

Abuse of female athletes goes unchecked on mainstream social media sites

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Social media posts that abuse female athletes can remain unmoderated on the official social media accounts of major sports clubs, new research has shown.

[The study](#), by the University of Stirling Management School, Chester Business School, Bournemouth University, Durham Business School and the University of Manchester, sheds new light on concerning trends of gender-based violence and toxic fan behavior on mainstream [social media platforms](#).

Over a period of seven months, the research team carried out an extensive analysis of comments responding to posts on the official TikTok accounts of Manchester United and Burnley football clubs.

The study, co-authored by [digital business](#) specialist Dr. Wasim Ahmed during his time at the University of Stirling Management School, found that sexist comments were apparent in all TikTok posts containing female football players, with some also containing more aggressive misogynistic comments.

Dr. Emma Kavanagh, associate professor in sport psychology and safe sport at Bournemouth University, said, "Globally, women's football has seen an incredible rise in its profile and popularity in recent years which is obviously very welcome. However, we have found that a toxic culture among so-called fans is still able to thrive, and the fact it can appear on mainstream platforms and official [club](#) channels is particularly concerning."

Dr. Wasim Ahmed said, "Worryingly, some of the toxic comments we looked at were being 'liked' by other users and attracting further disparaging replies, and appeared to be left unchecked by the clubs at the time. It was clear that the accounts were not being monitored on a regular basis for misogynistic comments or sexualized language. The danger is, then, that such exchanges become part of a tone that is acceptable to clubs and their followers."

In total the researchers studied the responses to 417 videos about the women's teams posted on the clubs' accounts—collectively the videos had over seventy million views and fifty-nine thousand comments.

The results, published in the journal *European Sport Management Quarterly*, showed a troubling level of gender-based violence, across four key themes:

- **Sexism:** Belittling the players' skills and mocking fact that women play football professionally.
- **Misogyny:** Aggressive comments showing hatred and animosity towards the women.
- **Sexualization of women:** lurid comments about their appearance, reducing them to mere objects of sexual desire.
- **A demand for a male-only space:** A belief that the club should only share posts about their male players.

"This study shows how urgent it is for football clubs to address longstanding issues of toxic fan behaviors. Hopefully it will serve as a wake-up call to clubs and social media platforms to act, for the well-being of their players and also to bring a more respectful and inclusive online culture for their fans," Dr. Kavanagh concluded.

More information: Alex Fenton et al, Women's football subculture of misogyny: the escalation to online gender-based violence, *European Sport*

Management Quarterly (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/16184742.2023.2270566](https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2023.2270566)

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