

# Sport: The Universal Language

## Part 1. A linguistic comparison analysis

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**MEDIACOM**

**talkSPORT** 

 **Relative**  
INSIGHT

## Background

Content and language are hugely influential on our perceptions. Words and images can influence our thoughts through two of our five senses, sight and sound, and also for some people, touch. Experiencing language from a particular viewpoint creates a subjective understanding of the world around us.

Given that the majority of people experience sporting events through media only, it is a powerful tool in influencing public attitudes.

There have been several studies looking into the type of coverage female sports teams or athletes have received. Petty & Pope from Durham University manually analysed the content of 181 articles from popular UK newspapers around the 2015 Women's World Cup and reported generally positive results. The skill and achievements of the England team and individual players were highlighted, as opposed to an excess of coverage around their appearance or personal lives, which had been found previously. The authors suggest that this represented a positive shift on the reporting of women's football.

However, whilst the subject of women's sport articles is frequently studied, the language used by the media within these articles is not. Research has shown that the language used within advertising text can affect a consumer's perceptions of a brand or product.

As of 2018, UNESCO reported that only 4% of sports media content is dedicated to women's sport. We're expecting this figure to gradually increase as women's sport becomes more aligned with the mainstream media, however, research is lacking in terms of how that reporting is, and should be, presented.

Sport: The Universal Language will look specifically at the reporting of Women's Football. Whether it differs to the men's, how it differs, and the impact of any differences, with the objective of understanding how a brand should involve themselves and the associated benefits.

In the words of Seth Godin, 'content is the only marketing that's left', and if this is true, then it's vital content is helping, and not hindering, the marketing of women's sport.

## Methodology

Voice of the  
**Media**

Vs.

Voice of the  
**Fans**

By using data publicly available online, comparisons can be made between;

- Men's match reports and women's match reports
- Men's fan forums and women's fan forums

Text was used from an equal number of match reports from the men's Premier League games 2018/19 and the Women's Super League from the same period. These online reports were from the BBC, Sun, Telegraph and Guardian. To understand the language of the fans, data was collected from fan forums and YouTube comments



Relative Insight use AI to automatically code individual words into topics, phrases and emotions. By uploading comparative data sets (for example, men's match reports vs women's match reports), the platform statistically tests the differences between the two. Analysing the quotes that led to the difference allows us to see the context in which that topic was used.

*Topics with a word frequency of less than 10 were excluded.*

We are incredibly thankful for the help and guidance from Relative Insight in creating this report. As far as we're aware, this is the first time the reporting of women's sport has been analysed alongside the day-to-day language used by the fans, using AI and a comparative linguistics methodology.

The results in Part 1 are truly fascinating, and will feed into a quantitative survey where we can look to understand the impact, if any, these differences have on perceptions of women's sport as well as the preferences of the fans and those engaging with the content. Overall, we hope these findings and those which will come in Part 2 will contribute to the understanding of, and improvement in, communications around women's sport.



## Comparative analysis of 114 online match reports reveal stark differences in the media reporting of men's and women's football

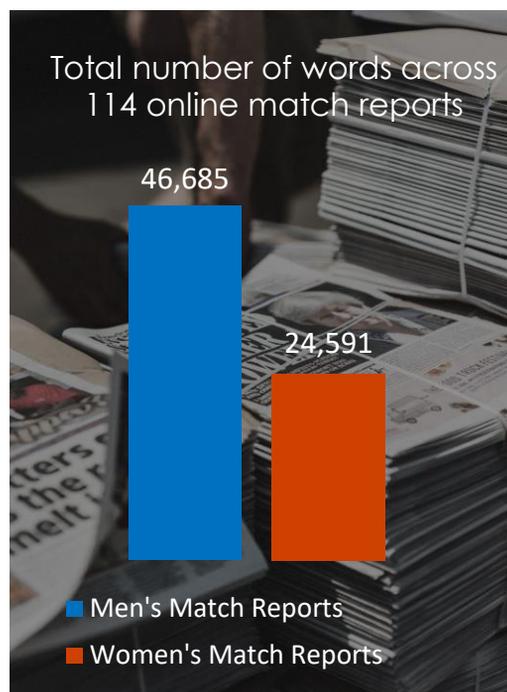
### What was compared?

57 x Premier League match reports from the 2018/19 season

57 x Women's Super League match reports from the 2018/19 season

Sourced online from the BBC, Sun, Guardian and Telegraph

Before the language analysis had even begun, it became apparent there was a huge difference in the volume of words. The match reports from the Premier League contained almost twice as many words compared to the Women's Super League (WSL) reports. This was primarily driven by the BBC, with The Guardian maintaining the most equal split.



The match reports also had significant differences in content, as can be seen in the tables below. The following pages will look into the most prevalent themes in more depth.

Topic	Relative frequency vs. men's reports
People: Female	45.2 x
Unbeaten	2.5 x
Hard/Soft	2.3 x
Success	1.6 x
Cross/Corner/Line	1.5 x

Example - How to read the tables:  
The **Women's** football match reports contained **1.6X** more words within the topic 'Success' compared to the **Men's** reports

Topic	Relative frequency vs. women's reports
Evaluation: Bad	7.9 x
Wrong/Ruthless	5.5 x
Unlucky	7.4 x
Unlikely	2.9 x
Seemed/Looked/ Appeared	1.9 x
Personal names/ Surnames	1.2 x
Numbers	1.2 x

## It may not be surprising the terms ‘women’ or ‘ladies’ were more common in the women’s match reports

The first and most prominent (yet unsurprising) finding across all of the voices was the use of gender marking in football.

Topic	Relative frequency vs. men's reports
People: Female	45.2 x

Using terms such as ‘women's’, or ‘ladies’ to differentiate a team or competition from the ‘norm’, considered as standard to be the men's, isn't necessarily an issue in itself. It's more so that this research has highlighted the sheer frequency and repetition of gender labelling for the female events. This is most noticeable in football; other sports such as athletics and tennis, where men and women compete alongside each other, don't gender label an entire sport, rather the individual match or event (e.g. men's 100m or women's singles final). This may become an issue if women's sport, primarily football, is to become more engrained into popular sports culture, rather than maintaining it's niche position within the market.

## The male footballers are named in a way that influences perceptions of status and importance

Proper names (i.e first name + surname) were significantly more likely to be used in reference to the female footballers, whereas the male footballers were more likely to be called by their surname only.

Topic	Relative frequency vs. women's reports
Personal names/ Surnames	1.2 x

This is in-line with current academic research which has shown that men are 56% more likely to be referred to by their surname only. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to be referred to by first name only or first name + surname (Princeton University, Atir & Ferguson (2018)).

Research has shown that recognizing a professional by last name can mean improved perceptions of fame, status and importance in that person's field. So much so, that an experiment run by Princeton University, found that scientists referred to by their surname were seen as 14% more deserving of a career award<sup>1</sup>.

You could argue that awareness of female footballers is lower, and therefore a proper name is used unknowingly as a way to introduce a player, compared to the men who are more well known. However, the potential for a detrimental effect should not be ignored.

Nikita Parris pulled a goal back after she was brought down in the penalty box

Klopp has maintained his Liverpool team are not yet at their free-flowing best.

Georgia Stanway netted a stunning half-volley for City in the first half before Jade Moore equalised with a header shortly after half-time.

Ritchie diverted Salah's second attempt wide with a vital block

## The Women's Super League reports are positive and full of praise

The use of adjectives relating to success and winning is much more common in the WSL reports.

Topic	Relative frequency vs. men's reports
Unbeaten	2.5 x
Success	1.6 x

- Achievement
- Victory
- Breakthrough
- Fruitful
- Thrive
- Flourishing

After the break Arsenal reverted to type, and the left-hand side that had proved so fruitful would do so once more when Mead's cross-cum-shot sailed far beyond the reach of Anke Preuss

With Manchester City's molehill now a mountain they strangely started to thrive

This had become less a contest than a countdown to a celebration. With Brighton assisting with a champion-themed post-match playlist, when that moment came there was no holding back.

## Whilst critique is more prevalent in the Premier League reports

It's unclear as to why this is the case. The men's game could be more heavily criticized as there is more emotional investment from the author of the match report. It could be that more is expected from the men's game, and therefore there's a higher possibility of disappointment or failure.

Topic	Relative frequency vs. women's reports
Evaluation: Bad	7.9 x
Wrong/Ruthless	5.5 x

The women's game, on the other hand, could be more of a duty to the author, with less emotional investment. The attention may then go to the winning team where praise and commendation is more easy to come by.

The gender of the author may be having an impact here, but interestingly, around half of the WSL reports had no reporter cited near the article. All of the men's reports cited the author.

- Catastrophic
- Disastrous
- Worst
- Difficult
- Strained
- Struggling

Yet, even then, it was their catastrophic start, a comedy of errors from the kick-off, which still drew all the focus.

They are without a win in eight games in all competitions this season their worst run since 1964-65.

Arsenal and Chelsea both appointed new managers in the summer and both came into the game at the Emirates with questions marks over their progress after difficult recent results.

## Reporters were more likely to share their thoughts and opinions on the Premier League games

In a similar manner to critique, the Premier League reports were more opinionated. This again could be related to the level of emotional investment from the author, or general knowledge of the teams in question. An author is less likely to be opinionated on a topic with which he/she is unfamiliar.

Topic	Relative frequency vs. women's reports
Seemed/Looked/ Appeared	1.9 x
Unlucky	7.4 x
Unlikely	2.9 x

## Whereas the WSL reports were descriptive and matter of fact

This may have an impact on the emotional response of the reader. For example, if reading a report where the author is opinionated, it's likely to trigger thoughts of either agreement or disagreement, engaging the reader on a higher level compared to a report that just states the facts.

Topic	Relative frequency vs. men's reports
Hard/Soft	2.3 x
Cross/Corner/Line	1.5 x

This could be important when it comes to growing and engaging with the fan base of women's sport.

The Scotland midfielder put the title holders ahead with a towering header from Hannah Blundell's pinpoint cross.

True, it took them time to find a way to break down a well-drilled Brighton side, but they had so much of the ball they always appeared in control.

Defender Louise Quinn prodded Arsenal in front from an early corner, before Vivianne Miedema dinked in the second..

Arsenal seemed to have been set up with a clear plan by manager Unai Emery to press high up the pitch to prevent Chelsea playing from the back.

## The Premier League reports were supported by numbers and stats

Numbers and stats were more likely to be incorporated into the main body of the Premier League reports or as an additional feature.

Topic	Relative frequency vs. women's reports
Numbers	1.2 x

The WSL reports may have had simple statistics, such as goals and bookings, but the Premier League reports were more likely to have detailed figures such as possession, passes, corners won etc. In order to get this level of detail it is possible there was a team of analysts either at the game or watching the footage shortly after. This level of resource might not be available to the Women's game yet.

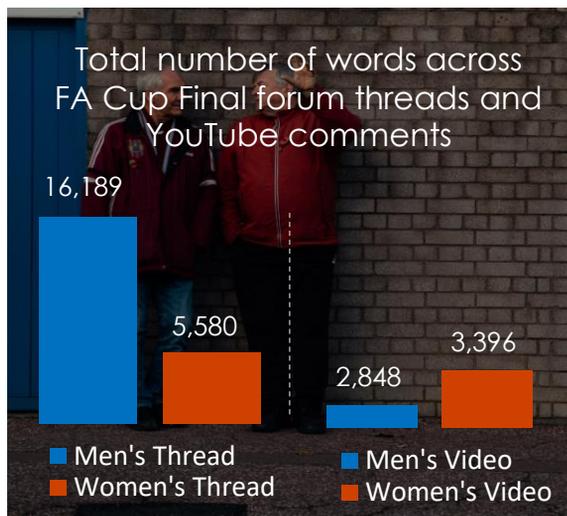


## Analysis of forums and social media show the passion and emotion the fans express around the game, for both the men's and women's teams

### What was compared?

Forum threads from the 2019 FA Cup Final. Manchester City won both the Women's and Men's final. The separate match day threads were on the MCFC fan forum, Bluemoon, were compared.

YouTube comments under 3x Arsenal Men's team videos and 3x Arsenal Women's team videos



### Forum Threads

Topic	Relative frequency vs. men's fans
Quality/Standard	14.9 x
Deserving	3.3 x
Diminishers: Slightly/Less/Maybe	3.3 x
Evaluation: Good	2.9 x
Exceed: Too many/Too much	2.5 x
Evaluation: Bad	2.3 x
Agree/Looks like/Seems	2.4 x
Strong obligation: Needs/Should	1.7 x

Topic	Relative frequency vs. women's fans
Want/On Purpose	4.3 x
Time: Future	2.5 x
Hope/Expect	2.2 x
Excitement/Passion / Impressed	2.1 x
Likely: Can/Would/Might	1.9 x
Success/Achievement	1.7 x

### YouTube Comments

Topic	Relative frequency vs. men's fans
Content/Pleased	7.3 x
People: Male	7.1 x
Belonging to a group	2.4 x

Topic	Relative frequency vs. women's fans
Video/Camera Angle	13.1 x
Evaluation: Bad	5.6 x

## Fans of the women's team appreciate quality football

Conversations on the Women's final thread are a mixture of fans praising the team for the win, and discussions on the future and direction of women's football.

On the whole, comments specifically on the team were about the quality of the players.

The term 'deserved' is more frequently mentioned in the women's forum thread, despite both teams winning their respective games. Instead, the men's is referred to as an 'achievement'. The term 'achievement' tends to suggest the team overcame a challenge or accomplished something rare, most likely as the team also won the Premier League the same season. 'Deserved' is a term more associated with a hard-working performance and a well-fought win, most likely reflective of the nature of the match.

Topic	Relative frequency vs. men's fans
Quality/Standard	14.9 x
Deserving	3.3 x
Evaluation: Good	2.9 x
Evaluation: Bad	2.3 x

Topic	Relative frequency vs. women's fans
Success/Achievement	1.7 x

The second was lovely football, perhaps a bit fortunate with the deflection, and the third was just quality. Well done ladies thoroughly deserved.

Just like our men's team, shocking biased officials

Happy to be in front and the standard of the women's game is very good technically

Makes the achievement all the more remarkable.

The more negative mentions from the Women's thread were specific to the refereeing and media.

## Comparisons are made with the men's team, rather than a rival

Comparing the women's game to the men's may signal a lack of awareness of female teams or players. It also suggests that the fans of the women's game are followers of, or at least knowledgeable about, the equivalent men's team. One aspect of the comparison is around the players and the game itself, including the referees and officials.

The other mentions of the men's team are to do with achievements, hoping the men can emulate the success of the women's team.

There are no mentions of the women's team in the men's thread.

Topic	Relative frequency vs. men's fans
People: Male	7.1 x

Parris is playing like Salah. Needs to be less selfish. I reckon she'll grab one eventually anyhow.

Booking for nothing and then a clear booking from them, nothing given. Bit like the men's game then.

Well played ladies. A real achievement that, hopefully, the guys can follow!

## In contrast to the women's match reports, fans are not afraid to give their opinion!

There are 2 different types of opinion present on the women's thread. On the one hand, people are discussing the standard of women's football and the level of skill in general. But you also get fans commenting on the ability of the players.

Topic	Relative frequency vs. men's fans
Diminishers: Slightly/Less/Maybe	3.3 x
Exceed: Too many/Too much	2.5 x
Agree/Looks like/Seems	2.4 x
Strong obligation: Needs/Should	1.7 x

the skill levels have risen dramatically over the last decade or so.

Sorry but you can see the skill levels are right up there, it is just the physical side that is different.

It's a mixture between 'soft critique' with terms such as 'a bit', and 'maybe'...

Steph was a bit ropey but the women's game is on the up and have got the stage to themselves this summer as well.

Great move, maybe should have been a bit less greedy.

Stanway still a bit raw, but very classy.

...and a more definitive critique, such as 'must', 'needed', 'should':

Our quality should shine through here over the course of the full match

We must move it quicker instead of lumping it forward.

However we are not helping ourselves with slow play, sloppy passing and no width. The manager needs to sort it our ASAP

## Fans of the women's team are more positive on YouTube

The fans are proud of their team and they seem to be more aware that it is a 'team' sport, with 2.4X more mentions related to 'belonging to a group'.

Topic	Relative frequency vs. men's fans
Content/Pleased	7.3 x
Belonging to a group	2.4 x

## Whereas forums offer an outlet for expectation and excitement for fans of the men's game

There's a much higher volume of conversation in the build up to the men's final, with fans sharing their hopes and predictions for the game.

Topic	Relative frequency vs. women's fans
Hope/Expect	2.2 x
Excitement/Passion/Impressed	2.1 x

## So what does this mean?

Currently, this linguistic analysis has been able to highlight differences between the way the media reports on women's football, and how the fans talk amongst each other.

Research has shown that if your objective is to engage with a particular audience, you should speak in their language. In the same way that personalization within advertising has become a go-to for marketers, language within content should follow suit. It helps an audience feel closer to the author, and therefore the source of that content ('Slang & Sociability', Connie Eble). Closeness is a metric frequently measured in market research as it has shown to be correlated to brand equity and positive brand perceptions.

The next step is for us to test the impact of these language differences on perceptions of women's sport such as ability, success, and general engagement.

### Women's football...

#### Voice of the **Media**

1. Matter-of-fact
2. Positive and full of praise
3. Proper names

#### Voice of the **Fans**

1. Pride and Passion
2. Critique and Opinion
3. Appreciative of skill
4. Surname or first name only

***"You should use their language, the language they use everyday, the language in which they think"***

David Ogilvy

## Appendix

When citing this report please include the following partners:



**MEDIACOM**



All data analysed was publicly available through the following platforms:



theguardian



The Telegraph



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