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# 'Women play football, not women's football': the potentials and paradoxes of professionalisation expressed at the UEFA women's EURO 2022 Championship

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the potentials and paradoxes of professionalisation in women's football expressed at the UEFA Women's Euro 2022 Championship. Through an event ethnography during the semi-finals of the championship, five potentials related to the professionalisation of women's football are identified, each of which are accompanied by a paradox. First, UEFA's marketing raised expectations of the event despite the lack of visibility of the championship in the host cities. Second, record-breaking attendance signalled increased popularity, while UEFA's choice of smaller stadiums and lower ticket prices limited any commercial potential. Third, increased commercialisation efforts align with developmental trends in men's football, while gender stereotypes portrayed in commercialised products pose an equality-related paradox. Fourth, the implementation of VAR highlights a commitment to the professionalisation of women's football, but limited resources impact the quality of the technology. Finally, the diversity of spectators fosters inclusivity, yet stadium designs do not support such diversity. Collectively, these potentials demonstrate a growing recognition and investment in women's football and reflect the development of commercialisation and professionalisation. However, the paradoxes associated with these potentials indicate that there is still some way to go in terms of providing equal opportunities for men and women football players in Europe.

## KEYWORDS

Women's football; professionalisation of sport; event ethnography; gender and sport; women and sport

## Introduction

The UEFA Women's EURO 2022 Championship marked a significant milestone in the progress of women's football. The final match between England and Germany had more attending fans than any other European football championship in history, for

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men and women alike (UEFA, 2022c). Despite the event's success, the teams participating in Women's EURO 2022 received approximately 23 times less in bonuses than the men who played in Men's EURO 2020 (Bergh, 2022). This indicates that regardless of the progress made in professionalising women's football, there are still significant differences in the financial conditions associated with women's and men's football in Europe.

The harmful differences in pay and bonus levels between men and women footballers affect the multiple stakeholders involved in women's football. It is a fact that officials earn less refereeing women's football matches than men's matches at a similar performance level. Similarly, women's football coaches systematically earn less than men's teams' coaches across Europe (Pfister, 2013). Additionally, women are under-represented as both coaches and referees in football (Knoppers et al., 2022; Skirbekk, 2023). As women coaches and referees seldom engage in men's football, on average women in these leadership roles earn less than men (Fasting et al., 2017; Reid & Dallaire, 2019). The differences in the commercialisation and professionalisation of women's football compared to men's football can also impact fans' experiences. In the case of UEFA Women's EURO 2022, one example is the critique against the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) for booking small stadiums (de Oliveira et al., 2022), which limited both the number of people who could attend the event and the revenue generated from the championship.

Although women's football has made notable progress in terms of professionalisation, the simultaneous development of men's football highlights the persisting disparities between men's and women's football that are evident in unequal pay, bonuses and stadium sizes. It could even be argued that the development trends in European football suggest that such gendered differences in professional football are increasing in certain areas. The introduction of Video Assistant Referee (VAR) in elite football is one example of this. VAR is costly to implement and requires an increased number of referees for each match (Tjønndal, 2023). Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that VAR has mainly been introduced in men's elite football leagues around Europe. The European championship and the FIFA World Cup represent arenas where the governing bodies of football (UEFA and FIFA) make efforts to narrow the gender gap by introducing VAR in the women's championships, even if it is not included in any women's league on a day-to-day basis (Skirbekk, 2023). Such efforts make UEFA Women's EURO 2022 a current and interesting case for studies of gender and professionalisation in European football.

The aim of this article is to examine the ongoing processes of professionalisation in women's football in Europe. Specifically, the research question we investigate is: *Which potentials and paradoxes of professionalisation in women's football were expressed at UEFA Women's EURO 2022?* We examine this research question by means of an event ethnography conducted in Sheffield and Milton Keynes (England) in the days leading up to the semi-finals, the day of the semi-finals and the day after the semi-finals of the championship.

In the next part of the article, we present our theoretical framework. Here we build on broader sociological perspectives on the professionalisation of sports. Further, a brief review of research on the professionalisation of women's football is outlined. This is followed by a methods section, where we detail the procedures of our event

ethnography. Our findings and analysis follow. This builds on a narrative approach to construct a story of experiences before, during and after the matches. Finally, we conclude by outlining the main findings and the possible implications for practice and research.

## **Theoretical framing: a sociological lens on the professionalisation of sports**

In order to examine the professionalisation of women's football as expressed at UEFA Women's EURO 2022, we turn to sociological theories of the professionalisation of sports. While professionalisation has been examined in a variety of sporting contexts, the term is not used consistently in research (Marshall et al., 2022). For instance, based on a review of sports professionalisation literature, Dowling et al. (2014, p. 521) state that 'although the concept of professionalisation has enjoyed a continued and popular usage, its precise definition, the unit of analysis employed, and the exact manner by which the concept is operationalised is often ambiguous, unclear, implicit or omitted entirely'. Thus, there are many conceptualisations of what the professionalisation of sports entails. Taking a sociological approach, some key features often occur in theoretical conceptualisations, one of which is the willingness to invest a lot of time, money and resources into the development of athletic talent (Strandbu et al., 2017). A second feature is an increased focus on expert knowledge in the pursuit of better performance, as well as in sports leadership and management (Giddens, 1991; Guttmann, 1978/2004; Strandbu et al., 2017). For instance, Guttmann's (1978/2004) description of specialisation highlights the influence of expert knowledge as a defining trait of modern sports. Guttmann (1978/2004) furthermore describes the terms *specialisation* and *professionalisation* as overlapping traits of modern sports. In doing so, he argues that professionalisation involves more than simply earning money and making a living from sport.

According to Guttmann (1978/2004), specialisation relates to the various functions in sports organisations and sports teams. In his work, Guttmann (1978/2004) exemplifies this by describing how American football contains 22 different player positions and specialised teams that only enter the field in specific game situations (such as placekicks and kick-offs). In Guttmann's work (1978/2004), specialisation is also related to highly specialised support teams consisting of coaches, doctors, physiotherapists and managers in elite sports.

In addition to specialisation, Guttmann (1978/2004) outlines six other defining characteristics of modern sports: secularism, quantification, obsession with records, rationalisation, bureaucratisation and equality. Of these, secularisation is perhaps the least relevant for the study of the professionalisation of women's football. Quantification allows for a better comparison of sporting performances. The need to give the performance a quantitative expression derives from the competitiveness of modern, professionalised sports. Guttmann's (1978/2004) quantification term also relates closely to another characteristic of modern sports, namely obsession with records, which is linked to technologies of measurement and rationalisation.

Guttmann (1978/2004) describes rationalisation as the standardisation of sports equipment and as the social norms of how athletes train, eat and live their lives. In relation

to this, he highlights how the relationship between science and sport has become increasingly intertwined. This is visible through a close connection between athletes, coaches and professionals in scientific fields such as nutrition, physiology, biomechanics, medicine and sports psychology. Furthermore, Guttmann (1978/2004) describes bureaucratisation as a condition of rationalisation and specialisation through the establishment of rules and standards that can be maintained by a governing body. Some of the rules and standards maintained by governing sports bodies relate to equality. Guttmann (1978/2004) elaborates on equality by outlining that it connects to two aspects: that everyone should have equal access to sports participation and that competitions should be fair for all participants, regardless of background, gender or ethnicity. Equality is further highlighted in studies of the professionalisation of women's sports. For instance, the process of professionalisation is defined by Bowes & Culvin (2021, p. 9) as:

underpinned by progressive gender ideologies, involves women's sports organisation's demonstrating an increasing formalisation of their administration and structure, through policy and practice, resulting in the formal contracting of women as athletes for financial remuneration.

From these perspectives, professionalisation is not a coherent and straightforward phenomenon (Williams, 2013). There are also gendered aspects to the professionalisation of sports. For instance, if a player earns more from their football-playing activity than the expenses incurred in performing it, they must have a written contract and are thereby considered professional under FIFA rules (Williams, 2013). Bowes & Culvin (2021) find this to be problematic, since not all women with a formal contract are professionals, especially as sportswomen are often unpaid, or underpaid for their labour.

## Previous research on the professionalisation of women's football

While women's football is marginalised in the popular media (Culvin & Bowes, 2023), the gendered barriers that women football players experience have been extensively studied by sports scholars (Conor et al., 2015; Culvin et al., 2022; Culvin & Bowes, 2023; Lago et al., 2022; Skogvang, 2023; Williams, 2019). Much of this research emphasises the economic inferiority of women's football compared to men's football, and thoroughly documents that no matter which indices are considered (the number of employed staff, pay, contractual status), women footballers fare worse than their male counterparts (Conor et al., 2015).

Research on the professionalisation of women's football is a global field, with contributions ranging from South America (Biram, 2023; Garton, 2023), the Arab region (Al-Khalifa, 2023), Asia (Edwards, 2023; Hong & Zhouxiang, 2013), Europe (Clarkson et al., 2022; Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2020; Hjelm & Olofsson, 2003; Hjelseth & Hovden, 2014; Kjær & Agergaard, 2013; Skogvang, 2019, 2023; Williams, 2013, 2019) and the US (Allison, 2016; Culvin et al., 2022). Thematically, Culvin & Bowes (2023) categorise research on the professionalisation of women's football into three overarching themes. The first is processes of professionalisation from a historical point of view, often with organisational perspectives. These contributions include studies published in history of sports journals, with document analysis as a preferred methodological approach (see Hong & Zhouxiang, 2013; Skogvang, 2019; Williams, 2013). The next theme is

contributions by women footballers with a focus on their experiences of playing professionally (Scraton et al., 1999) and issues of gender discrimination in football (Culvin, 2021; Melkersson, 2017; Williams, 2019). The third theme is commercialisation and the role of the media in developing women's football, especially in terms of better economic conditions for players and coaches (Bullingham & Magrath, 2023; Peeters et al., 2019; Petty & Pope, 2019). For instance, using document analysis of the Norwegian Football Association's strategy plans and interviews with leaders involved in women's football in Norway, Skogvang (2023) argues that the positive increase in media coverage contributes to an increase in the sponsoring and financing of women's football.

In this article we examine the professionalisation of women's football in terms of an international championship: UEFA Women's EURO 2022. In this, research on the formalisation of women's professional football, commercialisation and stadium experiences is highly relevant. For instance, in a historical analysis, Williams (2011) shows how women's football has developed despite being banned in England for 50 years (1921–1971), its inclusion in UEFA in 1970 and the English Football Association (FA) in 1993. Furthering perspectives on the professionalisation of women's football, Fielding-Lloyd et al. (2020) find that the prevailing discourses by the English FA have depicted women's football as a fairer form of football that is culturally distinct from the men's game. Marketing strategies have tended to target fathers who are already football fans and their daughters (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2020), while excluding other demographic groups. In line with this, Lago et al. (2022) advocate the importance of committing to the commercial promotion of women's football to ensure the economic development of women's teams.

Fielding-Lloyd & Woodhouse (2023) show that the marketing of women's football as a 'family friendly' product makes the position of women's football within the sports market both difficult and vague. This limits the commercial growth of women's football and contributes to its delegitimisation. Similar findings have been shown in studies from the US. For example, Allison (2016) finds that women's football struggles to gain legitimacy and that this leads to a lack of investment being justified by a presumed lack of interest in the market.

Pfister (2015) has previously argued for the need for a more equitable allocation of resources to ensure the development of women's football. However, allocation is not limited to economic resources. Pope (2010) argues that even though new stadiums are designed to appeal to family supporters, including women, the number of women's toilets and the 'abysmal' state of the facilities that do exist is a concern. Findings presented by Athanassiou & Bury (2014) illustrate how the men's 2012 European championship was presented as an all-inclusive event, while stereotypical perceptions of women supporters underpinned the event. Pope (2010) argues that women football fans are depicted as 'new consumer' fans and are often perceived as 'inauthentic' in their support. Through qualitative interviews with women fans, she shows that women fans have diverse and heterogeneous perspectives on their fan engagement.

## Methods

UEFA Women's EURO 2022 was held in England between 6 and 31 July with venues in nine locations: Brighton and Hove, London, Manchester, Milton Keynes, Rotherham,

Sheffield, Southampton, Trafford and Wigan and Leigh (UEFA, 2022a). Empirically, we draw on fieldwork undertaken between 25 and 28 July 2022 during the semi-finals of the championship. The first semi-final was played at Bramall Lane in Sheffield between England and Sweden. The second semi-final took place at Stadium MK in Milton Keynes between Germany and France. Both stadiums have a similar capacity (approx. 30 000). While Bramall Lane is an iconic stadium built in 1855 and centrally located in Sheffield (approx. 15 minutes' walk from the city centre), Stadium MK is a newer stadium built in 2007, about an hour's walk from Milton Keynes city centre and 35 minutes by train from Central London. In this section, we describe the ethnographic fieldwork undertaken at UEFA Women's EURO 2022.

### ***Event ethnography***

The study was designed as an event ethnography of UEFA Women's EURO 2022. Ethnography involves participation in a specific context for an extended period of time and the use of a variety of methods to examine a social phenomenon (Flick, 2014; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Building on ethnographic approaches, event ethnography is characterised by short-term fieldwork during temporary events. Koch (2018, p. 2015) argues that temporary sporting events act as important sites of analysis, in that they are 'venues for a unique confluence of diverse actors, who are normally dispersed in time and space, allowing for an intensified interaction among individuals, ideas and infrastructures'. In the context of UEFA Women's EURO 2022, this approach allows us to examine the event while it is happening, as opposed to dominant retrospective approaches (e.g. surveys or interviews) about how an event was delivered and experienced (Parry et al., 2021b). Thus, this approach is fruitful for examining the professionalisation of women's football at UEFA Women's EURO 2022.

All four authors engaged in the data collection, and participant observation was utilised as a primary source of data. The first author played football at a youth level. She has diverse experiences of attending women's sport events, but this event was the first international women's football event she attended. The second author has a background as an amateur male football player and regularly watches his favourite men's team live, although has no previous experience of attending an international women's tournament. The third author also has no experience of attending international tournaments in football but has for many years closely followed the Norwegian national teams as a supporter. The fourth hails from a media background and therefore brings experience in covering women's and men's football at national and international levels as a journalist.

During the fieldwork, we emphasised the recording of aspects of professionalisation in a broad approach that characterised the materialities of the host cities and the semi-final matches themselves. This meant that we structured the observation guide loosely, with the intention of describing 'everything' from the game settings, teams, stadiums and fans to the surrounding environment and atmosphere. This gave us a feeling of dynamism and enabled us to study the championship from diverse settings and locations, such as stadiums, fan zones, shopping centres, restaurants, bars and social events. Furthermore, several informal conversations with locals, event organisers, fans and journalists were conducted to understand how the event was delivered, experienced and engaged with by different stakeholders. All four authors used cameras to

record the visual data of event materialities (e.g. stadiums, physical environment and tangible elements such as signs, decorations and merchandise). We documented the data through individual fieldwork notes and daily discussions of the happenings and our interpretations of them. The presented empirical material is intended to be read as a narrative of the current state of professionalisation of women's football in Europe.

### ***Analytical strategy: narrative analysis***

The study draws on narrative inquiry and the assumption that storytelling is an essential part of human meaning-making (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Reissman (2008, p. 11) describes narrative analysis as 'a family of methods for interpreting texts [e.g. oral, written, and visual] that have in common a storied form'. Coffey & Atkinson (1996, p. 80) remark that 'there are no formulae or recipes for the 'best' way to analyse the stories we elicit and collect'. They argue that the strength of thinking about research data as narratives is that this approach opens a plethora of possibilities for analytical strategies. In other words, we make sense of our experiences through the construction of stories. In order for there to be a narrative, there needs to be a plot, characters and connecting events that form a template for telling the stories (Reissman & Quinney, 2005). In our narrative analysis, we employ this principle by designing the analysis as a story of fans going to a football match. Our story has three phases: pre-match, during the match and post-match. We construct this narrative by combining our field notes and photographic material to form one story representing events from both semi-finals.

Using narratives as an analytical approach enables us to communicate meanings and experiences of being at the event itself. In other words, it facilitates a narrative about the current state of international women's football in Europe, as expressed at UEFA Women's EURO 2022.

### ***Ethical considerations***

In terms of ethical considerations, several ethical issues and consequences were considered for this study. Particularly, informed consent provisions are a persistent challenge when conducting fieldwork (Flick, 2014). We argue that the events we participated in and observed were already in the public domain. Therefore, informed consent was determined pragmatically. When initiating informal talks with locals, event organisers, fans and journalists, we introduced ourselves as researchers and described the aim of our study. Furthermore, to respect privacy, we did not take photographs of identifiable individuals but instead of 'tangible elements' in the public square, such as stadiums, signs and merchandise. To ensure the upholding of ethical standards, we adapted Allen's (2012, p. 10) criteria when taking photographs: '(1) images void of people and (2) images focused on events or objects that may include people who could be easily anonymised without altering to the photographic meaning'. Other important ethical aspects were confidentiality and anonymity. Consequently, the photographs chosen for the analysis meet the ethical criteria (i.e. even though Figures 1 and 2 include photos of people they are not easily recognisable). All the fieldwork notes and photographic material were stored in accordance with data protection legislation.



## Analysis

In line with our narrative approach, we structure our analysis of the event ethnography as a story of going to a football match. As indicated above, we first present our analyses of pre-match narratives. Second, narratives of events during the football matches are presented. Lastly, we present our analyses of post-match narratives.

### *Pre-match narratives*

Our pre-match narratives begin with a walk in the cities where the semi-finals are to take place. As we take our time to familiarise ourselves with the cities, we notice how little attention to the championship is allocated in the cityscape:

We are walking downtown to get a feel of the atmosphere before tonight's semifinal. Driven by promises that this will be the biggest women's football event in UEFA history, our expectations are high. In the city centre, we see some signs and posters advertising the upcoming match. Beyond this, there are few indications that an international event is taking place. As we approach a fan zone, the number of signs and posters increases, but we are still surprised by their size and layout, which seem to be quite low-key ([Figure 1](#)).

There is a mismatch between the promotion of the championship internationally and how the event is marketed locally. The lack of visibility in the host cities could be interpreted as a reflection of the way in which women's football has traditionally been marginalised in Europe ([Bowes & Culvin, 2021](#); [Skogvang, 2019](#)). The low profiles in the city centres give us a sense that the importance of the championship is downplayed. While [Petty & Pope \(2019\)](#) demonstrate the increasing professionalisation of women's football, our event ethnography identifies a discrepancy between the expected progression of women's football and the marketing of the event locally. Against this background, women's football may still be treated as lesser and 'unworthy of attention' ([Dunn, 2018](#), p. 788). Seeing the local advertisement for the semi-finals, it is legitimate to ask whether the potential of the championship 'to drive a further step change in women's football in Europe' ([UEFA, 2022e](#), p. 3) is utilised fully. The lack of advertisement in the host cities may also be related to [Guttman's \(1978/2004\)](#) equality characteristic, and illustrate how this is lacking in European football.



**Figure 1.** Signs and decorations marking UEFA Women's EURO 2022.



Figure 2. Outdoor exhibition of the history of women's football in England.

As we continue our pre-match walks in the host cities, we come across various informative and educational outdoor exhibitions:

We come across an outdoor exhibition that depicts the history of women's football, the UEFA women's championships and local stories about extraordinary women's players and teams from 1881 to 2022. This includes the story of the British Ladies' Football Club formed in 1895 and Carol Thomas, the first woman to win 50 caps<sup>1</sup> for England. The stories shown in the exhibition are portrayed as success stories before and after the historic ban of women's football in England (Figure 2), highlighting the resilience of exceptional women players throughout history.

In some aspects, the portrayals of the history of women's football told through the exhibitions (Figure 2) align with findings from feminist research on football (Culvin & Bowes, 2023; Pfister, 2015; Skogvang, 2019), in that the stories told through these exhibitions is that the responsibility for the promotion of equality and equity is placed on the women players themselves. For instance, Williams (2013) demonstrates how developmental steps for women's football often depended on individual players promoting the sport. In this context, players and clubs are hailed as role models and expected to encourage young girls to play football. This was also the case in the outdoor exhibitions (Figure 2). Paradoxically, this may underplay gendered power hierarchies that prevent the development of women's football, overlooking the governing bodies' responsibility. Although these exhibitions (Figure 2) recognise the efforts of the English trail blazers in women's football, they also obscure the roles of the FA and UEFA in discriminatory practices towards professional

women football players. The hard work of previous women pioneers to elevate women's football is important and should be celebrated, but to some extent this focus exempts organisational bodies from their responsibilities to contribute to the growth.

Although England's 50-year ban from 1921 to 1972 is mentioned in the exhibition (Figure 2), the stories largely focus on how extraordinary women worked to resist it. Individualisation is a common approach for diminishing the gendered structures and practices within sports organisations that serve to marginalise the professionalisation of women's sports (Williams, 2013). In feminist theory, such framings are often referred to as 'fix the woman' (Hovden, 2006), in that women are also blamed for any lack of development of women's sports. Guttman (1978/2004) somewhat recognises the gendered power relations that hinder the professionalisation of women's football when he links bureaucratisation with equality as two defining traits of modern sports. Equality is one of many ideologies and standards that sports organisations are expected to promote and maintain. However, Guttman's (1978/2004) description of equality focuses on the opportunities for individuals to participate and compete fairly. Also here, the role that sports organisations play in the marginalisation of women's football is overlooked.

Walking past the exhibitions, we eventually find ourselves entering a fan zone:

We follow the small yellow signs *UEFA Women's EURO 2022* (Figure 1) until we find a *fan zone*. This is the first time we really get a sense that a championship is taking place. The fan zone is packed with people. Children are getting their faces painted, doing football activities, riding mini rollercoasters and buying snacks from food stands. There is a stage where a youth band is playing.

Not far from the family-friendly area, we enter a bar street. The atmosphere changes and we start to see adult supporters with team jerseys, scarves and hats. Two Swedish flags hanging outside of a pub catch our attention. The staff have painted Swedish flags on their checks, the pub is decorated in blue and yellow colours and Swedish music such as ABBA is played on repeat. The pub is full of Swedish fans who are excited and ready for tonight's semifinal. A family tells us that the Swedish Fanclub has received 2000 of the 30 000 tickets for the match. They feel lucky to have secured tickets through one of the players. We explain that we paid £15 each for our tickets a couple of months ago.

Our observations of the fan zones indicate that the championship is marketed towards families. A family-oriented approach and atmosphere for spectators and fans have been highlighted as typical for women's football events in England (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2020). Families represent a large consumer group for the marketing of sports events, although a paradox is apparent in the choice of stadiums included in England's bid for the championship and the ticketing pricing of the matches. England is known for its large and spectacular football stadiums, such as Wembley, London Stadium and Old Trafford, to name but a few. Even though the championship's opening match and final were held at the sold-out Old Trafford and Wembley Stadiums, other fixtures were scheduled at lower league and reserve team stadiums (Ogden, 2022). The choice of smaller stadiums for UEFA Women's EURO 2022 illustrates that the professionalisation of women's sports is not a straightforward process (Williams, 2013). While UEFA Women's EURO 2022 has been hailed as a success, with record-breaking attendances (UEFA, 2022c), UEFA's choice of smaller stadiums does not reflect the type of

progressive gender ideologies that Bowes & Culvin (2021) describe as necessary for the professionalisation of women's sports. The choice of stadiums for UEFA Women's EURO 2022 may reflect the financial realities of women's football, which is less lucrative than men's football (Pfister, 2015). As such, the use of smaller stadiums could be seen as a form of rationalisation (Guttmann, 1978/2004), as these venues are likely to be more cost-effective than larger ones. Still, choosing smaller stadiums for the championship limits financial opportunities for women's football, as it hinders the potential for bigger crowds, which in turn could lead to increased revenues. This is further highlighted by the ticketing prices for the matches.

We paid £15 per ticket for both semi-finals. In comparison, the same category of tickets for the 2021 men's semi-final between England and Denmark at Wembley Stadium would have been £195 per ticket. Additionally, the respective tickets for the previous tournaments were £15 per ticket (women's Euro 2017 semi-final) and £65 (men's Euro semi-final), thus showing that while women's football's commercial value might progress, it happens slower. This happens while men's football's commercial value continuously grows faster and reinforces the gender gap in football. The differences in ticketing prices may also indicate that women's football is not taken seriously as a professional sport, and that such gender differences in ticketing prices for football championship matches are common (Dunn, 2018). It is often argued that cheaper tickets may avoid empty seats in women's championships. The same argument also legitimises the choice of using smaller and lesser-known stadiums (Bullingham & Magrath, 2023; Peeters et al., 2019). Arguably, sold-out stadium attendances could be seen as a measure of success and perceived as a symbol of progress. However, the assumption that such quantifiable outcomes are meaningful can be questioned. Overall, choosing smaller stadiums and pricing tickets at 1/15<sup>th</sup> of the equivalent men's championship matches undermines claims of progress in the professionalisation of women's football.<sup>2</sup> Implicitly, these choices can be said to communicate that women's football still lacks the commercial value and professionalism that are needed to play at the same stadiums as their male counterparts.

After spending some time with the families in the fan zones, we join some Swedish fans on their walk towards the stadium:

As we approach the stadium, the crowds become denser. We see people selling supporter merchandise. *'Cash only, scarves for a fiver'* one seller yells. He has placed all his items on the pavement. The sellers furthest from the stadium have limited selections of supporter-related items such as scarves, hats and flags. Many of these items are available in the colour pink, in addition to each country's colour.

In the area outside the stadium we only see official UEFA items for sale and volunteers with UEFA identification cards around their necks. The volunteers hand out flags, clappers and cheering sticks for free, while the sellers have a wider selection of official matchday programmes, jerseys, t-shirts, scarves and caps. In contrast, the price level of the items is higher, and it is only possible to pay by card. We buy an official scarf for £18.

Embracing and enhancing a commercial orientation are necessary parts of the professionalisation of women's football. UEFA's efforts to commercialise women's football by selling a large array of supporter merchandise aligns well with similar development trends in men's football (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2018). Nonetheless, the lack

of supporter merchandise in other parts of the host cities, like local sports stores, shows how the vague and uncertain position of women's football commercially limits its potential economic growth (Fielding-Lloyd & Woodhouse, 2023).

### **Match narratives**

The narratives presented in this section are based on our observations at the stadiums during the two semi-finals. Once we entered the stadium we located our seats and waited for the match to start:

The stadium lights brighten and the anticipation is palpable as the speaker presents the teams, coaches and the on-field referees. Before the match begins, a minute-long video is played on the big screens, explaining the use of VAR. The video's colourful characters are all women, perhaps to appeal to a female audience (Figure 3).

Although the implementation of VAR represented an innovative element at UEFA Women's EURO 2022, its introduction was not without controversy. Leading up to the semi-final match between Sweden and England, the media buzzed with debates about the use of VAR in the championship. In one article, Swedish captain Kosovare Asllani spoke out against the use of VAR after five Swedish goals were cancelled in their first four games (Wrack, 2022). Asllani was critical of the differences in the use of cameras between women's and men's championships and called the camera quality at the championship a 'catastrophe'. Among other things, professional sports are characterised by the increased use of technology to enhance the performance and fairness of sporting events (Tjønndal, 2023). This is part of professionalisation and what Guttmann (1978/2004) calls specialisation. The implementation of VAR technology at UEFA Women's EURO 2022 serves as a prime example of the influence of expert knowledge as a system designed to improve fairness by allowing referees to make more accurate decisions based on a video review system. In this way, the implementation of VAR in the championship demonstrates a commitment to the continued professionalisation



**Figure 3.** Instructional VAR-video and live VAR-situation during the semi-finals.

of women's football through both specialisation and rationalisation (Guttmann, 1978/2004). Including VAR in women's games is a way of standardising sports equipment throughout international football and encompassing both men's and women's games. This is particularly significant given the historical underinvestment in women's football compared to men's football (Pfister, 2015; Skogvang, 2019). Still, differences in the numbers of cameras used illustrates a further gendered paradox of the progressiveness of the championship, since fewer cameras hinders the possibilities for VAR to function as in the men's game (Skirbekk, 2023). Therefore, a 'light version' of VAR signals that fairness and correct decisions are important, but not as important as in the men's game, thereby making specialisation, rationalisation and professionalisation different in women's football compared to men's.

Another gendered dimension of the use of VAR in UEFA Women's EURO 2022 relates to the referees and officials. While UEFA exclusively used women on-field referees during the championship, only two of the sixteen VAR referees were women (UEFA, 2022b). Consequently, an increased professionalisation does not necessarily lead to equality through access, which Guttmann (1978/2004) contends is a pivotal aspect of professionalisation. The lack of female representation amongst VAR referees points to some of the gendered barriers that officiating women face in football (Reid & Dallaire, 2020). By limiting women's access to VAR officiating, international elite football risks reinforcing gender stereotypes and perpetuating an exclusionary culture (Messner, 2009). Overall, the controversies surrounding the use of VAR in the championship may indicate that women's football is taken more seriously and is subject to the same level of scrutiny and criticism as men's football, which can be interpreted as a positive development for the professionalisation of the sport.

As the semi-finals progress and the audience cheers, we cannot help but notice the diversity of the spectators and the materialities of the stadiums:

Looking around, we notice that there are more women and girls in attendance than what we typically experience when we go to men's matches. The atmosphere seems friendlier somehow.

The commercials displayed on the electronic boards along the pitch are directed towards women. For instance, one UEFA message reads, *'Women play football, not women's football'*. This is followed by a Gillette commercial for 'Venus' products.

Our observations from the semi-finals suggest a diverse stadium-audience with more girls and women in attendance than what one would typically find at men's football matches. Commercials directed at women consumers show a shift in traditional marketing strategies at football stadiums (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2020). Interactive halftime elements, such as 'dance cam' and 'show a heart', could reflect an increasing participation and accessibility for girls and women in football. However, this could also be interpreted in line with previous research showing that women fans tend to be depicted as 'new consumer' fans and 'inauthentic' (Pope, 2010).

Fielding-Lloyd & Woodhouse (2023) find that marketing women's sports events as 'family-friendly' positions women's football vaguely in an overcrowded sports market and limits its commercial growth. Building on these findings, marketing women's football events specifically towards women fans may help to secure women's football a better position in an international sports market by cementing its position in the above-mentioned overcrowded sports market. This also aligns with Lago et al. (2022) call for a better commitment to the promotion of women's football and women's empowerment through football. Similarly, UEFA's message, *'Women play football, not*

women's football', could be seen as a response to Lago et al. (2022) call for action. However, an apparent paradox is the name of the championship itself: *UEFA Women's EURO 2022*, with the men's championship simply being called *UEFA EURO 2020*.

### Post-match narratives

The final section of narratives presented in this article is based on our observations after the matches. These narratives relate to the materialities of the stadiums and the atmosphere in the crowd, particularly that in the Sweden-England semi-final:

After the match's final whistle nature calls and we need to make a quick trip to the toilets. We are surprised to discover that there are only two toilets for women supporters, yet plenty for men. After almost an hour of waiting in line for the toilet, we are finally ready to head back to our hotel.

Making our way to the streets we hear wild cheers with English fans singing '*Football's coming home, it's coming home, it's coming home*'. Flutes and trumpets are played. People are jumping and dancing, celebrating like champions already. The enthusiastic atmosphere is characterised by the record attendance in a women's Euro semifinal (Figure 4). Stealing our attention is a man singing the national anthem with his whole head painted in the red and white cross of England's flag. The celebrations appear respectful, we do not see any fighting. We notice the limited number of police officers on the streets. With the celebrations, crowds and record attendance, we feel as though we are witnessing a historic event for women's football in England and Europe.

The lack of facilities for women fans could be seen as an example of how gender inequality is expressed in the materialities of sports stadiums. Pope (2010) found that even though new stadiums are designed to appeal to families, the number of women's



**Figure 4.** Record attendance and celebration at the Sweden-England semi-final.

toilets and the 'abysmal' state of the facilities that exist is a concern. Similar findings are presented by Athanassiou & Bury (2014) in their study of men's Euro 2012.

As indicated above, when leaving the stadium it felt as though we were witnessing a historical event in women's football. First, the number of people in attendance (Figure 4) was emphasised as record breaking by UEFA (using large screens in the stadium). Framing record attendance as an achievement and comparing it to previous semi-finals could be viewed as an expression of the quantification of football championships (Guttman, 1978/2004). Paradoxically, this achievement could have been even greater considering the critique of the size of the stadiums chosen for the matches (de Oliveira et al., 2022). Thus, the record attendance might have been limited by the capacity of the stadiums chosen, rather than by a lack of potential support.

## Conclusion

In this article we examine the potentials and paradoxes of professionalisation of women's football expressed at UEFA Women's EURO 2022. Through our event ethnography of the two semi-finals, we identify five potentials for professionalisation of women's football. However, we also recognise that each of these potentials is accompanied by a paradox. The first potential relates to UEFA's international marketing of the championship as the 'best women's euro ever' (UEFA, 2022d), both before and during the championship. Here, we interpret the lack of visibility of the championship on match days as a paradox. The international marketing of the event is an important part of professionalisation. However, the minimalistic ways in which this is done represent a commercialisation process similar to Allison's (2016) findings of a presumed lack of interest to begin with. In particular, the small and anonymous signs directing spectators to the *fan zones* exemplifies this (see Figure 1).

The second potential relates to the record-breaking attendances throughout the championship. UEFA Women's EURO 2022 broke the record for the best-attended women's EURO, with a total attendance of 574,875 spectators. This was more than double the previous record set in 2017 (Statista, 2022). Attendance records indicate an increased professionalisation of women's football and align with theoretical perspectives on the professionalisation of sports (Culvin & Bowes, 2023; Guttman, 1978/2004). However, this does not necessarily result in the commercial value of women's football developing in the same way as men's football. UEFA's choice of small stadiums and ticketing pricing at 1/15<sup>th</sup> of that for the men's championship is paradoxical in the sense that even though the aim was to create the 'best women's euro ever', such choices limit the possibilities for commercial growth. Consequentially, the process of professionalising women's football is impaired by a lack of equality, which according to Guttman (1978/2004) is central. This is a responsibility that the governing bodies need to actively take into the future in order to secure the players' financial remuneration, which is an integral part of professionalisation (Bowes & Culvin, 2021). Implicitly, the choices of stadiums and ticket prices signal that women's football still lacks the commercial value and professionalism needed to play at the same stadiums as men.

Increased commercialisation represents the third potential for professionalisation during the championship. One example of this is the variation and number of supporter-related



items for sale around the stadium on match days. UEFA's efforts to commercialise women's football by selling a large array of supporter merchandise also aligns well with similar developmental trends in men's football (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2018). An equality related paradox here is the gender stereotypes that are portrayed in such commercialisation. For instance, many of the supporter items are pink and the commercials played at the stadium depict stereotypical expressions of femininity. This fits poorly with the vague marketing of women's football (Fielding-Lloyd & Woodhouse, 2023) and may indicate the need for a more specialised commercialisation strategy across women's football.

The fourth identified potential is the implementation of VAR in the championship. UEFA Women's EURO 2022 represented the first European championship for women with VAR technology. Paradoxically, the tournament had to rely on a simpler version of VAR, with fewer cameras than men's matches normally use. This shows a formal difference in the processes of professionalising women's and men's football. The simpler VAR version shows that the importance of bureaucratisation and specialisation (Guttmann, 1978/2004) is acknowledged yet downplayed in women's football compared to men's football. Additionally, this relates to the equality aspect (Guttmann, 1978/2004), which becomes even clearer in that no women referees were allowed to act as VAR referees during the semi-finals. This illustrates gendered issues relating to the recruitment and retention of women football officials and is important for governing bodies to be conscious of when working to improve gender equity in refereeing.

Finally, the fifth potential we identify relates to the diversity of spectators and the inclusive supporter culture that may follow. We observed that the fans attending the matches were more diverse (in terms of gender and age) than in most men's professional football matches. Our interpretation is that this diversity of spectators may make supporter culture more socially inclusive and perhaps more appealing to girls and women. The paradox associated with this potential is that the stadiums are not designed for such a diversity of spectators. The lack of toilet facilities for women is one practical example of this.

Overall, our event ethnography illustrates how growing recognition and investment in women's football in Europe reflect the development of commercialisation and professionalisation. Still, the associated paradoxes we identified during the event also illustrate that there is a long way to go in terms of narrowing the commercial gap between women's and men's football.

## Notes

1. The number of appearances a player has made with their senior national team.
2. We compare Women's Euro 2022 with this particular Men's Euro because it also took place in England and shows the differences in stadium choices/ticket pricing.

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