the interpretation of FIFA's language of governance. Women's football is recognised institutionally, through policies and public statements in

the organisation for gender equality. But the use of equality language does not necessarily reflect the presence of an equitable distribution of resources or decision-making power. The symbolic recognition, in the Bourdieu sense, happens when the distribution of capital and power is actually changed in a institutional field. Formal institutional commitments and their implementation are, therefore, contrasted in the chapter. Gender equality is more apparent in the use of language in FIFA's strategic and policy documents, but concerns with leadership representation, resource allocation and accountability remain. This indicates that reform of institutions must be measured, not just by policy statements, but by the degree to which it alters power dynamics and opportunities within in the governance of football. In sum, Bourdieu's model offers a coherent structure for the analysis of the interplay among institutional structures, unequal access to various forms of capital, and symbolic recognition in the reproduction or contestation of gender inequality. The report results also set the groundwork for the further analysis of the representation, reinforcement, and contestation of these inequalities in the mainstream media and social media, which will be explored later.

4.6. Summary

This chapter analysed FIFA institutional practice and policy aspects on gender equality with regard to governance structures, the representation of leadership, the allocation of resources, financial transparency and the implementation of equality-related policies. Findings reveal that there remains a persistent disconnect between FIFA's stated goal of gender equality and the actions taken to implement institutional measures to achieve that goal. The analysis identifies the lingering problems of unequal representation in leadership roles, unequal access to resources and financial transparency and accountability. Meanwhile, growth in the Women's Football Division of the OFC, growth of women's football prize funds, and the growth of women's football in the region (as identified in the OFC) are areas of progress. These developments are not, however, a sign of an equal redistribution of power and decision making authority within institutions. These findings are explained by Bourdieu's theory that unequal distribution of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital may shape a player's career in football. Having women's football formally recognised and having a policy in place can help to raise its profile, but if it is genuinely going to make a difference then that policy needs to be followed through

with a shift in resources, institutional power and opportunities to participate in decision making. The chapter illustrates the need to look at institutional commitments and to what extent they are implemented in practice when analysing gender inequality in FIFA-governed football. The findings inform the next chapter, which goes beyond formal governance structures and looks at the representation and communication of gender inequality in the mainstream media.

Chapter 5: The Field of Vision: Governing Bodies, Sports Media, and the Battle for Symbolic Capital

5.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses how the gender inequality in football is reflected in the main stream sports media, after the institutional structures and the policy implementation in FIFA have been analyzed. Sports journalism is not just a product of sporting events, but also a part of a process of building sporting value, visibility, prestige and legitimacy. The Bourdieu approach suggests that the sports media constitutes a sub-field in which the distribution of symbolic capital is shaped by editorial practices, coverages and decisions. Eight selected news outlets are explored in this chapter: BBC Sport, The Guardian, ESPN, New Zealand Herald, Al Jazeera, Fox Sports, The Times of India and The Sydney Morning Herald. The organisations will give the researcher access to media material from varying geographic and institutional backgrounds, which will enable the study to consider how women's football is represented in the chosen media material. The analysis centres on the amount of and the prominence of coverage, the themes that have been adopted to represent women's football, and the language and framing used when talking about women's sport and competitions. The differences in the coverage of men's and women's football, covering sporting performance, human interest stories, empowerment and gender-equality are treated with special attention. The quantitative content analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) processes described in Chapter 3 are followed. Results are reported by descriptive patterns of media representation and qualitative analysis of selected language and framing practices. The primary theoretical framework for understanding the potential for the mainstream media to reproduce or resist gender hierarchies in football comes from Bourdieu's theory.Bourdieu's theory forms the core of the analysis of the potential of the mainstream media in reproducing or challenging prevailing gender hierarchies in football.

5.2. Overview of Media Sample and Analytical Focus

5.2.1. Data Composition

A total of 480 institutional and mainstream media documents from January 2015 to March 2026 were examined. In this chapter, the dataset compromised of 360 mainstream media documents sourced from the digital archives of eight selected news organizations. Articles were sourced from the digital archives using keyword searches (“women’s football,” “FIFA,” “World Cup,” “gender equality,” “women players,” “equal pay”). Each article was classified in NVivo 14 utilizing categories that captured both quantitative and qualitative factors like: Visibility metrics include article length, headline position, picture usage, and homepage prominence; Descriptive elements include the gender of the featured subjects, the type of event (male or female), and the sport level (domestic, international, grassroots); Tone (celebratory, neutral, critical), main theme (performance, emotion, controversy, empowerment, inequality), and language characteristics (metaphor, evaluative adjectives).

5.2.2. Analytical Focus

The analysis looks at two interrelated aspects of the mainstream media representation. In the first step the amount, prominence and thematic development of coverage content in both men's and women's football is analyzed quantitatively to reveal patterns. Second, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is applied to analyse the ways in which the language, framing and representational choices produce meaning of female athletes and women's competitions. The analysis consists of three questions: 1. How often and prominently is women's football covered when it comes to football as a whole? 2. What themes and discourse frames are used to cover women's football? 3. What are the differences between representations in the chosen media organisations and within the different contexts? The quantitative and qualitative results are analysed together, to analyse the visibility of women's football and how sporting values and legitimacy are represented. The methodological grounds for the synthesis of these analytical methods are discussed in Chapter 3.

5.3. Historical and Structural Context of Gender in Sports Journalism

5.3.1. Historical Exclusion and Gendered Norms

Sports journalism has often reflected the patriarchal hierarchies of the sporting entities it covers. For much of the twentieth century, women's sports were underrepresented, trivialized, or ignored. When present, it frequently prioritized femininity and attractiveness over athletics (Messner, Cooky, & Hextrum, 2010). This trend arose from the underlying notion that men's sports reflect the "universal standard" of athletic ability, whereas women's sports are an exception or novelty.

5.3.2. Structural Barriers in the Media Industry

Commercial imperatives, newsroom hierarchies, and gendered labor divisions all have an institutional impact on sports journalism. Senior editorial roles continue to be controlled by men; female journalists are frequently allocated to "soft" sports or lifestyle topics, whereas men oversee high-profile beats like football, cricket, and rugby. This gendered division of work reinforces ideological gatekeeping, with masculine perspectives influencing judgments about what constitutes "news" (Franks & O'Neill, 2016).

5.3.3. Shifts in the Digital Era

The digital change of sports media during the mid-2010s has created both opportunities and obstacles for gender equality. On the one hand, online platforms and social media have allowed alternative sources and fan communities to promote women's sports beyond established hierarchies (Bruce, 2016). On the other hand, algorithms that prioritize engagement frequently amplify men's sports, which already receive more attention. The present media landscape is thus hybrid: while mainstream publications have increased women's coverage around major events, everyday reporting continues to marginalize female athletes. These tendencies demonstrate how gender inequality in sports is both institutional and cultural, reflecting broader power dynamics that are replicated through language and practice.

5.4. Quantitative Findings: Patterns of Representation

5.4.1. Volume and Visibility of Coverage

The quantitative content analysis revealed a significant gap in coverage of men's and women's football. Among the 480 institutional and mainstream media documents in the sample, 64% focused on men's football, 28% on women's football, and 8% on mixed or gender-neutral topics. During the 2022 Men's World Cup, all eight sites published an average of five items per day, up from 1.5 per day during the 2023 Women's World Cup. Notably, BBC Sport and The Guardian had the highest relative balance, with each devoting 35-40% of their football programming to women's activities during the 2023 tournament. The homepage visibility index, which measures whether content shows on the front page or in submenus, found even more inequality. For men's tournaments, 78% of stories featured on primary homepages, but for women's tournaments, this proportion fell to 41%. This implies that, even when coverage volume increases during momentous events, prominence remains unequal.

Source: Wasserman/ESPN Research (2023); Women's Sport Trust (2024); Sport Victoria (2024)

Metric	Figure	Year	Source
Women's sports' share of total sports media	15%	2022	Wasserman/ESPN
Women's sports coverage (pre-2019, SportsCenter avg)	5.7%	Pre-2019	Wasserman (2023)
Women's sports coverage growth	Tripled in 5 years	2018-2019	Wasserman (2023)
Women's sport on BBC Sport homepage (peak)	45.7% of the top 10 stories	2019	Women's Sport Trust

Football's share of women's sports viewing (UK)	74%	2023	Women's Sport Trust
Football's share of women's sports viewing (UK)	55%	2024	Women's Sport Trust
Women's football coverage-Australia	36% (up from 20%)	2023-24	Sport Victoria
Sky Sports Women's Sport coverage hours (UK)	61% of the total	2024	Women's Sport Trust
BBC iPlayer match requests_2019 WWC	13,100,000	2019	BBC
Peak BBC One viewers-2019 USA vs Netherlands final	4,700,000 (38.5% share)	2019	BBC

5.4.2. Thematic Distribution

Article themes were classified into five groups: (a) performance, (b) controversy, (c) emotion/human interest, (d) empowerment, and (e) equality/policy. The results show considerable gender differences. Performance-oriented coverage dominated men's football (62% of stories) but was less common among women (38%). Emotional and human-interest themes accounted for 31% of the coded articles focusing on women's football. These stories frequently emphasised resilience, parenthood, and the balancing of personal and professional roles. This finding indicates the prominence of human-interest narratives within the women's football coverage examined in this study. However, a direct comparison with men's football coverage would require the corresponding percentage from the original coded dataset.

Equality and empowerment themes were mentioned in 18% of women's stories but only 3% of men's. Controversy, including salary conflicts and governance scandals, occurred equally (about 10%) across genders, albeit with differing framing emphasis.

These distributions reflect the gendered double bind found in feminist media studies: women athletes are praised for overcoming difficulty but are rarely depicted as authoritative figures. Men, on the other hand, are evaluated based on their athletic abilities.

5.4.3. Tone of Coverage

The tone was identified as jubilant, neutral, or critical. Women's football articles were celebratory in 47% of cases, typically emphasizing "inspirational" successes, whereas men's stories were only 25% celebratory, with a more neutral or critical tone. While the upbeat tone appears progressive, it can also be patronizing, portraying women's success as special or surprising rather than expected. For example, The Times of India portrayed India's women's squad as "breaking barriers" and "defying expectations." At the same time, men's teams were addressed analytically with terms such as tactical analysis and formation strategy. Such tonal disparity reinforces the underlying idea that women's accomplishments are exceptional and so emotionally charged, whereas men's sports remain the baseline for logical criticism.

5.4.4. Visual Representation

An additional visual investigation looked at visuals and photographic framing. In men's coverage, 86% of photographs were action shots, displaying players in competition, while just 62% were action shots, with the remaining being posed portraits or group celebrations. Images of female athletes often emphasized facial emotions, body beauty, or team togetherness. This visual tendency leads to what Kane et al. (2013) refer to as ambiguous representation, in which women are recognized for their athleticism while also being evaluated on their aesthetics. Fox Sports and The Sydney Morning Herald typically featured jubilant or emotional graphics, whilst BBC Sport and Al Jazeera provided a more balanced representation that emphasized gameplay.

5.4.5. Quantitative Summary

Overall findings indicate that there are ongoing disparities between the representation of men's and women's football within the mainstream media that has been selected. Among the institutional/standard media documents analysed, 28% covered women's football and 64% covered men's football, with 8% covering mixed or gender-neutral football. The results also show variations in the prominence of the homepage, as well as the distribution of themes, tone and visual representation. The analysis also revealed variation in coverage of women's football during key events in terms of the salience of coverage and framing. The focus of the reporting was more performance-based in men's football than it was in women's football, which also showed more emotional and human-interest themes. These patterns indicate that in addition to the amount of media coverage, inequality is also a concern of how sporting achievements are represented. The social media engagement and digital audience data that were previously included with this section is analysed independently in Chapter 6: "Analysis of social media discussion and digital representation. This separation ensures a difference between media-sports discourse and social media discourse, while it makes it possible to analyse both types of mediated representation in the larger research.

5.5. Qualitative Findings: Framing, Themes, and Discursive Tropes

The qualitative section of the investigation looked at how media narratives shape meanings about women’s football, gender, and power. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used to code articles for recurring frames, linguistic patterns, and metaphoric constructions. The goal was not just to identify what the media said about women’s football, but also how they said it, via vocabulary, tone, and symbolic associations that show the ideological foundations of representation.

5.5.1. Dominant Framing Categories

Four prominent framing patterns were identified from the CDA: Empowerment and progress tales emphasize “firsts,” “milestones,” and “trailblazers.” Emotional and human-interest framing, with emphasis on resilience, family, and personal suffering. Comparative framing is the explicit or tacit comparison of women’s performance or popularity to men’s football. Commercial and institutional

legitimacy framing entails portraying women's football as a burgeoning market or a moral symbol of inclusiveness.

Each frame has different ideological consequences that influence how people perceive the women's game and its legitimacy.

5.5.2. Empowerment and Progress Narratives

Across all channels, empowerment narratives were the most prevalent. Stories were commonly titled in triumphalist rhetoric, such as "Breaking Barriers," "Making History," "Her Time to Shine," and "The Future is Female." For example, The Guardian termed the 2023 Women's World Cup as "a celebration of how far the women's game has come." Similarly, Al Jazeera Sports described the competition as "a new era of empowerment for women globally." These narratives appear progressive, but CDA reveals a subtle temporal framing that portrays equality as constantly "emerging" rather than being realized. The emphasis on exceptional achievements ("first female referee," "record attendance") perpetuates a sense of novelty, preventing women's sports from becoming mainstream. Furthermore, empowerment is frequently framed in terms of individual heroism-figures such as Megan Rapinoe or Sam Kerr are promoted as change icons, personalizing systemic issues and hiding collaborative action. While such stories encourage audiences, they risk perpetuating what Gill (2017) refers to as "postfeminist sensibility": applauding women's accomplishments as evidence of progress but ignoring systematic disadvantages that continue under the surface.

5.5.3. Comparative Framing and the Logic of Benchmarking

The comparison of women's football to men's football was a common theme across publications, particularly on ESPN, BBC Sport, and The Guardian. Articles frequently used language like "catching up with the men's game," "closing the gap," and "proving that women can play just as well." While encouraging, this comparative framing encourages masculinity as the default metric of greatness.

5.5.4. Commercial and Institutional Legitimacy Framing

Several media outlets, including Al Jazeera Sports, The Guardian, and BBC Sport, linked women's football to corporate or institutional legitimacy discourses. Coverage of FIFA's equalwere programs

and commercial partnerships was frequently framed as proof of progress: “Visa partners with FIFA to empower women through football” (BBC Sport, 2023). However, the analysis conducted in this thesis indicates that this framing can commercialise gender equality by presenting it as a marketing tool. The rhetoric of corporate social responsibility (“empowering women consumers,” “diversity as growth”) is consistent with what Darnell and Field (2020) refer to as neoliberal sport governance, in which social justice is central to brand identification. This discursive pattern reflects the political economy of representation: women’s football receives media coverage primarily when it corresponds with institutional or commercial objectives. In such situations, empowerment is depoliticized, stripped of its structural critique, and reinvented as brand-friendly optimism.

5.5.5. Counter-Narratives and Resistance

Amid prevailing frames, certain counternarratives emerged, particularly in The Guardian and the New Zealand Herald, where journalists took clearly critical viewpoints. For example, a Guardian editorial (July 2023) titled “Equality Still Has to Be Earned” questioned FIFA’s commitment to promoting women’s football, highlighting disparities in prize money and board representation. Similarly, the New Zealand Herald published columns by female sportswriters criticizing local media bias and advocating for “a redefinition of football greatness beyond gendered hierarchies.” These pieces exemplify discursive resistance, in which journalists use their platform to expose contradictions between rhetoric and reality. Though less common than celebratory tales, these interventions are critical for altering the mainstream flow of ideological reproduction.

5.6. Comparative Analysis Across Regions

5.6.1. Selected UK and US Media Outlets (BBC Sport, The Guardian, ESPN)

Western outlets took a progressive attitude to women’s football but were nevertheless restricted by structural norms of hierarchy and commercialism. BBC Sport followed a public-service mentality, providing thorough tournament coverage and using gender-neutral language. The headlines frequently utilize athlete names instead of gender indicators, signalling normalization (“Kerr Leads Australia to Victory” rather than “Women’s Captain Leads”). However, outside of momentous events, coverage

frequency decreased dramatically, indicating the event-driven nature of gender inclusion. The Guardian set itself apart with critical editorial commentary that linked women's football to larger social justice movements like equal pay and LGBTQ+ inclusion. Despite this, visuals and human-interest framing persisted. ESPN, influenced by North American business logic, highlighted celebrity personalities and market development opportunities. Its tone merged empowerment and amusement, promoting sport's spectacle economy (Whannel, 2008). Women's football was frequently portrayed in media coverage as a rapidly expanding "product" rather than a sociopolitical movement.

5.6.2. Selected Middle Eastern and Indian Media Outlets (Al Jazeera, The Times of India)

Al Jazeera Sports offered a fresh, global perspective that frequently highlighted cultural difficulties for female athletes in the Middle East. Its framing combines appreciation for female pioneers with cultural relativism, accepting local restrictions while avoiding overt moralization. This approach reflects the channel's place in a postcolonial media context, which aims to convey regional modernity while maintaining traditional sensibilities (Sakr, 2021). In contrast, The Times of India adopted a more patriarchal tone. Women's football received little coverage, and when it did, stories frequently emphasized moral character and national pride above technical ability. Stories depicted women athletes as cultural advancement ambassadors- "bringing honor to India's daughters"- but rarely addressed systematic injustices such as funding constraints or institutional neglect. This promotes the developmentalist discourse prevalent in South Asian media, in which women's sports are used to demonstrate national modernity rather than gender justice (Majumdar, 2018).

5.6.3. Selected New Zealand and Australian Media Outlets (NZ Herald, Fox Sports, Sydney Morning Herald)

The 2023 Women's World Cup drew unprecedented attention throughout Oceania. The NZ Herald used a strong equality lens, consistent with New Zealand's overall policy framework that emphasizes women's inclusion in sport. It frequently referred to national efforts like Sport New Zealand's Women and Girls Strategy (2020), presenting the World Cup as a legacy event for youth development and social inclusion.

In contrast, Fox Sports and The Sydney Morning Herald viewed women's football from a business and entertainment perspective. Coverage tended to focus on audience enthusiasm, attendance records, and sponsorship milestones, but provided little tactical or analytical insight. The tone was sympathetic but patronizing, referring to the event as "a spectacle of passion" rather than a demonstration of strategic excellence. Nevertheless, both mediums helped to influence public opinion in Australia. The Matilda's performances were portrayed as national unifiers, breaking gender lines and redefining "football heroes" to include women. This represents a partial rupture in Australia's traditionally masculine sports culture.

5.6.4. Patterns Across the Selected Media Outlets

Based on the analysis of the selected media outlets, two general patterns were found. In fact, empowerment speeches and commercial optimism, as well as event-driven coverage were disseminated through news outlets in various national and regional contexts. Secondly, differences were found in the way these themes were presented. For instance, critical or progressive discussions of gender equality were chosen in the selected outlets from the UK and New Zealand, and developmentalist, cultural or moral elements in the coverage in The Times of India and Al Jazeera. The results of this study must be interpreted based on the media organization, articles and not as a reflection of all the media in these areas. They propose that there are different ways of reading and representing gender equality stories on football in specific media and national landscapes. The differences can be analysed from a Bourdieusian viewpoint by looking at the way in which media organisations function within their field and the symbolic value and legitimacy which they give to women's football.

5.7. Discussion: Media, Power, and Gendered Narratives

5.7.1. Media as Ideological Apparatus

The trends highlighted above demonstrate that the media are not passive observers, but rather active participants in influencing the gender hierarchy of sport. Using Althusser's (1971) concept of the ideological state apparatus, sports media replicate dominant gender ideas by determining what is "normal," "exciting," and "newsworthy." The continuous disparity between men's and women's

football coverage reflects the larger patriarchal logic of visibility: what is seen becomes real, while what is unseen is marginalized. Media visibility turns into symbolic power. The restricted and gendered coverage of women's football contributes to the cultural invisibility of female athletic authority, while men's sport remains the default locus of prestige and profitability. Even when equality is praised, the media frequently frames it via narratives that reinforce existing hierarchies- progress as assimilation, empowerment as consumerism, and variety as spectacle.

5.7.2. Commercialization and the Political Economy of Representation

The political economy of sports journalism further limits gender transition. Major sources rely on sponsorship, audience data, and advertising money. Men's football attracts more commercial returns; therefore, women's sports are viewed as a secondary investment. This dynamic is consistent with the commodification thesis in feminist media theory, which contends that gender equality is sought only when it benefits market expansion (Darnell & Field, 2020).

As a result, coverage frequently prioritizes economically feasible features of women's football- fashion, personality, and inspiration- over structural criticism. While the exposure of famous players like Alex Morgan and Sam Kerr is uplifting, it also supports celebrity hierarchies, which can hide collective fights for labor rights, wage parity, and institutional reform.

Table 5.2: Commercial Investment, sponsorship and Financial Indicators in Women's Football

Source: Ampere Analysis/ SportsPro (2026); Forbes (2024); GroupM/LinkedIn (2024)

Metric	Figure	Year	Source
Women's-only sponsorship deals (Europe leagues)	181 deals (+53% since 2022/23)	2026	Ampere/SportsPro
Serie A Femminile sponsorship increases	+600%	2026	SportsPro
2023 WWC net sponsorship value	$308,000,000	2023	Forbes

Barclays Women's Super League sponsorship	$59,600,000	2024	Forbes
ROI per $1 invested in women's sport (corporate)	$7 customer value	2024	GroupM
Brand favorability boost (women's sport sponsors)	62% of consumers	2023	FIFA Benchmarking
% of women's clubs with a domestic broadcasting deal (top-tier)	91%	2023	FIFA Benchmarking
Average revenue of clubs with strong social media	32%	2023	FIFA Benchmarking
The average revenue of clubs without strong social media	$2,700,000	2023	FIFA Benchmarking
% of women's clubs reporting financial loss (2023)	59%	2023	FIFA Benchmarking
% of women's clubs making a financial profit (2023)	12%	2023	FIFA Benchmarking

The indicators that are shown in Table 5.2 highlight the increasing commercialisation of women's football, including sponsorship, brand engagement, broadcast and club revenues. With the growing trend of women-only sponsorship agreements and the estimated sponsorship value of the FIFA Women's World Cup 2023, the commercial potential of the growth of the women's game is significant. In the same way, the data on brand favourability and customer value indicates that women's sport could provide commercial value to its sponsors. These indicators should not be seen, however, as proof of equal distribution of financial resources between men's and women's football. Also noted in terms of club revenue and access to broadcasting contracts, cautions the need to understand the translation of commercial opportunities to sustainable institutional and financial resources. In a Bourdieusian sense, commercial recognition can be used to the accumulation of economic and symbolic capital but to what extent, and to what benefit, these capitals benefit women's football is dependent upon how resources and opportunities are distributed and negotiated in the football field.

5.7.3. Journalism and Cultural Reproduction

Journalists' work requires them to be in a pro and insta-culture which can impact the representation of women's sports. This is referred to by Bruce (2016) as “gendered mediation”, whereby media representations can perpetuate cultural norms and assumptions about gendered sport. This was seen in the focus on moral qualities, emotional strength and nationalism in the chosen media material that was analysed in this thesis. For instance, The Times of India's coverage of women sportsperson mentions about being “cultural advancement ambassadors”, and the term “bringing honour to India's daughters”. This framing links women's sports successes to both the nation and cultural recognition and does not just cater to the athletic success or the structural environment of women's football. Likewise, the selected Australian media analysis of the 2023 Women's World Cup described the event as “a spectacle of passion”, highlighting the impact that emotional and celebratory language has on the coverage of women's football. Such depictions can raise visibility and awareness, but can also highlight women athletes essentially as inspirational figures or symbols of national development and progress rather than as sports professionals and agents of institutional change. The Bourdieu approach to representation is

useful to understand how these images shape the symbolic value and legitimacy of women's football in the media field.

5.7.4. Emerging Transformations

Despite longstanding disparities, there are hints of change. Digital media and feminist journalism are rapidly diversifying the narrative landscape. The emergence of dedicated women's sports platforms, podcasts, and independent commentators calls into question mainstream gatekeeping. During the 2023 Women's World Cup, social media engagement outperformed traditional broadcast measurements, indicating that audience demand for women's sports is underappreciated rather than non-existent. Furthermore, major media sources such as BBC Sport and The Guardian have implemented gender-equality policies within their sports desks, resulting in long-term reporting portfolios rather than short-term event coverage. This shift marks the transition from episodic to structural inclusion. However, long-term progress will rely on whether media organizations view gender equality as an editorial norm rather than a transitory marketing plan.

5.8. Theoretical Implications: Critical Discourse Analysis and Feminist Political Economy

The previous analysis of media representation demonstrates that, while women's football has received unprecedented attention in global journalism, the language around it is nevertheless dominated by established gender ideas and financial imperatives. These findings can be better understood by combining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Feminist Political Economy (FPE), which illustrate how language, power, and capital interact to perpetuate inequality in sports.

5.8.1. Critical Discourse Analysis: Power Through Language

The critical discourse analysis conducted in this study examined how language and representation within sports journalism contributed to the construction of gendered meanings in football. As outlined in Chapter 3, Fairclough's (1995) approach informed the examination of language, framing, and the relationship between media discourse and wider structures of power. The findings indicate that women's football was frequently represented through language associated with exceptionality, emotion, and development, whereas men's football was more often presented as established, strategic, and

conventional. The CDA results from this study show that women's football is linguistically framed as exceptional, emotive, and developmental, whereas men's football is framed as standard, strategic, and established. The frequent adjectives-inspirational, bold, trailblazing-characterize women's accomplishments as unusual rather than conventional. Such linguistic imbalance perpetuates what Van Dijk (1998) refers to as "the symbolic reproduction of dominance," in which even ostensibly favorable images maintain women's marginal status by implying deviation from an established norm. Furthermore, the narrative frameworks of many articles, particularly empowerment and progress narratives, show teleological logic, implying a linear path from exclusion to inclusion, from invisibility to success. This framework not only depoliticizes gender struggles but also positions equality as a natural evolutionary outcome rather than the result of contentious power dynamics. By removing conflict and opposition from the narrative, media discourse sanitizes gender reform politics, resulting in what Gill (2017) refers to as "feel-good feminism" widespread in neoliberal cultures. CDA also highlights the intertextuality of institutional and media discourses. Phrases like "empowering women through football," "growing the women's game," and "creating opportunity" reflect the rhetorical patterns of FIFA's policy language. This repetition reveals how the media amplifies institutional narratives, bolstering the moral authority of governing organizations but rarely questioning the gap between policy promises and results. In consequence, media coverage suggests the legitimacy of FIFA's equality mission, even when expressing critical overtones.

5.8.2. Feminist Political Economy: Market Logic and Symbolic Value

Bourdieu's notions of economic and symbolic capital can be used to explore the commercialization of women's football. Particularly, the media outlets reviewed, such as ESPN, Fox Sports, and BBC Sport, discussed women's football in relation to a "growth sector" or "emerging market." This framing links the "visibility" of women's football to commercial ideas and market development. Coverage for sport's sponsors often included terms like "record audiences", "brand reach" and "commercial success", highlighting the financial viability of the women's game. Considering the Bourdieusian lens, commercial recognition can help build up economic capital while positive media coverage can build symbolic capital by enhancing the legitimacy and value of women's football. But higher visibility and

commercial interest doesn't always mean equal distribution of resources or decision-making power. The visibility of key athletes like Megan Rapinoe and Alex Morgan also demonstrates how sport, visibility and marketable stars can become intertwined in the media sphere. The results thus underscore the difference between the commercial development of women's football and the allocation of the advantages of that development. While opportunities for women's football may arise as a result of sponsorship and audience interest, the impact of these opportunities on institutional and financial transformation will rely on the allocation of economic resources and symbolic recognition in the broader football landscape. This reading does not see 'commercialisation' as a theory outside of the main discourse of the study, but part of the central Bourdieusian discourse.

5.8.3. Intersectionality and Postcolonial Dimensions

An intersectional analysis confuses the situation. The representation of women athletes varies by race, class, and nationality. Western media sites such as The Guardian and ESPN primarily highlight white or Euro-American athletes. In contrast, women from the Global South appear less frequently and are often portrayed through developmentalist lenses ("pioneers," "breaking barriers"). The Times of India and Al Jazeera place a greater focus on moral virtue and cultural growth, tying women's sports to national modernization efforts rather than individual achievement. This represents a postcolonial hierarchy of representation, with Western women representing empowerment and non-Western women representing cultural awakening (Majumdar, 2018). Such portrayals perpetuate worldwide inequalities in visibility and authority, presenting Western femininity as the universal ideal. Thus, while media discourses nominally promote female equality, they frequently do so within frameworks that reinforce Eurocentric and capitalist inequalities, prioritizing visibility over voice and representation above distribution.

5.8.4. Media Discourse, Commercialisation and the Reproduction of Gendered Power

The language of equality- "empowerment," "inclusion," and "leadership"- is reframed from a radical discourse of justice to a managerial lexicon of growth and branding. This change represents what Fraser (2013) refers to as the "neoliberal appropriation of feminism," in which emancipatory discourse justifies capitalist development. Thus, the media serves a dual purpose: it raises the prominence of women's

sports while also domesticating its political potential. The result is a paradoxical representation: progressive in form yet conservative in function. Equality is promoted, but only within limits that do not jeopardize the institutional dominance of men's sports, media conglomerates, or multinational sponsors.

5.9. Summary

5.9.1. Synthesis of Findings

This chapter provides a detailed investigation of gender representation in global sports journalism, combining quantitative and qualitative findings from eight major sites. The findings show that, while women's football has gained unparalleled visibility- particularly during big tournaments- the coverage is nevertheless shaped by existing gender hierarchies in both form and substance. Women's football accounted for less than one-third of overall football coverage. Visibility increases were event-driven rather than maintained, and news regarding women's tournaments appeared less prominently on homepages and sports websites. The language was qualitatively formed by four main frames: empowerment, emotion, comparison, and commercial legitimacy, with empowerment tales frequently overlapping with market rhetoric.

The comparative regional analysis found both convergence and divergence in representational techniques. Western liberal sources presented progressive discourse while remaining rooted in market-driven logics. While stressing cultural progress, non-Western and Global South outlets frequently used patriarchal or developmentalist motifs. The result is a globalized but unequal discursive terrain in which the language of equality is widely used but interpreted through various local ideologies.

5.9.2. Theoretical Integration

The study used Critical Discourse Analysis to explore how linguistic choices and framing strategies maintain power relations even in the name of development. These frameworks show that gender disparity in sports media is not only a question of representation, but of structural mediation- a process in which sport's cultural, economic, and ideological institutions come together to define who and what

matters. The hallmarks of mediated equality are visibility without redistribution, representation without accountability, and empowerment without transformation.

5.9.3. Implications for Global Sport and Media Reform

The results have numerous implications for global sport governance and media policy: Sustainable equality necessitates structural commitment. Media organizations must implement gender-balanced editorial policies that go beyond tournament cycles. Permanent women's sports desks and equal funding allocation can help assure continuity. Diversification of newsroom leadership is critical. Increasing the number of women and minority journalists in prominent editing positions would call into question the gendered hierarchies that influence content selection and framing—and require transparency in sponsorship and coverage measures. Just as FIFA requires gender-disaggregated financial reporting, media companies should provide gender-disaggregated coverage data to track progress—through cross-sector collaboration. Collaborations among governing bodies, media institutions, and advocacy organizations can produce consistent messaging that links policy rhetoric with representational practice—critical media literacy. Audiences should be able to understand how equality narratives can be co-opted by commercial logic, promoting more critical sports media consumption.

5.9.4. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study offers an insight into the representation of gender in selected sports media outlets, but certain limitations should also be noted. First, the analysis is limited to the English language media of eight selected news organisations. The results are therefore only indicative of the overall range of media coverage for football in the regions and countries analysed and do not provide a full representation of other languages used in the reporting of football in the regions and countries examined. The outlets selected offer information on specific media contexts and should not be considered to represent all Western, South Asian, Middle Asian or Asia Pacific media organisations. Second, the study is mainly focused on the consideration of textual content and does not consider in detail the process of visual representation, or the meaning that audiences give to media, or the way in which the media is produced. The findings of this research could inspire future studies in multilingual comparative research, visual semiotic research, and following the media coverage over the course of several tournament cycles.

Interviews with sports journalists and editors may also help to gain insight into editorial constraints and conventions that influence the representation of gender in sports journalism.

5.9.5. Concluding Remarks

To summarize, media coverage of women's football exemplifies the tensions of global modernity: exposure without parity, celebration without transformation. While journalists and outlets are increasingly embracing gender equality as a moral and professional objective, their actions are still tied to financial and cultural institutions that favor male sports. This chapter has demonstrated, drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical framework and using Critical Discourse Analysis as an analytical method, that the movement for gender equality in sports extends well beyond the playing field. It is a struggle for meaning, language, and control over representation. To achieve true parity, both institutions and the media must shift from symbolic acknowledgment to structural redistribution, ensuring that women's sport is not only recognized and celebrated, but also resourced, normalized, and integrated into the global sports hierarchy.

Chapter 6: Social Media Discourse Analysis

6.1. Introduction

This chapter investigates how gender, power, and legitimacy are formed, challenged, and negotiated in the social media discourse around global football. Building on Chapters 4 and 5, which examined institutional communication and mainstream sports journalism, this chapter turns its attention to digital publics: fans, activists, influencers, athletes, and informal commentators whose voices shape the cultural meaning of women's football in real time. Social media has altered the landscape of sports communication by decentralizing discourse production. Unlike traditional journalism, where editorial gatekeepers control visibility, social media platforms enable users to create, remix, circulate, and contest narratives at unprecedented speed and scale. According to researchers, platforms like Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube are "networked publics"-digital arenas where people assemble, participate, and co-produce meaning through dialogic communication (Boyd, 2010). These platforms serve not only as communication tools but also ideological infrastructures, determining whose identities, values, and political stances acquire traction in the global football conversation. Women's football has benefited significantly from social media visibility. Whereas traditional media frequently ignore women's sports, social platforms enable players and advocates to transcend institutional boundaries, communicate directly with audiences, and create personalized brands. Viral moments-celebrations, controversial refereeing decisions, and on-field brilliance- can reach millions of people, changing mainstream attitudes toward female sports. Influencers and internet fan communities aggressively oppose sexist myths. In contrast, players utilize their own channels to criticize governing bodies, advocate for fair treatment, and reveal behind-the-scenes information that humanizes and elevates women's football.

However, social media also reinforces structural inequities. Gender harassment, objectification, algorithmic bias, and misogynistic trolling are chronic obstacles to women athletes' internet engagement. Platforms promote visibility that is aligned with economic objectives, which may prioritize aesthetics, personality, or controversy over athletic expertise. Furthermore, worldwide inequities in

access, digital literacy, and cultural norms influence how female athletes are perceived and represented across many platforms.

Therefore, this chapter asks:

- How is women's football represented on various social media platforms?
- What types of support, praise, criticism, or animosity do female athletes face in internet spaces?
- How can fans, journalists, influencers, and activist groups shape competing narratives about women's football, equality, and gender norms?
- How do platform architectures (algorithms, affordances, and content formats) influence the visibility and framing of women's football discourse?
- What are the consequences of social media rhetoric for broader battles for gender equality in international football?

To answer these questions, the chapter examines 1200 social media posts and comment threads from Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube, collected between 2015 and 2026. Posts were chosen based on terms such as "women's football," "women's World Cup," "equal pay," "gender equality," and player names (e.g., Sam Kerr, Alex Morgan, Aitana Bonmati). The analysis combines quantitative examination of engagement and visibility patterns with qualitative thematic coding of the collected posts and comment threads. The analysis is informed by Critical Discourse Analysis and interpreted through Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, habitus and symbolic power. Digital feminist scholarship provides relevant contextual literature for understanding gendered experiences and inequalities in online spaces, rather than functioning as a separate theoretical framework.

6.2. Research Design and Sampling Strategy

This chapter explores the representation and discussion of women's football, female athletes and gender equality on the five social media platforms of Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and YouTube by applying digital discourse analysis. This is a suitable method since the study focuses on statements and discussions that have been posted on the web and left in discussions in online communities, in which linguistic, interactional, visibility and audience elements are involved in creating and disseminating significance. Helps the analysis to recognize the patterns of support, criticism, objectification, hostility

and advocacy in the gathered material. Platform analysis is used to complement this approach and to help consider the various social media contexts in which the material was gathered. The platforms are viewed as separate sites for communication instead of as equal sources of discourse. The various formats and interaction capabilities give context to the interpretation of content and interaction that can be seen from the data set. This study is not intended to look into proprietary algorithms, though, nor to directly measure their internal operations. Bourdieu's theory is used to inform the analysis. His ideas contribute to the understanding of the dynamics of online space as a public arena, the interaction between various types of capital and the visibility and legitimacy they offer, and the production and contestation of symbolic power from digital representations. The concept of critical discourse analysis is used to help analyze language, framing and power relations in the collected material. The contextual literature of digital feminist scholarship is not a central theme but rather used to understand gendered experiences in online space. All these strategies help the chapter focus on the content of social media discourse while remaining consistent with the overall framework of the chapter's thesis.

6.2.1. Data Sources and Sampling

A total of 1200 publicly available postings were gathered from five major social media sites: 300 posts from Facebook, 200 posts from TikTok, 300 posts from Instagram, 200 posts from Twitter, and 200 comments or posts from YouTube. These data sources included athlete accounts, official federation accounts like FIFA Women's World Cup pages, fan communities, influencer opinions, and public comment threads linked to viral videos or highlight reels. Significant football-related events, such as the 2019 Women's World Cup, the 2022 Men's World Cup, and the 2023 Women's World Cup, as well as current debates about equal pay, athlete advocacy, and instances of misogyny, were used to stratify the sample.

Table 6.1: Dataset Summary

Data Source	Platform/Source	Number of Documents	Dataset Timeline Coverage	Purpose

Social Media Posts	Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube	1,200	January 2015-March 2026	Analyze public discourse, representation, activism, and gender narratives.

Table 6.2: Platform Distribution

Platform	Number of Posts
X (Twitter)	200
Instagram	300
Facebook	300
TikTok	200
YouTube	200

Table 6.3: Social Media Engagement and Digital Audience Indicators During the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup

Source: ComScore (2023); SVG Europe (2023); WARC/Instagram (2023)

Metric	Figure	Source
Total social media actions-2023 WWC	185 million (3x2019)	ComScore 2023
Social media actions-2023 Final (Spain vs England)	17,000,000	ComScore 2023
New fans attracted to the 2023 WWC globally	543 million (+57% from 2019)	SVG Europe 2023
% of new 2023 WWC followers who were female	52%	SVG Europe 2023
% of 2023 WWC global audience via YouTube	30%	SVG Europe 2023

TikTok's share of the 2023 WWC audience	8% (surpassed Twitter at 7%)	SVG Europe 2023
GenZ (16-24) primary platform	43%	SVG Europe 2023
GenZ-Instagram	31%	SVG Europe 2023
GenZ=TV viewing	30%	SVG Europe 2023
Total social media followers gained-all 736 players, 2023 WWC	15,600,000	WARC/Instagram 2023
Instagram followers gained by all 736 players	12,500,000	WARC/Instagram 2023
Most followed female footballer-Alisha Lehman (Instagram)	14,910,000 followers	WARC 2023

6.2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Posts that specifically mentioned women's football, had significant language or graphic content, and received at least five hundred likes or comments on popular platforms were all included in the analysis. Posts published by anonymous accounts exhibiting bot-like traits, consisting mostly of commercial adverts, or lacking discursive content were eliminated.

6.2.3. Coding Framework

A two-stage coding process was used to analyze the posts. In the initial phase, quantitative coding concentrated on factors like post visibility (measured by likes, shares, comments, and views); content type (text, image, reels, and live-stream clips); subject focus (performance, controversy, activism, and personal life); and overall sentiment (positive, neutral, or negative). Qualitative thematic and discursive coding were used in the second phase. The coded themes included empowerment and celebration;

sexualization and body-centred commentary; misogyny, abuse, and gendered insults; nationalist narratives; comparisons to men's football; criticism of national federations and FIFA; athlete activism; identity politics; social justice; and algorithmic amplification of emotions or aesthetic values. The analysis also identified discourse styles such as irony, satire, rage, and memetic humour.

Table 6.3: Coding Hierarchy	
1. **Institutional Field and Governance Logics**	1.1 Institutional Field Exclusion 1.2 Market-Oriented Rationales 1.3 Policy Tokenism 1.4 Patriarchal Bureaucracy 1.5 Resistance and Structural Reform
2. **Capital Disparities and Devaluation**	2.1 Cultural Capital Depreciation 2.2 Social Capital Restrictions 2.3 Symbolic Capital Denial 2.4 Capital Conversion Obstacles
3. **Mediated Habitus and Hegemonic Representation**	3.1 Hegemonic Masculinity Protection 3.2 Trivialization and Infantilization 3.3 The Deficit Model Framing 3.4 Progressive Media Advocacy
4. **Digital Discursive Power and Platform Affordances**	4.1 Overt Online Misogyny 4.2 Algorithmic Amplifications of Bias 4.3 Aesthetic Labor Imperative 4.4 Digital Counter-Publics and Resistance 4.5 Platform-Specific Moderation Failures

6.2.4. Ethical Considerations

Only publicly available posts were analyzed. No personal information other than usernames was gathered or retained. The study adheres to Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR) principles, considering social media conversation as public content but acknowledging its socio-emotional sensitivity. Direct quotes are paraphrased to safeguard confidentiality.

6.3. Platform Affordances and Discursive Environments

One distinguishing element of social media discourse is that it is influenced not only by user behavior but also by platform architectures-the design features, algorithms, content standards, and economic logics that organize visibility. Each platform generates a unique communicative environment that influences how female athletes are depicted and how consumers interact with gendered information.

6.3.1. Twitter: Real-Time Debate, Political Visibility, and Polarisation

Journalists, athletes, fans, and critics interact in real time on Twitter, which is the hub of sports discourse. Coach Emma Hayes' squad planning was highlighted in a post by the Twitter account on 1 March 2023. It was part of the Codes of the Game, categorized as Governance & Leadership, and reported the rising prominence of women in football leadership. Representation Theory and Media Framing Theory revealed how female coaches are increasingly seen as authoritative leader’s worthy of public and media attention. The platform is a crucial forum for public discussion because of its characteristics, which include hashtags, quotation tweets, and quick information dissemination. However, its short-form communication approach frequently sparks divisive conversations, especially when it comes to gender-based abuse, equal pay disputes, political arguments about women's rights, and recurrent viral outrage cycles.

6.3.2. Instagram: Visibility Through Aesthetics and Performative Empowerment

Instagram is a platform for visual storytelling that highlights photos, videos, and customized branding. Through training films, celebration photos, lifestyle content, and behind-the-scenes portrayals of team culture, female football players frequently generate significant engagement. However, Instagram's

visual economy also upholds aesthetic standards. Posts that are only focused on athletic performance typically receive less attention than content that conforms to socially acceptable standards of femininity. As a result, the platform promotes influencer collaborations, business sponsorship initiatives, and self-branding. These options subject athletes to objectification and scrutiny based on beauty, even though they may offer financial advantages and more visibility. A billboard campaign was used to promote women's football, and the post was shared on X (formerly Twitter) on 30 June 2022. It was included in this study as a Representation & Visibility example, as it showed the role of outdoor advertising in making women's football more visible in everyday life. The billboard, using the principles of Media Framing Theory, presented women footballers as legitimate athletes, worthy of recognition in the public sphere. Representation Theory also posits that symbolic visibility comes at a time when women have been historically silenced in the world of football and can now be seen as part of the public sporting sphere, which in turn can lead to greater social recognition.

6.3.3. TikTok: Viral Creativity, Youth Culture, and Memetic Politics

Football discourse is shaped by viral trends, humor, and remix culture thanks to TikTok's short-form video format. Through dance-based festivities, skill competitions, memes that subvert sexist stereotypes, and fan-made emotional montages, women's football flourishes on the site. Female athletes can have unanticipated viral success since the algorithm driven "For You Page" regularly exposes visitors to information they did not actively seek out. Although misogynistic materials can spread quickly due to the accessibility of reposting and remixing content, young audiences frequently use humor and creativity to combat gender norms.

6.3.4. Facebook: Legacy Fan Communities and Generational Divisions

Long-form conversations in comment threads, nationalist fan groups, older demographics, and links to significant news stories all shape Facebook's environment. Facebook discourse is more politically conservative, with several comment threads opposing gender equality in football. Whether or not women "deserve equal pay," competitive standards, and national pride during tournaments are common topics of discussion. Because posts on Facebook often contain links to news articles covered in Chapter

5, the platform acts as a bridge between traditional media and digital audiences. Engagement-heavy arguments, which often highlight sexist and nasty words, are favored by the platform's ranking system.

6.3.5. YouTube: Video Narratives, Highlight Reels, and Toxic Comment Cultures

YouTube serves a specific function as a platform for long-form interviews, documentary-style stories, tactical analysis films, and match highlights. Official FIFA channels, national federations, independent commentators, and fan-generated compilations are among the sources of women's football material on YouTube. While many films celebrate athletic achievement, the comments also show misogynistic sentiments, such as accusations that women's football is "slow" or "boring," derogatory parallels to men's football, and harassment based on sexual orientation or appearance. Football culture's gender hierarchy is reinforced, and toxic masculinity is fostered by YouTube users' relative anonymity and lax monitoring.

6.3.6. Platform Political Economies and Algorithmic Inequality

Algorithms that reward interaction intensity—likes, comments, disputes, and controversy—as well as emotional content, aesthetic value (especially on Instagram and TikTok), trending hashtags, and virality determine visibility across all platforms. By emphasizing controversy over skill, sexualization over talent, outrage over helpful assistance, and celebrity-focused narratives over collaborative stories, these logics may inadvertently hurt female athletes. Thus, increased disparities in sports are reflected in the political economy of platforms.

6.4. Dominant Narrative Themes Across Platforms

Discussions about women's football are influenced by a complex interaction of celebration, skepticism, identity politics, and algorithmic amplification, according to a thematic study of 1200 social media posts. Social media discourse is more chaotic, emotionally charged, and varied than mainstream news, which typically uses consistent frames such as empowerment, novelty, and commercial expansion. This diversity reflects the decentralized nature of digital publics, where athletes, fans, influencers, journalists, and anonymous users work together to create narratives.

Five main subject categories appeared on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. These included comparisons to men's football and performance-based cynicism; discussions about equal pay, gender equality, and institutional responsibility; sexualization, objectification, and remarks about appearance; activism, identity politics, and feminist mobilization; viral highlight culture, humor, and memetic discourse. Due to variations in user demographics and affordances, each theme developed differently across platforms.

Thematic examination of social media data revealed several significant conversation trends. These themes show how gender inequality in football is both upheld and challenged.

Theme	Description	Example from social media	Interpretation
Gender Bias	Negative or stereotypical comments	"Women's football is slow"	Reflects cultural devaluation
Athlete Activism	Players advocating equality	# Equal Pay posts	Resistance against inequality
Fan Engagement	Supportive audience reactions	Positive match reactions	Growing acceptance
Online Harassment	Abuse or sexist trolling	Negative comments	Reinforces gender inequality

6.4.1. Celebration of Athletic Excellence and National Pride

Positive narratives were particularly common on Instagram and TikTok, where highlight reels, celebratory montages, behind-the-scenes videos, and national team hype films were frequently used to promote women's football. Millions of people interacted with posts that featured elite athletes, including Trinity Rodman, Aitana Bonmatí, Sam Kerr, Alexia Putellas, and Alex Morgan.

The theme of celebrating athletic excellence was one of the prominent themes identified in the social media dataset. Posts celebrating major victories presented women's footballers as athletes deserving recognition and visibility. One example was a tweet published on X (formerly Twitter) on 6 July 2015, following the United States Women's National Team's victory in the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup. The post was classified under the theme of Representation and Visibility because it related to the public recognition of women's football following a major international achievement. This example illustrates how social media can provide a space for celebrating women's sporting success and challenging the historical marginalisation of female athletes.

Fan groups often responded strongly to content honoring national accomplishments, such as Australia's Matildas, Spain's 2023 World Cup victory, or the USWNT's prior dominance, especially on TikTok and Instagram. Positive soundtracks, slow-motion action videos, heartfelt phrases like "History made!" and "She is unstoppable," country flags and emojis, and hashtags like #HerGameToo, #WWC2023, and #Proud were common elements of these joyous posts.

Because it follows broader internet trends, such content often goes viral. Relatable, physically appealing, and emotionally uplifting content is what users want. Social media celebration seems more normalized, presenting women's athletic success as a common cultural phenomenon, in contrast to traditional journalism, which could present women's achievements as extraordinary.

Positive sentiment did not, however, permeate all media equally. Joyful remarks often turned into divisive comment wars on Facebook and YouTube, revealing underlying ideological divides. These festivities serve as a collective affirmation of women's football's legitimacy and cultural value, even in unfavorable circumstances.

6.4.2. Equal Pay Debates and Gender-Justice Narratives

Equal pay is one of the most active, prominent, and polarising topics on social media. Equal pay continuously drew substantial involvement on Twitter, especially during moments of controversy or institutional decision-making. Posts calling for equal pay frequently framed the issue as one of human rights, labor justice, or symbolic acknowledgment. In contrast, counterarguments cited market reasoning (“They do not generate the same revenue”) or performance hierarchies (“Men’s football is

faster”). Equal pay posts on Instagram got overwhelmingly positive feedback, sometimes in the form of infographics, player comments, or official pronouncements. Captions like “Pay women what they are worth” or “Equality is not optional” were common, indicating a stronger feminist-aligned user base that mobilizes through visuals and pithy slogans. TikTok turned equal pay disputes into memetic activism. Users challenged sexist tropes by creating duets, remixes, and commentary videos that combined humor, data, and satire. This innovative combination of entertainment and political campaigning shows how young people use platform tools to express feminist views. In contrast, Facebook received the most negative feedback. Equal pay posts frequently elicited nasty comment threads, with individuals citing economic arguments to disguise ideological concerns. Gender-critical narratives frequently depicted women as “wanting special treatment” or “refusing to accept biological reality,” indicating a deep-seated opposition to structural equality. One of the main points arising from the dataset was the equal pay debate. This was followed by a tweet (28 May 2021) that said that women's football has been missing equal growth opportunities, which makes it less valued than men's football. As an example of economic inequality, it captured Liberal Feminism and Structural Inequality Theory, focusing on unequal opportunities and under-investment. Across platforms, equal pay discourse serves as a discursive battlefield. Supportive narratives present equality as a normative democratic value, whereas hostile narratives seek to reinforce patriarchal hierarchy.

6.4.3. Sexualisation and Appearance-Focused Discourse

While there has been an increase in feminist visibility and activism, so too has the themes of sexualisation been a recurring theme, especially on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Comments on posts of female athletes tended to be more about appearance than sports performance. These ranged from predictions on the 'most attractive', comments on physical fitness, beauty or clothing, memes that sexualised players or compared them to celebrities, and criticism of players who failed to fit the traditional beauty and appearance ideals. The comments illustrate the way in which female athletes might be judged on their sporting accomplishments and their physical appearance. For instance, under the celebratory reels, comments like "She is stunning", "I would marry her" and "Beauty and talent!" were posted under the reels. Some of these are said to be positive comments but they draw

attention to the athletes' looks, look ability or attractiveness instead of sporting ability. Specifically, beauty and talent are suggested to go together, which implies recognition of athletic success might come with expectations regarding physical beauty. Sexualisation was also linked to negative comments on YouTube, with some users drawing attention to the 'attractiveness' of female sportspersons but suggesting that they lacked the talent. This pairing might be thought of in context with Glick and Fiske's (1996) comments on the ambivalent attitude toward women (AAW), which consist of seemingly positive attitudes toward women and attitudes that maintain gender stereotyping. These examples thus show the possibility of using online visibility to enable the recognition of women's sports participation, but also to reinforce appearance-based expectations.

6.4.4. Comparisons to Men's Football

One of the most common discourse patterns on social media platforms is cross-gender comparison. The speed of play, the caliber and intensity of the competition, revenue disparities, the size of the fan base, and historical status were frequently mentioned in comments. These analogies situate women's football in a hierarchical structure that regards men's football as the gold standard. On Facebook and YouTube, these comparisons were frequently insulting, with comments implying that under-fifteen boys' teams could surpass professional women's teams. Users frequently discussed tactical sophistication and validity on Twitter, using statistics or video proof to back up their claims.

Comparisons were less frequent but appeared in comment sections on visually focused platforms like Instagram and TikTok, especially beneath videos that went viral due to extraordinary skill. With remarks like "She is great for women's football," users would simultaneously commend and disparage female players. These stories highlight the enduring cultural presumptions that women's football is inferior to men's football.

6.4.5. Activism, Identity, and Feminist Mobilization

The emergence of digitally networked feminism with roots in football culture is a significant aspect of social media debate. On Twitter and TikTok, where hashtags, videos, and user-generated content criticize gender discrimination and celebrate women's sport as part of larger movements for social justice, feminist mobilization is especially active. On 23 July 2022, a public Instagram user shared a

post encouraging women's involvement in sports and gender inclusion. It was coded under Representation & Visibility, questioning traditional gender roles in football. The post emphasized the role of social media in promoting equal opportunities and institutional involvement of women through the theories of Social Role Theory and Liberal Feminism.

Hashtags like #HerGameToo, #WomenInSport, #StopTheSexism, #EqualPay, and #RespectTheGirls are common examples of digital activism. Additionally, activists produce movies that refute sexist claims, promote player activism through remixes and retweets featuring celebrities like Marta Vieira da Silva and Megan Rapinoe, and disseminate instructional materials that address gender policy and historical exclusion. These kinds of mobilization are often intersectional in character. Racism, LGBTQ+ visibility, body positivity, and the experiences of female athletes from the Global South are frequently discussed topics. Young women and LGBTQ users often take on the role of opinion leaders, communicating feminist viewpoints through sarcasm, humor, and data-driven arguments.

Institutional crises, such as sexual harassment scandals, conflicts with football federations, or unequal resource distribution, frequently give birth to activism. Viral social media comments show how digital publics may hold institutions accountable, shaping public opinion and sometimes changing policy outcomes.

6.4.6. Viral Highlight Culture, Humor, and Memetic Discourse

The memetic framing of women's football is one of the most notable features of social media discourse. Skill compilations, slow-motion goals, amusing locker room films, player reactions, fan-made edits synchronized with popular music, and comical skits or lip-sync videos addressing sexism are all examples of viral content.

TikTok and Instagram Reels are excellent at creating emotional connections with viewers by fusing music, visual appeal, and quick editing methods. Fans regularly share humorous content that questions sexist assumptions. For instance, memes that make fun of the notion that women are incapable of shooting well are sometimes accompanied by film of amazing goals, employing humor as a kind of feminist criticism.

Public attitudes can be quickly changed via viral highlight culture. A single outstanding goal, celebration, or interview can change perceptions of women's football by introducing millions of users to top athletic achievements in an approachable and captivating way. The decentralized power of platform algorithms is demonstrated by the fact that these viral events often garner more attention than traditional news coverage.

6.5. Supportive, Celebratory, and Feminist Discourse

Positive conversations regarding women's football are common and powerful on social media. It is a counter-hegemonic force that opposes patriarchal systems that are ingrained in football culture and frequently supported by the media. Four interrelated types of supportive speech typically surfaced across platforms: the establishment of fan groups and collective identities, the celebration of athletic achievement and technical quality, emotional solidarity among players and teams, and feminist mobilization and activism.

6.5.1. Celebrating Athletic Excellence

The technical proficiency, tactical acumen, and physical prowess of female football players were often praised by encouraging users. Tactical analysts frequently create in-depth breakdown films on YouTube that look at build-up tactics, transition play, pressing methods, and positional frameworks. Audiences looking for in-depth football analysis—which is frequently lacking in mainstream sports coverage—showed a great deal of interest in these films.

The data also showed a notable focus on celebrating athletic achievement and national pride. A public Instagram user stated that the Indian Women's Under-17 team's historic qualification for the AFC quarterfinal was celebrated in a 10 May 2019. Coded as Representation & Visibility, it represented Liberal Feminism and Representation Theory, highlighting greater visibility and international recognition of women's football.

TikTok users frequently shared videos of long-range goals, daring saves, complex passing sequences, intense pressing, and imaginative celebrations. Captions like "Respect the women's game," "Top-tier football," or "Skill is genderless" frequently accompanied these films. Such information shows how

performance visibility can help change societal views and directly contradicts the notion that women's football is fundamentally inferior.

6.5.2. Emotional Solidarity and Community Support

Emotional solidarity with athletes was often reflected in supportive language. Waves of supportive remarks wishing athletes a quick recovery usually followed injuries, and affirmations urging teams to maintain their pride in their accomplishments frequently followed losses. In a similar vein, supporters who expressed solidarity with impacted athletes responded strongly to controversies involving sexist treatment.

Statements like "So proud of you" and "Keep shining" were frequently found in the Instagram comment sections of postings featuring personal athletes. These exchanges show how social media platforms foster parasocial connections that bolster networks of support for female athletes.

6.5.3. Feminist and Intersectional Activism

Across all mediums, digital activism became a potent theme. To combat sexism, structural inequity, unfair media representation, discriminatory federation decisions, and sexist trolling, users used feminist language. The supportive discourses helped popularize women's football by encouraging women to play football and praising women players. One Twitter/X user encouraged “girl power” in football with a tweet dated on 26 December 2020. As a form of representation and visibility, it was designed to embody Representation Theory and Media Framing Theory, presenting women's football as aspirational, inclusive, and socially valuable.

While some articles employed structural analysis to interpret episodes as instances of systemic sexism rather than individual incidents, many others used rights-based rhetoric, stressing that equality is non-negotiable. The unique difficulties faced by players of colour, LGBTQ+ athletes, and football players from the Global South were brought to light by intersectional viewpoints.

The history of women's football bans, gendered salary structures within football federations, and persistent underfunding of grassroots development were all commonly covered in instructional videos produced by TikTok users. These films frequently went viral because they blended relatable communication techniques with emotional impact.

6.5.4. Collective Identity and Fan Community Formation

Identity-driven fandom is often the focal point of women's football communities on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. Supportive users create collective identities based on solidarity against sexism, pride, empowerment, and shared values.

Fans of national teams like the USWNT, the Lionesses, the Matildas, and Spain's national team, as well as clubs like FC Barcelona Femeni, Arsenal Women, and Chelsea Women, generate hashtags, fan pages, and online communities that function independently of popular football culture.

By creating counter-publics—social settings where women's sport is prioritized rather than marginalized—this online fan action helps to influence culture more broadly. These groups create alternative spaces where women's football is honored, discussed, and promoted on its own terms, challenging established hierarchies of sports legitimacy.

6.6. Misogyny, Hostile, and Digital Violence

For many female athletes, social media remains a hostile atmosphere despite a lot of encouraging commentary. Although it also showed up to a lesser degree on Instagram and TikTok, misogyny was most prevalent on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Gender-based insults and harassment, performance-based denigration, sexualized hostility and homophobia, and anti-feminist resistance to equality movements are the four interrelated forms of hostile discourse.

6.6.1. Gendered Insults and Harassment

Explicit misogynistic remarks were a common type of abuse. Dismissive remarks like "Go back to the kitchen," derogatory terms like "girls," "little ladies," and "weak," and, in certain situations, outright threats were frequently used against female athletes. The highest rates of gendered harassment were found on Twitter and YouTube, especially when athletes had political opinions or promoted equal pay.

This unpleasant environment was exacerbated by anonymous accounts, which allowed users to act abusively with no repercussions, thanks to platform characteristics that restrict accountability. These exchanges show how wider societal patterns of gender discrimination can be replicated and amplified by digital platforms.

6.6.2. Performance-Based Denigration

Attempts to minimize the athletic accomplishments of female football players were a common issue in disparaging talk. Many comments questioned the authenticity and professional level of the women's game, calling it "slow and boring," asserting that "men's U-15 teams can beat them," implying that "nobody watches this," or stating that "women's football is not real football."

6.6.3. Sexualized Hostility and Homophobia

Sexualization and overt abuse were often coupled in hostile conversations, especially on YouTube and in anonymous comment sections. Sexual jokes, fetishization of lesbian partnerships, and homophobic statements about openly LGBTQ+ athletes were common comments.

These forms of hostility mirror broader social systems through which women are punished for violating established gender standards. Online abuse of female athletes who publicly express non-traditional identities, support social justice, or defy standard gender norms frequently intensifies. Such speech illustrates how homophobia, sexism, and cyberviolence are intertwined in modern football culture.

6.6.4. Anti-Feminist and Anti-Equality Backlash

There Hostility towards discussions of equal pay was evident, particularly on Facebook and Twitter. Neoliberal market-based arguments, anti-feminist language, conservative nationalist viewpoints and biological essentialism were used to frame resistance to gender equality. For example, an Instagram postdated 17 June 2025 ridiculed the issue of gender equality in football. This post was classified within the study's gender-discrimination coding because it challenged women's inclusion and the legitimacy of equality claims.

These findings are consistent with research identifying social media as a space in which gender relations in sport are both challenged and reproduced (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018; Kavanagh et al., 2019). From a Bourdieusian perspective, the responses can be understood as struggles over symbolic power and legitimacy within the football field. By presenting women's demands for equal treatment as requests for "special treatment" or evidence of entitlement, some users questioned whether those demands deserved recognition. Such responses can reinforce established hierarchies by treating existing arrangements as

normal while positioning challenges to inequality as unreasonable. Social media therefore functions not only as a space for expressing disagreement but also as a contested field in which the legitimacy of women's participation and claims to equality is negotiated.

Source: Women in Football (WIF) Annual Survey 2024; ESPN (2025)

Indicator	Figure	Year	Source
Women in football who experienced discrimination	89%	2024	WIF Survey
Women in football who experienced discrimination	82%	2023	WIF Survey
Women in football who experienced discrimination	66%	2020	WIF Survey
Respondents cited male dominance as the biggest challenge	71%	2024	WIF Survey
Women who believe they work harder for equal recognition	88%	2024	WIF Survey
Men who agreed women work harder for the same recognition	74%	2024	WIF Survey
Discrimination reports with no corrective action taken	60%+	2024	WIF Survey

Women among world's 100 highest-paid athletes	0	2023	European Parliament

6.7. Athlete Self-Representation and Digital Resistance

The athlete's active participation is a distinguishing element of social media conversation surrounding women's football. Unlike traditional media systems, in which journalists and editors decide who talks and whose opinions appear, social media allows female players to control their own narratives, develop personal brands, mobilize political activism, and challenge gendered preconceptions. Women athletes are increasingly producing debate on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube, rather than simply being subjects of it. This move has significant ramifications for gender power dynamics in global sport, since it challenges institutional monopolies on representation and broadens women's rhetorical repertoire in football.

6.7.1. Owning the Narrative: Self-Branding and Professional Identity

Self-representation was not limited to the role of the athlete and practitioner but also encompassed the roles of coach and leader. A typical example is a tweet published on X (formerly Twitter) on 25 January 2018, showing a woman conducting a football training session. In this study, the post was interpreted as an indicator of women's visibility and involvement in coaching and football leadership. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the example can be understood as a representation of women seeking recognition and legitimacy within a football field where coaching authority has traditionally been associated with men. The coaching knowledge and expertise demonstrated in the post can be understood as forms of cultural capital. However, visibility alone does not establish whether women have equal access to decision-making positions or institutional authority. This distinction highlights the difference between being visible within football and possessing the power to influence its structures and decisions.

6.7.2. Resistance to Misogyny and Troll Culture

A significant amount of content created by athletes directly addresses online harassment and sexism. Reposting or screenshotting misogynistic messages, discussing the psychological effects of harassment during major tournaments, publishing detailed statements denouncing discriminatory behavior, and working with teammates or clubs to issue collective responses supporting targeted individuals are all common ways that players expose abuse. In a post published on 18 August 2023, a female footballer questioned FIFA President Gianni Infantino's statement on gender equality. It was coded as digital discursive resistance and illustrated how Representation Theory and Cultural Capital describe female athletes' social media discourse as a means of challenging institutional power and gender inequalities.

These behaviors are significant examples of digital resistance. Athletes resist the culture of silence that has traditionally defined women's sport and raise awareness of institutional and interpersonal forms of sexism by openly addressing harassment. Fans, journalists, and feminist communities frequently show strong support for such posts.

Athletes also regularly use social media to draw attention to broader institutional injustices, such as poor training facilities, unequal bonuses, risky travel arrangements, and unfair scheduling practices. By doing this, they turn digital platforms into accountability tools that use audience participation and public awareness to put pressure on governing bodies to make changes. This strategy undermines the highly controlled public images frequently promoted by football federations and avoids the gatekeepers of traditional media.

6.7.3. Activism and Political Visibility

More female football players are using their online platforms to advocate for social justice in more general ways. LGBTQ+ visibility, anti-racist programs, anti-harassment campaigns, migrant and refugee rights, gender equality movements, and awareness of domestic abuse are common topics of their action.

With millions of followers on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, well-known athletes like Megan Rapinoe, Marta Vieira da Silva, Alex Morgan, and Asisat Oshoala have considerable influence over public

discussions. Women's football is often linked to broader issues of feminism, labor rights, physical autonomy, queer representation, and racial justice in its content.

Through these initiatives, women's football transcends its status as a sporting phenomenon. It becomes a politically significant public domain where sport serves as a forum for confronting interrelated systems of exclusion and injustice.

6.7.4. Community-Building, Mental Health, and Vulnerability

Emotional openness and vulnerability, traits that are less frequently linked with male athletes due to conventional assumptions around masculine stoicism, are also characteristics of athletes' social media discourse. Female football players often use social media to talk about burnout, depression, anxiety, injuries, retirement difficulties, sorrow, or personal crises.

In addition to creating online communities built on compassion, understanding, and support for one another, this authenticity enhances the parasocial bonds between athletes and fans. These posts humanize athletes and refute the notion that women's narratives are only characterized by emotion. Rather, conversations about mental health are frequently presented as political and professional actions that support resilience, awareness, and well-being in sports. Athletes show that vulnerability can coexist with exceptional performance and leadership through these discussions.

6.8. Viral Moments and Their Cultural Impact

Social media virality drastically alters perceptions of women's football around the world. Viral moments often increase visibility and change public perception by reaching audiences who would not otherwise be interested in women's sports. Four types of viral events were incredibly significant across all media. These featured hilarious or meme-based content, controversies that sparked feminist advocacy, emotionally intense celebrations and reactions, and displays of extraordinary physical ability.

6.8.1. Viral Athletic Moments

Goals, saves, dribbles, and tactical sequences are examples of skill-based viral videos that are phenomenally successful at changing the public's opinion of women's football. Sam Kerr's long-range goals, Alexia Putellas' technical skill, Mary Earps' penalty saves, and Linda Caicedo's dribbling

performances at the 2023 Women's World Cup are a few examples. A public Instagram post published on 12 August 2023 celebrated Colombian footballer's FIFA World Cup goal. This was under the umbrella of Representation & Visibility and showed how social media magnifies women's football. Representation Theory and Media Framing Theory emphasized their part in normalizing women's success in sport and the visibility of women's sport internationally.

These videos typically dominate platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels, garnering millions of views in a short amount of time. By offering highly obvious proof of elite-level performance, their popularity at once contradicts feelings of athletic inadequacy. Wider audiences can recognize the caliber of women's football because of the visual and emotional impact of these moments, which surpass gender stereotypes.

6.8.2. Emotional and Symbolic Viral Moments

On social media, emotionally charged events—such as wins, losses, retirements, team meetings, and celebrations—have a powerful impact. Motivational speeches given in team circles, players consoling rivals following losses, young girls meeting their sports heroes, and athletes' emotional responses to national anthems are all examples of viral content.

These incidents add to the strong emotional economy that surrounds women's football. They are consistently posted on TikTok and Instagram with popular music that heightens emotional connection. Emotional virality encourages new fans to participate in the sport and fortifies cultural ties between athletes and spectators.

6.8.3. Controversial Viral Moments and Feminist Backlash

Additionally, social media magnifies disputes that often lead to mass feminist mobilization. These occurrences include misogynistic comments made by pundits or officials, unfair refereeing decisions, sexual harassment scandals involving football federations, and institutional shortcomings pertaining to equal pay or working conditions.

These disputes frequently result in open letters, internet petitions, hashtags calling for responsibility, and declarations of solidarity from athletes, supporters, and advocacy organizations. These events reframe women's football as a venue for both athletic competition and political conflict through viral

transmission. Social media-generated public pressure can influence institutional reactions, such as formal apologies, resignations of leaders, or changes to policies.

6.8.4. Memes, Humor, and Digital Culture

Memes characterize football fandom on TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter. Exaggerated celebratory animations, hilarious critiques of stereotypes, sarcastic parallels with antiquated misogynistic views, TikTok remixes with dramatic transitions, and reproduced comment-section tales are common formats. Humor often softens the combative edge of gender discussions, making feminist criticisms accessible to a wider audience. Additionally, memes foster collective identities and shared symbolic allusions within fan communities. Supporters may combat prejudice and foster a feeling of community within women's football culture by using humor and inventiveness.

6.9. Cross-Platform Synthesis

Although each platform has its own discursive environment, the patterns together reflect a larger socio-digital ecology surrounding women’s football. Several cross-cutting insights appeared:

6.9.1. A Hybrid Discursive Landscape

Misogynistic animosity, commercial branding, fan identity building, progressive feminist mobilization, and viral entertainment culture are all included in the social media discourse around women's football. These various dimensions often coexist in the same postings, comment sections, or online communities, showing how platforms can simultaneously support conflicting narratives. An Instagram post on 29 July 2025 celebrated England's UEFA Women's European Championship title defense. It was presented under the theme Representation & Visibility and highlighted the power of sporting success in building up women's football. Representation Theory and Liberal Feminism became bound up in an association between elite achievement and increased visibility, legitimacy, and progress towards gender equality in football.

The complexity of today's digital publics, where prejudice and empowerment frequently coexist, is reflected in this hybridity. As a result, social media is not only a place to celebrate but also a controversial space where conflicting conceptions of equality, gender, and sport are debated.

6.9.2. Algorithmic Politics of Gender

Platform algorithms mostly determine visibility and interaction. While Twitter and Facebook tend to promote emotionally charged content, Instagram and TikTok often favor visual appeal. Regardless of whether reactions are favorable or unfavorable, YouTube's recommendation engine primarily promotes engagement-based conversations.

Female athletes may be both empowered and marginalized by these computational procedures. For instance, YouTube's recommendation systems may expose athletes to hostile comment cultures and an increase in online abuse. At the same time, TikTok's potential for viral amplification can elevate women's football content beyond traditional media expectations. As a result, algorithmic processes influence how gendered narratives are created and disseminated, as well as what consumers perceive.

6.9.3. Emotional Capital and Feminist Publics

Emotional narrative and audience participation are key components of women's football discourse. When events impact female athletes, social media followers often respond with pride, admiration, empathy, solidarity, and fury. On 28 May 2025, a public Instagram user stated: Equal opportunity is equal commercial value. It was part of Economic Inequality, and it tested the notion of the marketability of women's football. Economic Capital shared its vision of how the three pillars of investment, visibility, and institutional support can work together toward sustainable commercial growth and gender equality. Feminist digital publics and networked communities of solidarity are developed because of these emotional reactions. Users can mobilize around problems of social justice, equality, and representation by using emotional engagement as a potent tool for activism. Emotional capital thus plays a key role in influencing the conversation around women's football nowadays.

6.9.4. Persistence of Patriarchal Cultural Norms

Sexist and abusive themes are still pervasive in digital football culture, despite notable advancements in visibility and public support. Such conversation is especially prevalent on YouTube, where anonymous participation fosters abusive behavior, Facebook, where conservative fan communities are powerful, and Twitter, where quick interactions frequently exacerbate polarization.

These trends show that patriarchal ideas are not always destroyed by more online visibility. Rather, these beliefs are replicated, contested, and negotiated in new venues created by internet platforms. The persistence of discriminatory narratives emphasizes the continuous need for cultural change, platform accountability, and institutional solutions.

6.9.5. Decentralization of Authority

Athletes, influencers, fans, and activists are increasingly challenging conventional frameworks that have dominated football discourse. Social media transfers communicative power from corporate intermediaries, regulatory agencies, and media organizations to a variety of online groups.

This decentralization makes it possible for more diverse and inclusive depictions of women's football. It promotes a more democratic communication environment by enabling marginalized voices to participate in public discussions directly. As a result, power over football narratives is increasingly shared by a wide range of actors rather than being centralized only inside established organizations.

Source: UNESCO (2024); Euractiv (2024); Forbes (2024); Ampere Analysis (2026)

Indicators	Figure	Source
Football coaches globally who are men	95%	UNESCO 2024
Referees globally who are men	91%	UNESCO 2024
Players who view gender inequality as a major issue	71%	Euractiv 2024
Coaches who view gender inequality as a major issue	46%	Euractiv 2024
Sports fans in Europe following women’s football (2026)	17% (+21% since late 2023)	Ampere Analysis 2026
Nations where women and girls cannot freely access football	14+ FIFA MAs	FIFA 2023

National teams with any form of pay equity (women=men)	7 out of 211 nations	FIFPRO 2023

6.10. Implications for Governance, Media, and Gender Equality

The conclusions of this chapter have important consequences for football governance, media organizations, sports institutions, and policymakers.

6.10.1. Governance Implications

FIFA, national federations, and continental confederations, among other football regulating bodies, must acknowledge social media as a crucial tool for tracking and addressing gender-based disparities. Digital platforms offer valuable information on public perceptions, institutional legitimacy, athlete well-being, and new misuse trends. Additionally, they serve as forums for ongoing assessment and contestation of reputational legitimacy.

To address these issues, governing bodies should provide comprehensive guidelines to support athletes' digital wellness, reinforce anti-abuse reporting systems, implement real-time harassment monitoring tools, and impose penalties on those who engage in digital violence. Online harassment should not be seen as a personal or isolated problem, which is why such precautions are required. Instead, it is a structural obstacle that jeopardizes women's fair participation in football and undercuts larger initiatives for gender equality in athletics.

6.10.2. Media and Journalistic Implications

Media outlets and sports journalists ought to increasingly include social media analysis in their reporting. Digital communities are significant information sources that can offer insights into public opinion, emerging social challenges, and political mobilization strategies related to women's football.

It is also the duty of journalists to refute sexist tropes and promote fairer portrayals of female athletes. This can be accomplished by highlighting athlete viewpoints, offering contextual understanding of gender-related disputes, and critically analyzing discriminatory behavior and online harassment. Sports

media may support larger initiatives to achieve gender equality in football and encourage educated public debate by actively participating in digital discourse.

6.10.3. Platform Policy Implications

Social media firms need to be more accountable for dealing with algorithmic prejudice, homophobic abuse, misogynistic harassment, and inconsistent content moderation procedures in various linguistic and cultural contexts. This chapter shows that platform design and moderation practices shape the visibility of women's football content and the experiences of female athletes. On 26 July 2023, a post on Instagram requested more women on FIFA's governance. It was carried out under the Governance & Leadership code agenda with calls for inclusive decision-making. The post was interpreted to mean equal opportunities for leadership and institutional change in football's governance; this was in keeping with Representation Theory and Liberal Feminism.

Reforms include creating specialized moderation teams dedicated to sports-related harassment, improving tools that let athletes handle abusive interactions, and increasing openness about algorithmic decision-making processes. Digital gender violence should be addressed as a wider issue pertaining to social justice, human rights, and public health rather than just as a moderation issue.

6.10.4. Implications for Women’s Football Development

Social media offers significant chances for women's football to keep expanding and improving. It strengthens athletes' brands, improves sponsorship opportunities, expands worldwide fan bases, and encourages younger generations to engage in sports. Social media highlighted the global growth of women's football through increasing international participation. A 24 November 2021, one tweet displayed women's involvement in FIFA competitions worldwide. Coded as Global Development, it reflected Representation Theory and Liberal Feminism by emphasizing international visibility, legitimacy, and expanding opportunities for women.

However, long-term advancement cannot be guaranteed by digital visibility alone. Consistent institutional investment in facilities, coaching programs, player pay, grassroots participation initiatives, and broader structural reforms is necessary for sustainable development. Without this kind of support, the excitement created by social media participation might not translate into significant improvements

in the material circumstances faced by female athletes. Therefore, tangible organizational commitments that promote equality throughout the football ecosystem must coexist with digital growth.

6.11. Summary of the Chapter

To investigate how gendered discourse is generated on Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, this chapter examined 1200 social media posts. The results show that social media serves as a platform for conflicting forces, including political contestation, identity-building, viral jubilation, misogynistic reaction, feminist advocacy, and digital violence. By actively creating their own narratives, female athletes challenge prejudices and inspire group activism. While platform algorithms determine whose voices are amplified or marginalized, viral culture increases prominence.

Chapter 7: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1. Introduction

This chapter provides a synthesis of the empirical results and theoretical arguments presented in this thesis to explore the reproduction and contestation of gender inequalities in the football field under the auspices of FIFA. Based on the findings from the analysis of institutional governance and policy (Chapter 4), traditional sports media representation (Chapter 5) and social media discourse (Chapter 6), the discussion will focus on how various segments of the global football field play a role in perpetuating gendered inequalities. The theoretical guidance is mostly based on the theory of Pierre Bourdieu: the notion of field, the notion of habitus, economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, symbolic capital. The concepts serve as a starting point for exploring the interplay between institutional power, resource allocation, media portrayals and public recognition and how these elements contribute to the status of women's Football. Instead of addressing inequalities in governance, media and digital space as separate issues, the chapter looks at the links between them in the wider relations of power in football. The results are also analyzed in connection to the literature on gender equality in sport, the representation of women, gender leadership in institutions, and in the digital media field. Within this literature, there are points of comparison to liberal feminist perspectives, which tend to focus on equal opportunities, access and formal rights, and radical feminist perspectives, which focus on patriarchy and the structure of gendered power. But in this thesis these views are not considered as different theoretical approaches. The findings are interpreted in the light of Bourdieu's sociology which is the core analytical framework. The chapter therefore goes beyond a descriptive presentation of the results and reflects on the usefulness of the results for adding to, extending, or qualifying previous research. It ends with the overall conclusions, institutional and media reform and directions for future research.

7.2. Discussion of Key Findings

7.2.1. Gender Inequality as a Structural Problem

A Bourdieusian perspective on gender disparity in global football could be interpreted as a product of inequity in the power relations within the football field. Bourdieu (1984) notes that struggles over resources, recognition and authority shape fields. In their football domain, these struggles shape who

holds power over wealth, who benefits from success, and who is seen as having a right to play. The results of Chapters 4, 5 and 6 suggest that women's football remains less favoured in these areas. This inequity is starkly illustrated in the disparity between the amount of economic capital given to various countries in terms of the FIFA World Cup prize money. The 2022 FIFA World Cup for men has a prize fund of $440 million, while the Women's FIFA World Cup for 2023 has a pool of $110 million, which was later announced to be $150 million. The money available for the two competitions shows considerable disparity. This imbalance can be understood via the notion of economic capital as conceived by Bourdieu: pre-existing inequalities in the investments and financial backing that is put into the football field play a role in creating inequalities. The results align with the broader research on the historical underinvestment in women's sport and the link between level of funding and sporting opportunities (Fink, 2015; Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013). The findings also show inequalities of cultural and symbolic capital. Chapter 5 concluded that women's football was under-represented in the mainstream media sample, getting less than one-third of the coverage. Furthermore, women's accomplishments were more often presented as emotional (human-interest) or novelty-oriented stories. These patterns are important because media representations lead to the recognition and the legitimacy of sporting activities. The symbolic capital concept by Bourdieu can be useful to understand the differences in social status and legitimacy of different types of sporting success. Cooky et al. (2013) also highlight the fact that women's sport is not seen in sport media, and Fink (2015) explores how the media representations of gender can affect the recognition of female athletes. These inequalities are not to be seen as independent financial and media issues. They can support each other: unequal investment impacts the resources of women's football, and unequal media visibility can impact the recognition and commercial legitimacy of women's football. This is in line with the conception of the interplay of various modalities of capital and the generation of power within a field presented by Bourdieu. The present study, however, does uncover patterns of inequality across both its institutional and media datasets, and across its digital datasets, without making any direct causal connections between media coverage, investment, and commercial outcomes. Overall, the results indicate a structural gender imbalance in football, rather than occasional disparities in participation and representation in the FIFA sphere of influence. Despite being increasingly visible and institutionalised, women's football continues

to suffer unequal distribution of economic and symbolic capital. A lot of work is needed in the distribution of resources, recognition and decision-making power within the football field to make meaningful progress in formal access and participation.

7.2.2. The role of Institutional Discourses and the Policy-Practice Gap

The results in Chapter 4 reveal a discrepancy between the formal gender equality commitments in the governance of football and the presence of women in institutional governance positions. FIFA's Women's Football Strategy (2020) and other institutional documents convey the commitments to participation, development, empowerment and the development of women's football. But, analysis suggests that having gender equality policies does not automatically mean having the same gender balance in institutional power and resources. This gap can be analysed using the notion of symbolic power, according to Bourdieu. Institutional statements and policy documentation are not only about communicating goals and objectives of the institution, but they also can influence the definition of problems, priorities that are recognized, and how governing bodies frame their legitimacy. The language of empowerment, growth and development can then be used to show institutional recognition of women's football. This recognition, however, must be considered in the context of distribution of economic, social and symbolic capital within the football field. This difference between policy commitment and institutional representation is illustrated through the numerical results presented in Chapter 4. While 88% of FIFA Member Associations indicated that they have a women's football strategy, only 10 of the 211 FIFA Member Associations are managed by women, a total of about 4.7% of the total. The numbers in this report indicate that formal strategies have not been accompanied by similar representation of women in the highest leadership roles. This is in line with studies of gendered organisational structures in sport, which have suggested that formal policies and practices can exist alongside widespread disparities of gender in leadership and decision-making (Acker, 1992; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012; Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016). Another policy-practice gap needs to be considered in the context of language in institutional documentation. Any mention of encouraging, supporting and promoting women's football reflects a commitment at an organisational level, the effectiveness of which will rely on how these commitments are put into practice, held accountable and provided with resources. In the Bourdieusian context, it suggests the issue of who has the power to

decide, manage resources and set priorities in the football arena. Women's participation in decision-making may remain limited when they are underrepresented in decision-making roles. These findings are not to say that institutional strategies are not valuable. Instead, they highlight that policy adoption and substantive institutional change do not equal each other. Implementing a plan to improve women's football will need to be measured, the accountability transparent and women's representation, especially in positions of finance, governance and development, must be increased. The question, then, is not just about the existence of equality policies, but whether they are effective in enabling some sort of useful redistribution of resources, recognition and power.

7.2.3. Media Representation and the Constitution of Legitimacy

The analysis of the media in Chapter 5 shows that traditional journalism acts as an apparatus of ideology that controls the field of view. The quantitative measures show that even when there is a high concentration of traffic, such as the 2023 Women's World Cup, the homepage placement of Women's World Cup stories is very unequal (41% visibility for Women's World Cup stories / 78% visibility for Men's World Cup stories).

From a qualitative perspective, the ongoing use of comparative framing (comparing the women's game with the speed, physicality, and profitability of men's football) helps to protect hegemonic masculinity. Excellence in female athletics is not regarded as standard, self-contained athletic authority, but rather as a novelty with a teleological purpose, or an inspirational human-interest story, "breaking barriers" or "motherhood to midfield".

7.2.4. Social Media as a Site of Empowerment and Contestation

Chapter 6 shows how social media is a significant arena in which the representation and status of women's football is negotiated and challenged. While editorial brands have a degree of editorial control over the types of sport stories they publish in traditional media, digital platforms offer athletes, supporters and campaigners' opportunities to engage directly with audiences. This makes room for the women's athletes to build up their public image, to talk about their sports successes, and to defy the traditional narrative regarding women and football. There are also opportunities alongside with misogynistic remarks, sexualisation, denigration of performance, and resistance to equality.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, social media can be understood as an additional space within the wider football field in which actors compete for visibility, recognition, and symbolic capital. Female athletes use their sporting knowledge, achievements, professional identities, and public communication to establish greater authority over how they are represented. Their ability to communicate directly with audiences can strengthen their cultural and symbolic capital, particularly when their performances and opinions receive public recognition. This interpretation is consistent with research examining the relationship between women's sport, digital media, and athlete self-representation (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

The findings also identify supportive online communities and digital counter-publics that celebrate women's football on its own terms. Fan groups, hashtags, and campaigns such as #HerGameToo, #WomenInSport, and #EqualPay provide spaces for challenging the marginalisation of women's football and drawing attention to institutional inequalities. These activities demonstrate that digital communication is not limited to reproducing dominant sporting narratives; it can also provide opportunities for alternative voices and collective resistance. The development of such online communities is consistent with research on digital activism and the use of social media by women athletes to challenge established gender relations in sport (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

Nevertheless, the findings show that increased digital visibility does not automatically remove existing gender inequalities. Comments comparing professional women's teams with under-15 boys' teams, questioning the legitimacy of women's football, and focusing on female athletes' physical appearance demonstrate how established hierarchies can be reproduced within online discussions. Gendered insults, sexualised hostility, and anti-equality comments further indicate that digital spaces can expose athletes to forms of discrimination that extend beyond the football field. These findings are consistent with research on online abuse and gender-based hostility in sport (Kavanagh et al., 2019).

The relationship between digital visibility and symbolic power is significant and can be explained through the presence of supporting and antagonistic discourse. While social media could offer opportunities for women to contest dominant notions, it does not eradicate dominant gendered notions about sporting capabilities, legitimacy, and authority. Bourdieu's view of this would be a struggle that continues within the football field, where what is recognised and what is considered legitimate

continues to be defined. Digital platforms thus offer possibilities to disrupt existing power relationships and are also a place for the reproduction and challenge of power relationships. In conclusion, the results indicate that social media plays an important and paradoxical role in the evolution of women's football. It allows for self-representation, collective identity, visibility, resistance and it also brings misogyny, objectification and hostile discourse to the lives of female athletes. Digital visibility cannot therefore be confused with substantive gender equality. Its role in driving change is contingent on whether there is greater institutional acceptance and protection from online abuse and access to resources and decision making within football.

7.2.5. Persistence of Patriarchal Norms

The results from the institutional, media and digital aspects of this study suggest that greater exposure and formal recognition have not eradicated gendered power dynamics affecting women's experiences in football. The survey by Women in Football (WIF) 2024 offers additional context to explain this persistence. The 2024 survey found that 89 per cent of women who work in football said they faced discrimination against women last year, up from 66 per cent in 2020. In addition, over 60% of the respondents who were discriminated against said that there was no corrective action taken. These statistics reinforce the ongoing problems of women in football organisations and workplaces.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, these findings can be understood in relation to the unequal distribution of power and capital within the football field. Formal access to organisations and professional opportunities does not necessarily provide women with equivalent social capital, institutional influence, or symbolic authority. Existing networks and established organisational practices may continue to shape who receives support, whose contributions are recognised, and who has the authority to influence decisions. This interpretation is consistent with research on gendered organisational structures and inequalities in sport leadership (Acker, 1992; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012; Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016).

The survey results also highlight the need for institutional accountability. However, more than 60% of reported cases of discrimination did not involve the taking of action, meaning the presence of equality commitments does not guarantee effective action in response to discrimination. This resonates with the policy-practice gap found in Chapter 4, which saw formal strategies and institutional commitments, and

unequal representation in leadership roles. Institutional effects are not only on the distribution of resources but also on what experiences are recognised, prioritised, and addressed in the first place from the point of symbolic power. It is important to understand that the results of the surveys are very broad and are not a direct measure of the primary data sets analysed within this thesis. They are therefore meant to be used in conjunction with, not in place of, the institutional, media and social media findings discussed in the previous chapters. The results, therefore, indicate that gender equality in football is not a problem that can be resolved by simply having more women play, more women be seen, or having a football equality policy. Institutional accountability, participation in decision making fora, recognition of women's professional achievements, and measures to stop discriminatory institutional practices are also necessary for meaningful change. The continued disparities highlight the need to take a deeper look at the access to the football field as well as the power dynamics that affect women's role on the field.

7.3. Conclusion of the Thesis

This thesis has examined some of the systematic attempts to reproduce and contest gender inequalities across global football governance, traditional media systems, and social media. The research utilizes a multi-source qualitative methodology based on a Bourdieusian sociological perspective to illustrate that existing liberal-feminist perspectives that focus on surface-level inclusion measures and numeric growth are inadequate for promoting sustainable gender equity.

This is a story of surface-level progress, with FIFA itself crowing over the number of women who have registered as players (16.6 million) and the number of interactions that have taken place on television screens (record-breaking). So, all the while, these gains are used as a vehicle for commercial exploitation, with minimal investment and symbolism all but absent. Minor, non-binding changes within an inherently unequal system are not gender justice. Rather, it requires a reconfiguration, a legal restructuring of the distribution of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital throughout the global sporting infrastructure.

7.4. Recommendations

7.4.1. Policy and Institutional Reforms for Governing Bodies

The solution to closing the policy-practice gap and breaking the layered structure of patriarchy in football must start with a change from aspiration to mandate:

- Enforceable Executive Quotas: Fiscal targets for gender representation (30% minimum) must be introduced at all standing committees, executive committees, and leadership development programs across FIFA's 211 Member Associations, with financial penalties or removal of FIFA Forward funding if not met.
- Mandatory Gender-Disaggregated Auditing: Develop clear, independent, and gender-disaggregated financial reporting systems. MAs need to include in their budgets the precise dollar contributions to women's technical development, equal travel/medical conditions, and grassroots infrastructures, and not bury them under the broad rubric of "football growth.
- Equalization of Capital Investment: Create a developmental framework that acknowledges the 100-year history of safeguarded financial backing in men's professional football. Base investing and prize money on equality and democratic rights, not short-term profitability, and ensure at least financial equality among the global flagship tournaments.

7.4.2. Media and Journalistic Practice Recommendations

Structural integration in sports journalism desks is an evolution from novelty news of events.

- De-Gendering Narrative Frames: The broadcasting industry must try to avoid deficit thinking and soft essentialist framing actively. Editorial training should ensure that women's football is discussed just as men's football is discussed – from an objective sports journalism perspective and not from a ‘human interest’ or emotional perspective.
- Structural Newsroom Diversification: Make women’s presence in top sports positions and prime time football portfolios happen – actively disrupt the ‘old boys club' culture of sports newsrooms by making a change in the cultural habitus of newsroom production.
- Year-Round Media Portfolios: Ensure women's football desks are in place and fully resourced around the clock, not just during World Cups, to ensure that female athletes are part of the daily sports cycle.

7.4.3. Platform Policy and Digital Safeguarding Recommendations

Social media companies must redesign their technological ecosystem to prevent digital violence and to guarantee the mental health and professional dignity of female stakeholders:

- Algorithmic De-escalation of Misogyny: Rewrite algorithmic recommendations of comments and content to actively de-prioritize and shadow-ban comments and content that contain gender-based insults, coordinated pile-ons, and performance-based harassment.
- Targeted Moderation Architecture: Create custom, rapid automated and human filters for major women's sporting events to immediately identify and suppress thread comments containing homophobic, sexualised, and abusive content.
- Verified Athlete Safeguarding: Strengthen and institutionalize account controls for professional female athletes and coaches, and enable federations and clubs to manage, filter, and legally record digital violence from their team dashboards.

7.4.4. Future Research Directions

This thesis develops an integrated framework between policy, media, and digital discourse, but future scholarship needs to broaden these boundaries further to capture the changing landscape of global sport sociology:

- Non-Anglophone and Cross-Cultural Analysis: Further research could replicate this multi-source approach in other non-English language media, as well as in non-Western digital environments (Weibo, Spanish language, or Arabic language digital media networks) to assess the interplay between regional traditions and local patriarchies and global corporate football discourses.
- Intersectional Field Inquiries: Carry out focused empirical research on the experience of converting athletic capital for LGBTQ+ athletes, women of color, and athletes migrating from resource-poor environments in the Global South, revealing the unequal nature of exclusion under the guise of 'inclusivity' branding.
- Ethnographic Studies of Institutional Resistance: Engage in deep qualitative interviews and organizational ethnographies with sports journalists, platform content moderators, and mid-level football administrators to map the micro-politics of unwritten patriarchal norms and informal networks, in real time.

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Appendix A: NVivo Coding Framework

Codes	Capital Disparities & Devaluation		340
Codes	Capital Disparities & Devaluation\2.1 Economic Capital Deficit	Explicit disparities in prize money, player salaries, infrastructure investment, and travel accommodations.	95
Codes	Capital Disparities & Devaluation\2.2 Cultural Capital Depreciation	Subtle or overt devaluing of women's football expertise, tactical skill, and historical legacy (treating it as an inferior product).	72
Codes	Capital Disparities & Devaluation\2.3 Social Capital Restrictions	Exclusion of female athletes or administrators from old-boy networks, sponsorship circles, and elite mentoring pipelines.	58
Codes	Capital Disparities & Devaluation\2.4 Symbolic Capital Denial	Lack of prestige, official recognition, prestigious awards, or main-stage positioning compared to the men's game.	67
Codes	Capital Disparities & Devaluation\2.5 Capital Conversion Obstacles	Difficulties in transforming athletic success (cultural/symbolic capital) into long-term commercial	48

		revenue or institutional power (economic/social capital).	
Codes	Digital Discursive Power & Platform Affordances		850
Codes	Digital Discursive Power & Platform Affordances\4.1 Overt Online Misogyny	Hate speech, sexist slurs, violent threats, or explicit comments directed at female players or commentators in public threads.	260
Codes	Digital Discursive Power & Platform Affordances\4.2 Algorithmic Amplification of Bias	How platform affordances (shares, high-engagement controversy) elevate toxic commentary or coordinate pile-ons against women in sport.	185
Codes	Digital Discursive Power & Platform Affordances\4.3 Aesthetic Labor Imperative	Pressure on female athletes to curate specific, often sexualized or highly polished visual identities on platforms like Instagram to secure visibility and brand sponsorships.	142
Codes	Digital Discursive Power & Platform Affordances\4.4 Digital Counter-Publics & Resistance	Fan communities, hashtag movements (e.g., pay equity trends), and player-led digital	158

		campaigns contesting systemic inequality.	
Codes	Digital Discursive Power & Platform Affordances\4.5 Platform-Specific Moderation Failures	Instances where automated reporting systems or platform guidelines fail to protect female sports figures from targeted harassment.	105
Codes	Institutional Field & Governance Logics		185
Codes	Institutional Field & Governance Logics\1.1 Institutional Field Exclusion	Policy gaps, lack of female representation in executive decision-making bodies, and structural glass ceilings within football governing bodies.	42
Codes	Institutional Field & Governance Logics\1.2 Market-Oriented Rationales	Language that uses "commercial viability," profitability, or viewer metrics to justify unequal resource distribution	38
Codes	Institutional Field & Governance Logics\1.3 Policy Tokenism	Superficial diversity initiatives or gender equality mandates that lack enforcement mechanisms or financial backing.	31

Codes	Institutional Field & Governance Logics\1.4 Patriarchal Bureaucracy	Deeply entrenched, historical institutional rules and administrative setups that inherently favor the men's game as the default standard.	45
Codes	Instituional Field & Governance Logics\1.5 Resistance & Structural Reform	Policy amendments, legal challenges, or grassroots pressures targeting systemic governance changes.	29
Codes	Mediated Habitus & Hegemonic Representation		410
Codes	Mediated Habitus & Hegemonic Representation\3.1 Hegemonic Masculinity Protection	Media framing that positions men’s football as the peak of physical capability, tactical intellect, and "true" athleticism.	135
Codes	Mediated Habitus & Hegemonic Representation\3.2 Trivialization & Infantilisation	Referring to adult female athletes as "girls," focusing excessively on their personal lives, emotions, or appearance over their athletic performance.	112
Codes	Mediated Habitus & Hegemonic Representation\3.3 The Deficit Model Framing	Media narratives comparing women’s physical metrics (speed, power) negatively to men's metrics rather than	98

		evaluating the sport on its own terms.	
Codes	Mediated Habitus & Hegemonic Representation\3.4 Progressive Media Advocacy	Mainstream journalism that actively highlights pay gaps, celebrates athletic excellence, and holds governing bodies accountable.	65

Appendix B: Qualitative Codebook and Raw Media Artifacts

Figure & Code	Source Metadata	Content Focus / Text	Operational Analysis
Figure A1 & Code 1.1	FIFA Official Gazette	Establishment of FIFA Women's Football Division and structural reorganization.	This official administrative entry documents macro-level institutional adjustments within sports governance. Evaluated through the lens of feminist institutionalism, the creation of a structurally segregated "Women's Football Division" reveals how formal governance structures manage gender equity by partitioning administrative influence. Coded under institutional logics, it shows how

		(See Section A.2, Image A1)	executive bodies establish dedicated organizational structures that can isolate women's governance into specialized siloes rather than integrating gender parity into the core executive decision-making body of the main sport.
Figure A2 & Code 1.5	Digital Social Media Post / Administrative Critique	The South African Football Association is facing mounting criticism for its handling of contract negotiations with Banyana head coach Desiree Ellis, leaving the team to compete in the crucial Women's Africa Cup of Nations	This qualitative record highlights structural friction within national-level governing bodies. By capturing public backlash against the South African Football Association (SAFA) regarding critical contract negotiations, the text exposes the precarity and administrative instability surrounding female technical staff. Mapped under patriarchal bureaucracy, this case illustrates how administrative mismanagement and unequal structural treatment manifest directly during major

		(See Section A.2, Image A2)	international tournaments, requiring digital platforms to assert pressure for professional recognition and basic labor reform.
Figure A3 & Code 4.4	Digital Media / YouTube Broadcast Excerpt	Alisha Lehmann highlights the inequalities between men's and women's football! (See Section A.2, Image A3)	This digital artifact illustrates the use of platform visibility to deploy athlete-led counter-critique. By leveraging high-profile digital status, elite players successfully shift structural critique into mainstream media discourse. Mapped under digital counter-publics, it provides empirical evidence of how digital networks allow marginalized sports labor to bypass institutional barriers and articulate systemic inequality directly to public audiences.
Figure A4 & Code 4.2	Digital Media / Commentator Clip	Men's Soccer vs. Women's Soccer: Which is best	This entry captures the flattening of elite sports metrics into zero-sum, culture-war binaries by digital commentators to mobilize

		(See Section A.2, Image A4)	anti-feminist sentiment. Within your analytical framework, it shows how platform affordances weaponize competitive comparisons to safeguard androcentric sporting hierarchies, using public engagement to generate clicks by delegitimizing women's athletic skill.
Figure A5 & Code 4.1	Digital Social Media Post / Reaction Video	The Fight for Equal Pay in Sports	This qualitative item illustrates organized masculine backlash within specialized digital echo chambers. By framing gender pay equity struggles as an existential or material threat to established male athletic spaces, the commentary cultivates defensive masculinity. It serves as a direct example of overt online boundary maintenance designed to resist progressive structural reforms.

		(See Section A.2, Image A5)	
Figure A6 & Code 4.1	Digital Social Media Commentary	Football is not made for women (See Section A.2, Image A6)	This artifact captures explicit online hostility targeting the presence of women in the sport. By direct application of symbolic violence, the discourse operates to essentialize football as a naturally and exclusively male domain. Coded under overt online misogyny, it illustrates the hostile communicative barriers that female athletes and advocates face within public comment threads.
Figure A7 & Code 3.3	Digital Social Media Campaign	EQUAL SUPPORT FOR WOMEN IN SPORT	This digital artifact demonstrates progressive media advocacy within developing football landscapes. By explicitly highlighting the lack of equivalent institutional backing, the post exposes how media coverage often treats the women's game as secondary. It challenges the normalized deficit

		(See Section A.2, Image A7)	framing by demanding structural parity in visibility and support.
Figure A8 & Code 3.4	Digital Social Media Record	Rise of competition in women's football (See Section A.2, Image A8)	This qualitative sample illustrates media framing that actively documents the rising athletic legitimacy and technical competitive growth of women's football. Rather than viewing the sport through an infantilizing lens, this discourse highlights elite performance, serving as an empirical counter-narrative to the dominant patriarchal belief structures that position men's competition as the sole standard of authentic athleticism.
Figure A9 & Code 3.1	Digital Media Comment	Football is a sport not made for women	This entry captures the active reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity through traditionalist social role theory. By constructing an ideological wall

		(See Section A.2, Image A9)	that excludes women from the sport's legitimate habitus, the text explicitly positions the game as an androcentric preserve. It serves as a strong baseline example of how public media consumption channels protect historical masculine authority.
Figure A10 & Code 2.4	Media Broadcast & Viewership Record	USWNT vs. Japan Women's World Cup Final (25.4M average viewers) (See Section A.2, Image A10)	This quantitative and symbolic capital artifact tracks mass audience demand, establishing undeniable symbolic capital. By demonstrating a massive record-breaking viewership, this data explicitly refutes the institutional deficit logic commonly used by governing bodies to justify unequal investment. It serves as empirical proof that consumer interest exists when structural media access is provided.

Figure A11 & Code 2.1	Digital Social Media Video Clip	Based Man STUNS Feminists With FACTS On Gender Pay Gap In Sports (See Section A.2, Image A11)	This entry demonstrates how market rationalism is weaponized within popular digital spaces to justify structural economic capital deficits. By anchoring the wage gap within narrow revenue-driven formulas and commercial meritocracy, the narrative naturalizes pay inequality. This discourse actively devalues the labor rights of female athletes by insulating governing institutions from their historical underinvestment obligations.

Raw Media & Data Artifacts Directory

This section contains the raw digital screenshots corresponding to the 11 audited figures listed in the table above. All private user handles, profile images, and non-organizational personal details have been redacted to ensure ethical research compliance.

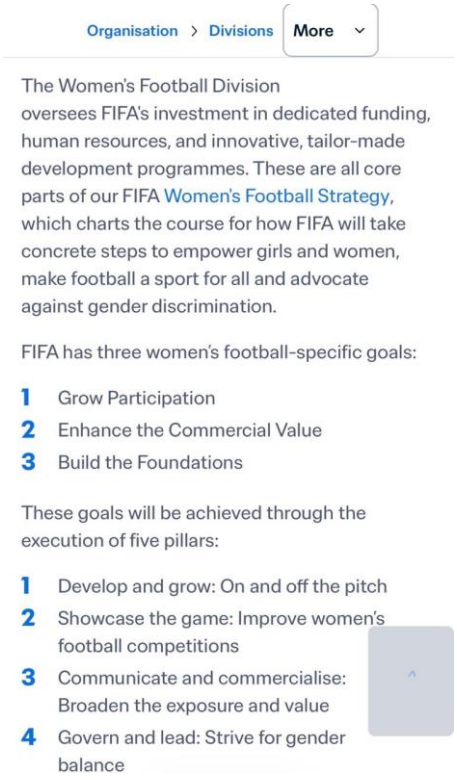


Image A1: Raw artifact for Figure A1 (FIFA Official Gazette)



Image A2: Raw artifact for Figure A2 (SAFA Contract Dispute Post)



Image A3: Raw artifact for Figure A3 (Alisha Lehmann YouTube Clip)



Image A4: Raw artifact for Figure A4 (Men's vs. Women's Soccer Debate)

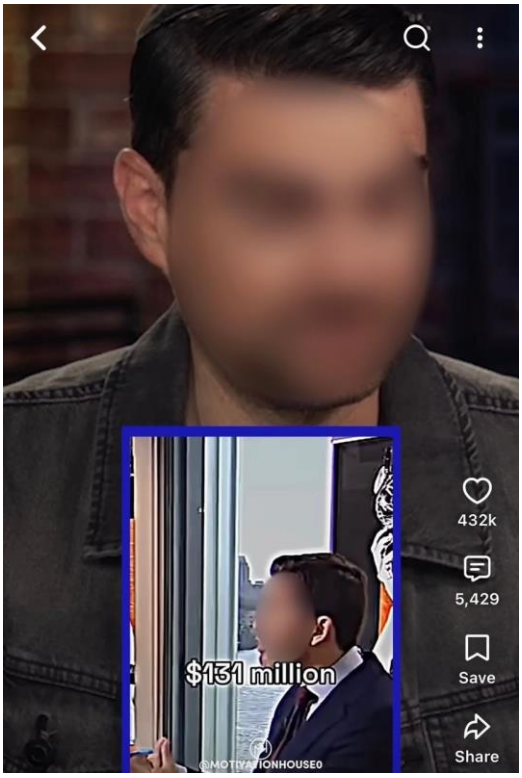


Image A5: Raw artifact for Figure A5 (Equal Pay Reaction Video)

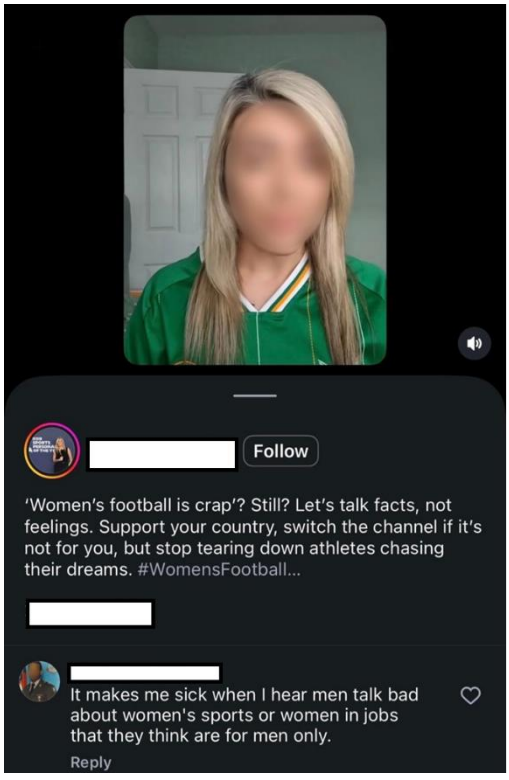


Image A6: Raw artifact for Figure A6 (Instagram Hostility Post)



Image A7: Raw artifact for Figure A7 (Voices of Indian Football Campaign)

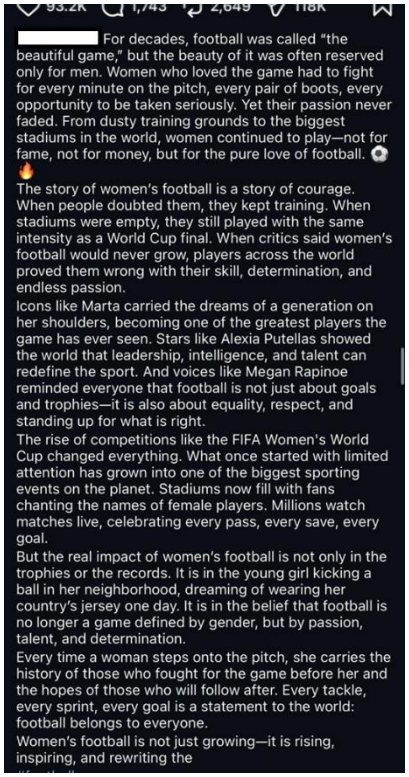


Image A8: Raw artifact for Figure A8 (Competition Growth Post)



Image A9: Raw artifact for Figure A9 (Traditionalist Gender Role Comment)

Staggering 25.4 Million Viewers Witness USA Win Coveted FIFA WOMEN'S WORLD CUP 2015 Title

The USA's emphatic 5-2 victory over Japan in the FIFA WOMEN'S WORLD CUP 2015™ final, America's first Women's World Cup championship since 1999, is the most-watched soccer match in U.S. history, according to Nielsen. The match posted a prodigious 12.9 household rating/share with 25.4 million viewers, and peaked at 30.9 million between 8:30-8:45 PM ET.

USA-Japan final highlights:

- The 2015 USA-Japan final is the most-watched soccer match in U.S. history, obliterating the previous mark of 18,220,000 set by USA-Portugal during last year's World Cup group stage match (6/22/15) by +39%.

Image A10: Raw artifact for Figure A10 (FOX Sports Viewership Data)



Image A11: Raw artifact for Figure A11 (Market Rationalism YouTube Clip)