

The Marginal Roles of Women Journalists Playing as Football Coverage Writers: The Case of FourFourTwo

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Abstract: In recent years, the participation of women in football journalism has gradually increased, but they still face major barriers to gaining recognition. Though Carrie Brown's appointment as Chair of the Football Writers' Association (FWA) in 2019 marked a historic milestone, female football coverage writers remain underrepresented, facing challenges like limited bylines, excessive coverage of women's football, a focus on "soft" news, and a lack of opinion pieces. As football's global dominance grows and audiences shift more towards online platforms, the paper carries out a content analysis of *FourFourTwo*, a football news website, to explore the roles of female football coverage writers, with a focus on the volume of their contributions, thematic emphases, and stylistic characteristics. The results show that women authored significantly fewer articles than men, with their contributions primarily centred on women's football. In addition, opinion pieces authored by female journalists are scarce, suggesting potential constraints on their editorial roles and expressive scope.

Keywords: Football Media, Female Sports Writers, Gender Representation, Byline Analysis, Content Evaluation

1. Introduction

Women's involvement in football grows, not only on the pitch, but also in football journalism, with figures like Kate Scott, host of Columbia Broadcasting System's UCL Today, and Sky Sports pundit Melissa Reddy, becoming recognisable voices [1]. The rise in women's visibility in football is partly due to digital media, which has increased their exposure opportunities [2]. However, some argue that women are valued more for their appearance than their journalistic skills [3]. Despite the growing visibility of women in sports broadcasting [4], female football writers still face underrepresentation [5,6]. For example, although Carrie Brown became the first woman to head the Football Writers' Association (FWA) in 2019, female writers continue to face challenges such as fewer bylines, excessive coverage of women's football, the prevalence of "soft" news, and a lack of opinion pieces [5,7,8]. Studies show that the gender of the author in news reporting can influence the content, thus shaping public awareness [9]. Furthermore, football reporting is seen as holding a prestigious status, often compared with political and arts journalism [10]. Therefore, this study aims to explore the role of female football writers on the *FourFourTwo* football news website. Through content analysis, this study examines the volume of contributions by female writers, their stylistic patterns, and the thematic distribution of their coverage. Particular attention is given to whether female writers concentrate on covering women's football and whether the lack of opinion pieces exists. The paper highlights their

contributions and challenges, offering support for improving women's status in football journalism and guiding editors and policymakers towards more balanced and inclusive sports reporting.

2. Literature review

2.1. Low visibility of women in sports journalism

In recent decades, there has been a notable rise in the number of women practicing journalism worldwide, yet it is still uncommon to see women working in sports journalism globally [6,11]. Since news readers are not able to know the ratio of women in newsrooms when reading, it seems to be meaningless to inform them of the head count of women journalists. Instead, counting the incidence of bylines has been proved to be a way to indicate the visibility of women authors, as bylines serve as the only way readers can know who wrote a news story [12]. As a result, the measurement of bylines has been widely applied to analyse the visibility of female journalists, especially in print media. Byline analysis reveals that women in sports journalism have limited visibility. Franks and O'Neill found that, in the UK, women writers contributed a small proportion of sports stories, with minimal improvement over the past decade, based on their analysis of various national newspapers by gender [4]. Schoch found a similar visibility plight of women journalists in the Swiss press, as less than 10% of sports news was written by women [8]. Similarly, Boczek et al. noted a low proportion of women-authored articles in sports coverage in Germany [6]. In line with previous studies, Faedo et al. revealed that women authored a much smaller proportion of articles compared to men in their quantitative analysis of signed pieces from two Spanish newspapers during four World Cup years [5].

2.2. Task allocation for women in sports journalism

Task allocation for women authors is often stereotypical, with femininity being a trait frequently emphasized in their work, resulting in women journalists primarily covering "soft" news [8,13]. Due to the stereotype, women were typically assigned coverage in less prestigious areas [14]. As a subcategory of the news industry, sports journalism is no exception, showing limited participation of women in news pages [9]. In sports newsrooms, where men's sports are often prioritized over women's sports, women writers are typically tasked with covering women's football [15]. Parry et al. found that reporting related to women's football was generally written by women authors in Britain [7]. The similar phenomenon of gender congruence has also been referred to in the research conducted by Boczek et al. in Germany through checking the bylines and the coverage content [6]. Furthermore, Faedo et al. observed a declining trend in opinion pieces written by women after analysing the content of the Spanish newspapers *Marca* and *Mundo Deportivo* in the years 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022 [5].

2.3. Framing theory and research gap

Framing theory focuses on how the media presents events and shapes the public's understanding of their meaning and significance, particularly in relation to gender issues [7,16]. In recent years, this theory has been increasingly used to sports journalism. Kian and Hardin found that the involvement of female reporters contributes to improving the framing of women's sports and female athletes [17]. Parry et al. analysed how British media framed women's football around 2020, focusing on themes such as financial difficulties, commercial priorities, and player welfare, reflecting the increased visibility of women's football [7]. Thus, the study aims to examine the role of female journalists in football reporting, with a focus on their output, coverage topics, and writing style. In particular, it explores whether women are more likely to cover women's football and whether the type of stories they write tends to be softer news. In contrast to previous studies that mainly focused on traditional newspapers, this study uses the *FourFourTwo* website as a sample, reflecting current reading habits

dominated by online news and examining its unique position in football coverage, the world's largest football magazine, which focuses on football content and delivers up-to-date news online [18]. Therefore, the following research questions are proposed:

In the football coverage on the *FourFourTwo* website,

RQ1: What is the proportion of coverage written by female writers?

RQ2: Do female writers tend to cover women's football more than men's football?

RQ3: What type of coverage do female writers tend to be assigned to write?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a quantitative content analysis approach to examine football news on the website of *FourFourTwo* in a systematic, objective, and data-driven manner [19]. Early content analysis methods were initially applied to politics and propaganda. By the 1940s, there had been a notable expansion in the use of the analysis of newspaper articles and advertisements [20]. In recent years, it has also played a significant role in gender research within sports media [5,6,21]. Content analysis is also frequently adopted in frame-related studies [17]. This research develops a multi-level coding framework based on three analytical dimensions: gender of the author(s), gender of the subject's content, and journalistic genre. This structure is intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of gender representation in *FourFourTwo*.

3.2. Data Sources and sampling

The research data is drawn from all the reports published on the *FourFourTwo* website during October 2022, 2023, and 2024. These three months were chosen to avoid distortions from cyclical reporting fluctuations and gender distribution during major events like the FIFA World Cup. This cross-year, same-month comparative design boosts the representativeness of the sample, with each article treated as an individual unit of analysis.

3.3. Content classification and coding scheme

The classification criteria and coding procedures for each dimension are detailed below.

3.3.1. Author gender identification

To assess the visibility of female journalists in sports reporting, each article is first coded according to the gender of its author(s). The classification criteria are shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Author gender classification criteria

Code	Category	Description
W	Woman	The author is female
M	Man	The author is male
U	Unknown	The author's gender cannot be determined from the byline or other sources
B	Both	Multiple authors of different genders (e.g., one male and one female)

If an article is co-authored by individuals of the same gender, it is coded as either W or M. If the authors are of mixed gender, it is coded as B. Bylines shared between two or more writers are counted only once in total. Gender identification is primarily based on the author's biography and profile

image provided on the article page. External platforms such as LinkedIn and X are also used to verify gender. Coverage without clear authorship is signed as either *PA Staff* (*Press Association*) or *FourFourTwo Staff*.

3.3.2. Subject gender classification

To evaluate if women writers are more assigned to write about women’s football, this study categorises each article according to the gender of its content. The classification system is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Subject gender classification criteria

Code	Category	Description
M	Men’s Football	Focuses on men’s matches
W	Women’s Football	Focuses on women’s matches
B	Both	Covers both men’s and women’s football
N	Not Specified	Gender-neutral topics such as gear reviews, stadium construction, etc.

3.3.3. Genre classification

To explore which genres of reporting are often assigned to women writers, this study draws on the genre framework based on Faedo et al, grouping articles into four types, as shown in Table 3 [5].

Table 3: Genre classification criteria

Category	Description	Typical Features
Informative	Primarily delivers factual information; common in news briefs and match reports	Cites sources (e.g., “According to...”)
Interpretive	Provides background or explanatory content; includes in-depth interviews, and chronicles	Includes firsthand reporting or internal information sourced by the journalist (e.g., “... exclusively tells <i>FourFourTwo</i> ”)
Opinion	Expresses subjective views; typical of columns, editorials, and commentary	Uses evaluative language such as “best player,” “disappointing”, etc.
Other	Includes promotional content, interactive quizzes, entertainment, etc.; while not traditional news, it reflects media strategies and resource allocation	e.g., quizzes like “Line-up quiz! Can you name ...”

Different journalistic genres employ distinct expressive styles, which may result in varying writing content being assigned to different genders, with soft news, for example, typically assigned to women [8]. As opinion pieces are a pivotal component of democratic discourse and a cornerstone of media, it is imperative to explore whether women have increased their involvement in this vital area through genre classification [5].

4. Results and discussion

4.1. The invisibility of female authors

Despite the increasing attention to female professionals in sports journalism, female authors remain largely underrepresented in *FourFourTwo*'s coverage. From 2022 to 2024, football news coverage on the site remained predominantly written by men, with only a slight increase in articles authored by women in 2024. Specifically, in October 2022, *FourFourTwo* published a total of 589 articles. Among them, 116 pieces were published without a clear byline, 472 were written by men, and only one article was co-authored by two women. In October 2023, the situation was similarly grim, with a mere one article out of 416 being authored by a woman, constituting a mere 0.2% of the total. In contrast, October 2024 saw a modest improvement. Of the 549 articles, 20 were written by female journalists, making up 3.6% of the total content. This increase can be attributed to women assuming higher positions within the sports newsroom. As seen with the BBC, where the number of women in sports reporting rose under a female Director of Sport, female leadership can help counter the male-dominated content [22,23]. At *FourFourTwo*, Jules Breach became the first female columnist, posting one article per month since April 2023, and Sarah Rendell now serves as the Women's Football Editor, both contributing to the growing visibility of women writers on the site.

While the trend reflects a certain degree of advancement, the number remains disproportionately low compared to male authors, as shown in Table 4. Framing theory suggests that the way an issue is presented can impact public perception [24]. In this case, the low visibility of female sports reporters may discourage women from pursuing careers in sports journalism, as evidenced by the declining number of women enrolling in sports journalism programs [25].

Table 4: Authorship of the articles

	October, 2022	October, 2023	October, 2024
Total	581	416	549
Women	1 (0.2%)	1 (0.2%)	20 (3.6%)
Men	472 (81.2%)	415 (99.8%)	529 (96.4%)
Unknown	116 (19.7%)	0	0
Both	0	0	0

4.2. The gender congruence in news content

While the number of articles related to women's football increased from a mere 1.0% in 2022, 1.4% in 2023 to 4.3% in 2024, reflecting the growing awareness towards women in football, a strong gender alignment can be observed between female authors and the subject matter of their reporting.

An analysis of football stories written by women reveals that the vast majority focus on women's football. In 2022, the sole article by a female author was a ranking of the Top 10 Women's Football Goalkeepers, co-written by Jessy Parker Humphreys, a freelance women's football journalist, and Sarah Rendell, who became *FourFourTwo*'s Women's Football Editor in September 2024. In 2023, the only article written by a woman was by columnist Jules Breach, focusing on men's football and highlighting Jude Bellingham's performance. A clearer trend emerged in 2024, with 19 out of 20 articles by female journalists covering women's football, all written by Sarah Rendell, except for one by Jules Breach on men's football. The dataset also revealed that only three female journalists contributed during the entire period, emphasising the limited representation of women's voices in football reporting. As shown in Table 5, the content distribution further reflects the gendered nature of football coverage. Framing, shaped by recurring themes, may lead female writers to feel confined

to covering women's football, a more marginal topic, thus limiting their career advancement [17, 26, 27].

Table 5: Content of the articles

	October, 2022	October, 2023	October, 2024
Total	581	416	549
Women's Football	6 (1.0%)	6 (1.4%)	24 (4.3%)
Men's Football	561 (96.6%)	376 (90.4%)	479 (87.2%)
None	19 (3.3%)	31 (7.5%)	37 (6.7%)
Both	3 (0.1%)	3 (0.7%)	9 (1.6%)

4.3. The gender distribution across journalistic genres

Female journalists have contributed to the three genres of informative, interpretive, and opinion writing, although their involvement in opinion pieces has been relatively limited. In particular, in 2022, the only female-authored article was classified as an opinion piece. The authors discussed their criteria for ranking the Top 10 Women's Goalkeepers, offering a subjective perspective on player performance. In October 2023, the single article written by Jules Breach also fell under the opinion category, where she praised Jude Bellingham, a young player for England and Real Madrid, and described him as "one of the best midfielders in the game." In October 2024, a total of 20 articles were written by female journalists. Nine articles were informative, covering news like injury updates in women's football, while another nine were interpretive, primarily featuring player profiles. Only two articles were opinion pieces: one by Jules Breach, reflecting on the miracles of clubs' promotions to the Premier League from her own experience, and the other by Sarah Rendell, analysing potential candidates for the next head coach of Arsenal Women. This pattern indicates that while female writers are contributing across multiple journalistic formats, their visibility in opinion-based reporting, which often carries greater editorial influence and authority, remains relatively low. Nevertheless, as female writers are likely to frame their coverage differently from their male counterparts, bringing a divergence of values and perspectives, it is essential to let more females voice their opinions in the sports newsroom [28].

5. Conclusion

The data from *FourFourTwo*'s coverage shows that female writers currently have low visibility in online football journalism. Women-authored articles remain few, with a predominance of gendered content and limited opinion pieces, which may discourage women from pursuing careers in football writing and reinforce the glass ceiling in newsrooms, perpetuating the dominance of hegemonic masculinity in football journalism. However, it is encouraging to see a rise in the number of articles by female writers, as well as their contributions across various genres. Given that this study is limited to just three months of coverage from a single outlet, future research should explore a wider range of football-focused media to gain a deeper understanding of the roles women journalists play in football reporting.

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