

An Analysis of Representations of the AFLW in Online Discussion

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Abstract

The introduction of the Australian Football League Women's (AFLW) competition in 2017 has seen Australian Rules Football become an increasingly popular sport for Australian women, as well as sparking considerable public discussion about the topic of women in sport. Although studies of media portrayals of AFLW and women in sport, more broadly, have been conducted, there has been limited research on public sense-making and discussion around women's participation in the AFLW. This project aims to add to understanding of the developing public culture around the AFLW by examining representations of the AFLW and women who play Australian Rules Football in public and spectator discussion. A thematic analysis of an online discussion board that discusses topics within the AFLW was conducted using the method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The thematic analysis resulted in five key themes being identified in the data, that capture the defining characteristics of the AFLW, including: "AFLW as Evoking Nostalgia", "AFLW as Beneficial for the Advancement of Australian Rules Football", "AFLW as in Need of Support and Promotion", "AFLW as Unenjoyable" and "AFLW as inferior to AFL". The findings suggest that due to women's participation in AFLW, representations of women's sport and sportswomen are shifting.

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree of diploma in any University, and, to the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published except where due reference is made. I give permission for the digital version of this thesis to be made available on the web, via the University of Adelaide's digital thesis repository, the Library Search and through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the School to restrict access for a period of time.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.4 Overview

The Australian Football League Women's (AFLW) is Australia's national Australian Rules football competition for female players. Commencing in 2017, the league has been the object of considerable public and media attention, with interest in it exceeding expectations (Willson et al., 2018). Female participation in Australian Rules football is reported to have grown by 790% in the past decade (Squiers, 2017), and the popularity of the AFLW has sparked ongoing public discussion around women in sport. Few studies, however, have examined the nature of public discussion around women's recent involvement, as players, in the AFL. The present analysis aims to fill this gap in understanding.

1.2 The AFLW: History and Development

The first documented game of women's Australian Rules football was in Perth in 1915, however, the history of the origin and early development of women's involvement in the sport remains largely unknown (Hess, 2011). The absence of historical memory is argued to explain the phenomenon of women players repeatedly being framed as pioneers for their sport (Hess, 2011). In recent times, the first ongoing league for women's football was formed in Victoria in 1981, with other states forming leagues thereafter (Hess, 2011).

Auskick, an inclusive skill-building program that serves as an introduction to Australian Rules Football for 5-12 year olds, is credited with much of the current success of the ALFW (Willson et al., 2018). Auskick is an initiative designed to encourage young male and female players to develop football skills, but until recently, barriers prevented young women from continuing their participation and development, most obviously the inability to compete at youth

and adult levels (Willson et al., 2018). The AFL commissioned a report into the state of the women's game in 2010 that recommended the establishment of the AFLW. This was initially intended to start in 2020, but the date was moved forward to 2017 following significant interest in, and the success of, women's games nationwide (Squiers, 2017). The AFL's motivation to initiate the AFLW is argued to involve both social and commercial interests, as they can make capital gains in both areas (Willson et al., 2018).

As of 2019, the AFLW consists of eight clubs in five Australian states (Clarke et al., 2018). The competition is played with very similar rules to the men's Australian Football League (AFL), with the exception of a shorter season (7 home-and-away games), shorter game time (4 x 15 minute quarters), and fewer players on the field (16 players with additional six interchange players)(Clarke et al., 2018). Though modelled on the men's competition, the AFL governing body made a number of concessions in creating the AFLW, including comparatively low remuneration for players, shorter seasons and therefore shorter contracts and, due to the competition for resources, the AFLW is played over summer instead of the colder months during which the AFL is played (Willson et al., 2018). The establishment of the AFLW has made Australian Rules football a professional sport option for women, and is expected to have impacts on culture, as well as the economy, and also to encourage the participation and leadership of women throughout Australian sport (Willson et al., 2018)

1.3 Women and Sport

To understand the public discussion that surrounds the AFLW it is important to examine the broader relationship between sport and gender. Sport is argued to be a masculine domain, largely due to men's historical domination of the space both at amateur and professional levels

(Travers, 2018). It has been argued that the practice of sex-segregated sport works to emphasise sex differences and normalise the ideology of a two-sex system (Travers, 2018). Women and men are separated into spaces and activities that correlate with widely shared societal beliefs about what is normal and appropriate for each gender based on their capabilities, bodies and interests (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). Therefore, men are encouraged to play high-contact sports such as football or rugby (Nelson, 1994), whereas women are directed towards feminised sports such as dance or gymnastics, or even away from sport entirely, as this fits within our social understanding of what is acceptable and normal for each gender (McDonagh, 2008). With the introduction of the AFLW we are not only witnessing an increase in women playing a sport, but witnessing women participate in a typically masculine sport, which will have consequences for how people understand the concepts of sport, gender and what it means to be a women (Lenkic, 2018).

Through the cultural normalisation of two-sex system in sport, we have also normalised the unequal rewarding and recognition of male athletes (Travers, 2018). This is because sex-segregated sport is constructed around a discourse of masculine superiority whereby males are better athletes resulting from their testosterone levels and higher muscle percentage (Sykes, 2006). As males are positioned as better at their sport and it is justifiable that they are more deserving of reward, opportunity and recognition (Travers, 2018). McDonagh (2008) has argued that through coercive sex segregation, that commences at junior levels, and results in women not being allowed to play particular sports with men, women are socially relegated into their own competitions, which often have different rules and standards, based on this belief that they are inherently inferior. McDonagh (2008). Demonstrated how women had achieved male standards

in a variety of sports – including baseball, swimming and fencing – but were not able to compete directly with men due to the social assumption they are inferior.

In a review of arguments that have been used to deter or oppose female participation in sport throughout history, Lenkic (2018) described repeated framings of women's competitions as non-serious, uncompetitive and as publicity stunts. Lenkic (2018) also discussed how women's bodies have been constructed as too fragile and needing protection from the physicality and risk involved in sport. However, a study of the psychological profiles of women involved in risk-taking professional sports argued that such women approached risk-taking in positive and constructive ways and demonstrate careful planning (Cazenave, Le Scanff, & Woodman, 2007), therefore demonstrating women are not adverse to being involved in risk taking sports, and that they do not need protection from these risks.

The AFL is a highly masculinised institution, that is reliant on social norms that differentiate and segregate women and men (Marks, 2019). The introduction of the AFLW provides an opportunity to examine public reactions to women's involvement in a typically male sport, as well as exploring whether techniques that 'other' women in a masculine space continue to be used.

1.4 Representations of Sportswomen in the Media

To examine the nature of public discussion around women's recent involvement, as players, in the AFL, this study will examine representations of the AFLW and women who play Australian Rules Football. Hall (1997) argues that a representation embodies "concepts, ideas and emotions in a symbolic form which can be transmitted and meaningfully interpreted" (p. 10), and therefore analysing a representation is an attempt to examine a preferred meaning of

discussion, stories and images. Studies of media representations of AFLW and sportswomen, more generally, have found that although opportunities for increasing coverage of women's sports have grown with the internet, the coverage is different to that of men's sport (Billings, Angelini, Macarthur, Bissell, & Smith, 2014; Creedon, 2014). A mixed-methods study that analysed the entirety of America's Olympic telecast by the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in 2012 reported an increased focus on women's sports of gymnastics and beach volleyball, and that female athletes were significantly more likely than males to be described as emotional and attractive (Billings et al., 2014). Examples that trivialise and undermine women's sporting ability were also identified in scholarly literature and media reports in the United States, (Kaskan & Ho, 2016; Willson et al., 2018). Female sports players were regularly referred to as girls instead of women, they were sexually objectified (e.g. through the clothing they were described as wearing) and in the ways they were described as being nurturing or delicate (Kaskan & Ho, 2016). These examples demonstrate how women continue to be 'othered' while participating in a masculine space.

In an analysis of US and global research into medias representation of sportswomen, it was found that four persistent rules of media representation existed: sportswomen don't matter, compulsory heterosexuality and appropriate femininity, sexualization and ambivalence (Bruce, 2016). Four current rules of media representation were identified which included: athletes in action, serious athletes, model citizens and us and them (Bruce, 2016). Researchers also identified two new rules which included agency: our voices and pretty and powerful. These rules demonstrate that while there are persistent representations of women, there is also a shift in the way women are being represented, and that there is a far greater diversity of representation's in the media than previous research has acknowledged (Bruce, 2016).

An Australian analysis of media coverage of women's sports, including coverage of the AFLW, described how players were represented using discourses of aggression and determination in some examples, and of family and motherhood in others (Wrench & Garrett, 2018). Media representation also continues to 'other' women who play Australian Rules Football. Historically, women who have contributed to the development of success of Australian Rules Football, through contributions in areas of support or administration, have gone unacknowledged (Hindley, 2006). Even when women start to play a sport, as women have started to play AFLW now, they become constructed as feminized, different and less than male athletes, as found in a review of an American sport magazines representation of women (Antunovic & Hardin, 2015; Dworkin, 2009). Another analysis of how the AFLW is positioned in the media described how women were less represented on the news in visible timeslot (Willson et al., 2018). It is argued that women's representation in the media demonstrates many inequalities when compared with men's representation (Willson et al., 2018).

The WAG (the colloquial term for the wives and girlfriends of AFL players) is argued to be becoming an "iconic figure in Australian Culture and a crucial part of Australian football branding" (Marks, 2019, p. 435). A thematic analysis into the media representation of WAG's in the leadup to the prestigious Brownlow Awards) which acknowledge the fairest and best player in the AFL league), found that women were only celebrated when they conformed to narrow ideals of feminine embodiment and presentation, and this was suggested to highlight the persistence of sexist norms within Australian football culture (Marks, 2019). Marks (2019) argues that these norms are extended to other female participants of Australian Rules Football including AFLW players, highlighting how the sexualisation of AFLW players in the media

downplays their athletic and physical skills and constructs women's bodies as primary for the sexual appetites of men.

An analysis of how the AFLW is represented in the Australian media also demonstrated there has been a shift in the way female players are being positioned, with women who play AFLW being described as exciting and role models for other women (Willson et al., 2018; Wrench & Garrett, 2018). The contemporary period has been labelled as a 'boom time', which assumes that progress towards gender equality is rapidly advancing, for women's sport, as found in an analysis of Australian media articles (McLachlan, 2019) AFLW players are often shown in the media with culturally recognisable symbols from the men's competition, with images of team embrace and familiar uniforms, that showcases similarity and unity between the men's competition and the women's competition (Wrench & Garrett, 2018). These findings suggest that the representation of sportswomen and women who play AFLW may be changing by becoming more accepting of women in a masculine space.

1.5 Online Spaces

The present research aims to examine representations of the AFLW and women who play Australian Rules Football, in the hopes of increasing understanding about the current state of public and spectator understandings of the AFLW and women's sport more broadly. This study will use public posts on online discussion boards as a resource to understand public discussion surrounding AFLW. With the increased use of the internet, online spaces offer a place to explore representations of women's sport that isn't in traditional media (e.g. television broadcasting). The increase in social media use has changed the field of representation, which now includes an increased quantity of public voice as well as information sharing through the internet (Bruce,

2016). These online spaces create a platform where social practices and prejudices are visible through posters discussion (Willson et al., 2018). Studies of this kind have not been conducted to investigate the AFLW, or within an Australian context, and the present study will attempt to fill this gap in the literature.

In previous studies conducted into discussion that surrounds women's sport in online spaces, both negative and positive representations of women are found. It is argued hegemonic masculinity, which is described as a masculinity which reinforces heterosexuality, subjugating women and male privilege, is visible in online spaces (Kian, Clavio, Vincent, & Shaw, 2011; Willson et al., 2018). An analysis of popular American football message boards described hegemonic masculinity as flourishing on the internet due to posters' anonymity, demonstrated through examples of objectifying women and misogyny (Kian et al., 2011). Similarly, a discourse analysis of online supporter discourses around women's football (soccer) in Norway demonstrated how posters positioned football as inherently masculine through constant comparison of the women's game to that of the men. Posters negotiated women's football as something special and abnormal, while discussing men's football as natural and normal (Hjelseth & Hovden, 2014). Gender inequalities in the sport were routinely justified by posters in terms of sex differences in physicality (Hjelseth & Hovden, 2014). Findings included women being trivialized by posters using terms such as 'childish' and 'boring' to describe the competition, as well as being eroticized through posters' discussion and objectivation of women's bodies. A counter discourse that represented women's right to 'fair treatment', and drew on themes of inclusion and respect was also identified as interrupting dominant discourses in the posts (Hjelseth & Hovden, 2014). Overall, these studies demonstrate that negative representations of sportswomen are created and exist in online spaces.

However, online platforms for interaction have been argued to have great potential for advancing feminist agendas of equality because they offer a place to shape and break-down ideas and discourses, as well as connecting new groups of people to allow for creative forms of activism (Baer, 2015). Women being participants in sport, and fans of sport, challenges the understanding of sport as reflecting masculine norms (Antunovic & Hardin, 2015). An analysis of two blog networks about women's sport, that serve female audiences, identified a feminist approach towards discussing sport that encouraged women's participation and represented sport as empowering, inclusive and leading to a healthy, fulfilling and balanced life (Antunovic & Hardin, 2015). The extent to which online platforms generate and restrict particular constructions is debatable, and represents an area for future research (Locke, Lawthom, & Lyons, 2018). This paper will analyse online interaction on online discussion boards with the aim of adding to understanding of emerging public discussion around the AFLW. It focuses particularly on the key characteristics of the AFLW, and how these characteristics position and represent the AFLW and women who play Australian Rules Football, to understand whether these are positive or negative representations.

1.6 Present Research

The present study aims to utilise the opportunity provided by the introduction of the AFLW, to examine the public's reaction to women's involvement in a masculine space, and a typically male sport. While past research into media and online representations of women's sport have found these representations to be mostly negative, recent studies have demonstrated these representations of women's sport and sportswomen are shifting. The present research aims to examine representations of the AFLW and women who play Australian Rules Football, to add to

the limited literature surrounding women's involvement in the AFLW, in the hopes of increasing understanding about the current state of public and spectator understandings of the AFLW and women's sport more broadly. This research will use online discussion boards to examine public discussion around women's sport in an Australian context, and women's recent involvement, as players, in AFLW.

Chapter 2: Method

2.1 Use of Discussion Boards as a Data Source

This study examines supporter posts on online discussion boards to examine constructions of women's Australian Rules football in the public domain. Discussion boards are online locations where communities of people go to discuss a particular interest or topic. They are organised into tree-like structures, that have different threads, sub-threads and sections, structured in a way that allows users to have conversations around specific topics (Holtz, Kronberger, & Wagner, 2012).

Discussion boards offer researchers a way to undertake naturalistic data collection, that summarise the understandings and experiences of a community (Giles, 2017). One particular advantage of discussion boards is the opportunity they provide for gaining information and viewing interactions that might not be available using traditional research methods such as interviews or surveys. Posters are able to remain anonymous and therefore have the opportunity to share their opinions and beliefs without the perception of being personally judged (Pendry & Salvatore, 2015).

2.2 Participants

The study used publicly available text-based material on the *Big Footy* discussion forum and therefore does not involve participants. In accordance with the British Psychological Society Ethics Guidelines for Internet-Mediated Research (2017), discussion-board posting can be considered a public activity. However, care must be taken to use discussion boards where it is possible reasonably to argue that posters have no expectations or perceptions of privacy, and therefore are aware that their activity is being conducted in the public domain (BPS, 2017). Any

data which may be made accessible as part of the research must remain confidential by ensuring that all possible identifying information is removed.

No personal information will be accessed or reported for the purpose of this study. Posters use pseudonyms or nicknames to protect their identity. Each post was given a study ID during data collection, analysis and write-up. No identifying information was used when describing findings.

2.3 Procedure

This study was approved by the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee (H-2019-19/66). Collecting the discussion forum data was completed in five steps outlined by Giles (2017), including selecting the forum, identifying a time-frame, selecting specific threads, downloading and formatting, and selecting relevant materials for deeper analysis (Giles, 2017).

The forum selected for this study was *Big Footy*. *Big Footy* was launched in 1999, and is the largest online Australian Rules Football online community, as well as one of the top ten social-networking sites in Australia ("AFL Womens - General Discussion," 2017). Due to *Big Footy's* popularity it attracts a variety of posters from the football community with an extensive range of opinions. The specific thread chosen for this study was the AFL Womens – General Discussion thread ("AFL Womens - General Discussion," 2017). This thread contained general discussion about the AFLW and women as players in the AFLW. The time-frame for the study was set from January 2019 to August 2019 to ensure manageability of data, as well as that data obtained was reflective of current issues in the sport. This time-frame resulted in the collection of 915 separate posts.

The posts were downloaded, and then posts were selected for analysis. Posts that were selected for analysis included those that discussed the AFLW from a supporter perspective, that contained an opinion or were part of a discussion about a particular topic. Posts that were disregarded included factual statements (for instance posts that reported the results of a particular game), or those that did not discuss the AFLW in any way.

2.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to examine the materials. This approach was suitable for the present study as it allows researchers to identify, analyse and report patterns or themes and key features within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used, following their six steps: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report.

An identified theme captures “something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). In accordance with the method and recommendations outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), it is considered good practice to outline the theoretical framework through which the analysis was conducted. The present research used an inductive approach to identify themes, which means the themes that are identified are strongly linked to the data and identified without trying to fit into a pre-existing coding frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were identified on an latent level and analysed through a predominately constructionist approach, which assumes that experience and meaning are socially produced and reproduced (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Chapter 3: Results

3.1 Overview

The thematic analysis resulted in five key themes being identified in the data, that capture the defining characteristics of the AFLW. These characteristics were identified through an analysis of how the AFLW was represented/described by posters on the discussion board. Two of these defining characteristics involved positive representations of the AFLW: with themes being labelled, respectively: “AFLW as Evoking Nostalgia”, and “AFLW as Beneficial for the Advancement of Australian Rules Football”. One theme involving defining characteristics was considered a neutral representation: “AFLW as in Need of Support and Promotion”, and two of the themes involved negative representations of the AFLW: “AFLW as Unenjoyable”, and “AFLW as inferior to AFL”. The following section will explore the nature of these themes in more detail.

3.2 AFLW as Evoking Nostalgia

A recurring theme identified in the dataset involved descriptions of the AFLW that were framed in nostalgic terms. Posts coded in this theme typically involved reminiscences about watching or playing football at community level. Posters described the AFLW in terms of its similarity to their own previous experiences of playing or watching football, or to the AFL as they remembered it from the past, non-professional era.

Nostalgic descriptions of football as community focused, which the AFLW was seen to exemplify were typical in this theme. Extract 1, below, illustrates such a nostalgic representation orienting to the family focus of the AFLW, particularly in terms of the family-centred atmosphere created for spectators:

Women's games are fantastic family nights out, often on a warm night, often at an old suburban ground, great happy atmosphere - keep it free." (#49)

Posters also commonly exchanged stories about how the community focus of the AFLW had allowed them and their families to become involved in spectating football again, particularly due to the games having free entry. These posts, as demonstrated by the example in Extract 2 and 3 below, constructed the central role of the AFLW as providing a free football experience:

I have a close friend who has taken his daughter to each of the Bulldogs games at Whitten Oval this summer. I know for a fact he couldn't afford to take her to an AFL game with their budget. For lots of people the free GF was the only way they can access the footy with the family. (#286)

I don't think it's relevant to whether it was free or not - I've gone to lots of AFLW games here in Melbourne (and was at the Prelim in Adelaide last week) and there is always a substantial number of the crowd who you know do not got to AFL games for a variety of reasons, and the cost of tickets is one of those things. (#286)

Posters frequently communicated appreciation for the AFLW's community focus, accrediting it the reason for their support of the game. As demonstrated in Extract 4 and 5 below, the nostalgia created by the AFLW was the cause of positive comparisons of female to male players:

The AFLW reminds us what footy was like at the old suburban grounds in the 80s, some of it was good, some of it wasn't and to the girls credit they play hard, they tackle and chase, a few men could learn something from that. (#240).

You're also very likely to be served by an AFLW player if you go to HQ in the cafe or the shop. Would be good if some of the humility rubs off on the men really. (#54).

Posters complimented the AFLW as it fills the desire for nostalgic football at traditional ground, and generates good community relations between fans and players, as demonstrated by Extract 6 and 7:

But until then, generate interest and fostering a relationship between fans and the teams / players is the name of the game. (#292)

...the sizes are perfect, the locations are in the areas where fans live so they don't need to travel into the city etc. plenty of nostalgia to be had as well, that connect the new teams to the history of the clubs. (#322)

As demonstrated above, the AFLW was frequently described in positive terms that were related to nostalgia for football from the past, at either community, local or non-professional levels. In short, nostalgia evoked by the AFLW was one of the dominant positive characteristics of descriptions the AFLW in posts on the discussion board.

3.3 AFLW as Beneficial for the Advancement of Australian Rules Football

The second theme identified in the dataset involved descriptions that positioned the AFLW as beneficial for the advancement of Australian Rules Football. Posts coded in this theme involved discussions about how the introduction of the AFLW could increase involvement in, and support for, Australian Rules Football, both at community and professional levels. As Extract 8 and 9 demonstrate, posters credited the AFLW with increasing the engagement of young girls in the sport:

wonder how many girls who previously had no interest in playing Aussie Rules now are interested in joining a team because they see women playing in a professional league?
(#157)

Another thing to consider is the explosion in community clubs. There are a LOT more lower grade clubs feeding good players up into the VFLW than there was even 2 years ago. (#46)

Posts frequently described the AFLW as having ‘potential’ for delivering positive consequences for the popularity and success of Australian Rules Football in Australia. Posts discussed the benefits of the AFLW beginning before women’s competitions in other sports (such as an Australian’s women rugby competition), as this attracted supporters and talented players and therefore increased its popularity. Extract 10, 11, 12 and 13 illustrate how posters praised the AFLW for starting a women’s competition before other sports, and advocate for the sport of AFLW and its benefits for the popularity and success of Australian Rules Football:

I can't believe anyone would question the value of supporting women's footy, it's an absolute no brainer, and every dollar spent will be returned in multiples... Others have already noted the new fans being brought to the game, (#300)

Cannot wait to see the outrage from the soccer lovers who pollute this thread when the Matilda's become a very average team, make no mistake the AFLW will become bigger and better and take the best athletes. . (#137)

That's part of the hidden value the AFL will derive out the AFLW - gaining new supporters. (#299)

There is a significant strategic advantage in the AFLW expanding quickly, over sports like netball, basketball and soccer... The importance of visibility cannot be overstated. (#68)

In this way, the discussion board became a resource through which posters shared their support for football and advocated for the continued growth of the game, encouraging others to view the AFLW as a key part in this advancement. The AFLW was characterised as beneficial for the sport of Australian Rules Football, representing another positive characteristic of the women's game.

3.4 AFLW as in Need of Support and Promotion

The third theme identified in the dataset involved posts emphasising the importance of support and promotion for the AFLW during the initial seasons. Posts that were coded in this theme made reference to the significance of ensuring the AFLW had the appropriate support and promotion to ensure it prospered. In particular, posts described the importance of appropriate management by the AFL governing body to ensure the game continued to grow and gain support. As demonstrated by Extracts 14 and 15 below, posts positioned the AFL's governing body as responsible for the promotion and support of the AFLW:

the AFL must market & sell the AFLW better than it has. AFL has to get cracking...start promoting the thing. (#27)

Has anybody seen any official promos for the league from the AFL? ...I have seen pretty much jack s**t from the AFL. Do they remember it is on? (#5)

Posts regularly characterised the current management of the AFLW by the AFL's governing body as poor. There was repeated criticism of the poor management by the AFL and it was suggested this would negatively impact viewer experiences, and decrease the popularity of the AFLW, as demonstrated by extracts 16, 17 and 18 below:

I tried to watch the GWS v. Brisbane game, but most of the images were long distance. It was virtually unwatchable, as it was like trying to watch "ants"- I gave up at the end of the 1st qtr. NOT good enough, AFL! (#27)

If you don't promote where they are, you don't reach them at all. That takes a broader and deeper campaign than we are going to get. It really is going to be down to word of mouth, which isn't good enough for a pro sport in my opinion. (#14)

With the expansion next year set to weaken the talent pool again I just think the AFL has rushed it and are basically WNBA-ing it. How they did not manage to learn one lesson from that schmozzle is astounding. (#311)

Posts also positioned the AFLW being likely to be unsuccessful without support and promotion. Support was particularly suggested in terms of rule changes (specific to the women's competition) to improve the quality of the women's game and therefore improve interest and popularity, as Extracts 19 and 20 demonstrate:

Possibly, specific female-only AF Rule changes, which reflect/address the physical differences of females/... safety challenges unique to females. (#297)

If girls were reduced to regular sized local football grounds and 18 a side scoring would RAPIDLY improve. Literally bring the boundaries in 10m the whole way around. Move the goal posts in 15m each way and you'll see such a difference. (#75)

The discussion board appeared to provide posters with a resource for advocating for AFLW and its need of support and promotion. The AFLW was characterised in its current state as needing support and promotion to gain interest and prosper.

3.5 AFLW as Unenjoyable

The first negative theme identified in the dataset involved descriptions of the AFLW, and its promotion, as unenjoyable. Posts coded in this theme involved descriptions of how unenjoyable the AFLW was to watch, as well as to the frustrating nature of the promotional strategy. Posts referred to aspects such as the lack of skill and professionalism that existed in the AFLW, describing this as a key reason for the AFLW being unenjoyable, as demonstrated by Extracts 20 and 21, below:

...at the moment the women's game is a bit like Auskick, see ball get ball. They don't have the ability to create space, quick hands, good foot skills. It's like watching seagulls trying to get the one chip and congestion simply can't be helped (#76)

Trying so hard to watch this game tonight and the skills are terrible. score is not enough, not enough marks or kicking potency....Can't deny the fact that the game is extremely hard to watch. (#73)

Posts also involved descriptions of the AFLW as unenjoyable because of the poor management of the competition by the AFL governing body. This poor management by the AFL governing body was discussed as including poor regulation of the size of the ovals and playing

grounds, the decision to have a shorter season length and the decision to play the AFLW during the summer months. These factors were regularly mentioned in posts as having a negative impact on the skill levels of the players, and therefore on the enjoyability of the AFLW as Extracts 22, 23 and 24 demonstrate:

Someone remind me why AFLW is played on a full-size oval... Severely limits scoring opportunities and stunts player development. Give us more goals and it might become a more viable professional league. (#71)

there are obvious examples in the AFL's promotional shortcomings ie:-scheduling excessive AFLW games during the day in the Aust. summer (strong heat undeniably has a serious, negative impact on skill execution...) (#15)

This governance decision by AFLW was purely stupid, and it's damaged the credibility of the season. Honestly it's a joke. (#184)

Posts in this theme also involved descriptions of how frustrating the promotional strategy for the AFLW was to experience. Posts described feeling forced to watch the AFLW. It was also regularly argued that the AFLW did not deserve the praise and recognition it was receiving. As illustrated in Extracts 25, 26 and 27, posts emphasise how frustrating they found the promotional strategy to promote the AFLW, and how this increased their dislike for the AFLW:

Stop filling up my AFL news feed with women's footy that I'm not interested in. (#119)

The AFLW is leveraging the AFLs dominance to get coverage and respect, rather than standing on their own two feet and getting it organically. (#132)

Then I don't expect it rammed down our throats or having to watch it on Foxtel when I never subscribed to it. But I have to like it, that's what I've been told. And my wife also has to like it apparently. You must like it. (#114)

Overall, the AFLW was characterised as unenjoyable in post, particularly due to its skill level, and the management of the competition and promotion by the AFL governing body. This unenjoyability was presented as one of the defining negative characteristics of the AFLW.

3.6 AFLW as Inferior to the AFL

The final theme identified in the dataset involved the AFLW being positioned as inferior to the AFL. Posts coded into this theme involved references to masculine superiority at sport generally, and within Australian Rules Football. Posts described women as inferior to men at sport. For example, Extract 28 and 29 below illustrate how women were regularly described as physically weaker than men:

As women have, obviously, much less strength than males, IMO it would be even rarer for females to kick 50 mtrs+. (#33)

We run training sessions with men and women together. When we run mixed practice matches you become accutely aware of how much damage you could do to the female players if you didn't hold back...If you think Kearney could compete against male players and not get hurt you're delusional. (#148)

Notions of masculine superiority were frequent in posts: men were recognised as superior to females in all football skills, including the ability to cope emotionally with being a professional athlete. Extracts 30 and 31 below illustrate how posters characterised women as being more emotionally fragile than men:

The simple answer is the blokes can have the sh#t bagged out of them relentlessly... The women cant handle one critique without a meltdown or dragging out the tokens (#108).

Male players get abused ferociously by opposing fans and they don't whine like this.

Disagree with all abuse but she loses support if she takes it too far with her complaining (#271)

Posts also routinely involved attributions for differences in skills and standards of the two competitions to the superior popularity of the AFL over the AFLW. It was argued that the AFLW deserved less interest than the AFL because it was inferior. Posts framed masculine superiority in Australian Rules Football as a normative understanding in society, as demonstrated by Extract 32, 33, 34 and 35:

but I have absolutely no doubt that the difference in interest between men's and women's sport (at least in the Western world) is almost entirely driven by the difference in standards. To pretend otherwise is a strawman. (#146)

AFLW is boring compared to the real stuff' (#232)

Will it ever be as big as the men's AFL - NO. Will it ever be as good - probably not (#299)

I don't rate the games of NeAFL the same as I do AFL nor do I rate the AFLW the same or the VFL or SydneyAFL. Different skill levels, funding, pay structure and professionalism for each. (#115)

The discussion board can thus also be seen as an avenue through which notions of masculine superiority could be openly discussed and reinforced by posters. Posters were actively involved in the forum through discussion that compared the men's and women's competitions, highlighting male superiority. The positioning of the AFLW as inferior to the AFL, was thus a defining negative characteristic in the dataset.

Chapter 4: Discussion

4.1 Overview

The present study aimed to explore representations of the AFLW through a thematic analysis of posts appearing on an online discussion board for Australian Rules Football supporters. The analysis of the dataset identified five key themes that described key characteristics of the AFLW. These five key characteristics involved both negative and positive representations of the AFLW. The following section will detail these negative and positive representations, as well as consider the implications of these findings.

4.2 Positive Representations of the AFLW

Two themes were identified that contained positive representations of the AFLW. These were labelled: “AFLW as Evoking Nostalgia”, and “AFLW as Beneficial for the Advancement of Australian Rules Football”.

While historically women’s role in the success and development of Australian Rules Football hasn’t been recognised or acknowledged Hindley (2006, p. 5), women may be starting to be given recognition for their positive role in Australian Rules Football. Posters in the present study demonstrated an acknowledgment and appreciation for the role women are playing in the advancement of Australian Rules Football. This was an interesting finding in this data analysis, as posters discussed the potential of the AFLW for increasing community engagement in Australian Rules Football, and for increasing its popularity and success, particularly over other sports. McDonagh (2008) study found that women were directed away from masculine sports towards feminine sports or excluded from sport all together, as this fits within our social understanding of what is acceptable and normal for each gender. The finding in the present study

however suggests that this social understanding of what is acceptable for each gender is changing. This is demonstrated by posters showing acceptance of women participating in Australian Rules Football by positioning them as beneficial and useful to the success of the sport, rather than being excluded or directed away towards more feminine sports.

Lenkic (2018) suggests that through women participating in masculine sports, there will be consequences for how people understand the concepts of gender and sport. The present analysis supports this suggestion, as demonstrated that through women's participation in Australian Rules Football being characterised as positive rather than negative as previous studies have suggested women's participation in Australian Rules Football is characterised (Marks, 2019). AFLW players are characterised as positive advocates for the sport, and this demonstrates another way women are being accepted into the masculine space of Australian Rules Football. The influx of women and girls wanting to play AFLW is also characterised as positive by posters, demonstrating that through active participation in Australian Rules Football, there is a positive consequence for how women are being represented and characterised in a masculine space.

The AFLW was also regularly characterised as evoking nostalgia in the dataset. Previous research has demonstrated that AFLW is starting to be represented in the media with culturally recognisable symbols, such as familiar team uniforms, from the men's competition (Wrench & Garrett, 2018). This type of representation, where the similarities between the men's competition and women competitions are highlighted, is also present in the current data. The recognisable elements of the men's competition within the women's competition lead posters to frame the women's competition in nostalgic ways. This is a notable finding not present in other literature. Although positioning the competition as nostalgic and community focused does lessen the focus on the professionalism of the competition, it demonstrates a willingness from posters to accept

and encourage women's sport that previous studies have not demonstrated. By framing the competition as nostalgic, posters constructed it as having value. Furthermore, posters acknowledged similarity to men's competitions that they had watched previously, and in some cases made positive comparisons of female to male players. This is unique finding in the literature, as sportswomen are rarely positioned in this way. This demonstrates the power of the nostalgic value the AFLW has in its ability to characterise the competition as likable and gain support.

Previous research has demonstrated a counter-discourse to the trivialisation of women's sport that represents women's right to fair treatment, and draws on themes of inclusion and respect (Hjelseth & Hovden, 2014). This finding is supported by the findings of the present study that demonstrated positive representations of women's football, particularly around the benefits of their inclusion. With the AFLW being positioned as beneficial for the advancement of Australian Rules Football, posters demonstrated advocacy not only for the sport of Australian Rules Football but for the inclusion in, and respect for, women in the sport, due to the benefits they bring. Posts also commonly involved statements of support for, and promotion of the competition, which further supports that women's contribution is appreciated and positively characterised.

4.3 Negative Representations of the AFLW

Two themes were identified that contained negative representations of the AFLW. These were labelled: "AFL as Unenjoyable", and "AFLW as Inferior to the AFL".

The AFLW was described as unenjoyable due to the lack of skill and professionalism demonstrated by the players. These skills were also described as inferior to those of AFL players.

Previous research has found that sport generally is positioned as inherently masculine, particularly through constant comparison of women's sport to that of men (Hjelseth & Hovden, 2014). The present study supported this finding, with posts consistently comparing the AFL and AFLW, describing the AFL as the higher standard that the AFLW needed to reach. Posts described men as superior to women at sport. Past research has demonstrated that sport generally is a masculine domain that is constructed around a discourse of masculine superiority, due to men's historic domination of sporting spaces (Travers, 2018). The findings from the present study that women in the AFLW are viewed as inferior to men in the AFL demonstrates that this masculine superiority existed within the data set.

The findings in the data set that males were constructed as superior was also reflected in posters discussion about women being physically weaker than men. Posters described females as being inferior to males in physical skill and used this difference to justify the difference between popularity and interest levels in AFL and AFLW. This supports Hjelseth and Hovden (2014) finding that gender differences and inequalities in sport are justified by differences in physicality. Posters also used this construction of women being physically weaker than men to characterise the AFLW being inferior to the AFL. Past research has demonstrated that sex-segregated sport is constructed around a discourse of masculine superiority whereby males are better athletes resulting from their testosterone levels and higher muscle percentage (Sykes, 2006). This is supported by findings in the current research that demonstrate posters characterising women a weaker than males and therefore supporting the notion of masculine superiority. Posters also, through the justification of a difference in interest levels between the men and women's competition and advocating for sperate rules for these competitions, justified the sex segregation of Australian Rules Football.

Posters also described men as better than women at sport due to women's inherent weakness and lack of ability to cope with criticism. It is clear that posts on the discussion board positioned men as better athletes than women, and the AFL as a superior competition to the AFLW. Past research has also found that the cultural normalisation of a two-sex system in sport has contributed to normalising the unequal rewarding and recognition of male athletes (Travers, 2018). The present findings demonstrate posts framing masculine superiority at football as a normative understanding support this finding, Unequal recognition of male footballers over female footballers is normalised. Posters particularly took issue with the fact that the promotional strategy employed by the AFL governing body to promote the AFLW relied heavily on the popularity of the AFL. The findings support previous research which suggest that male athletes have been normalised as more deserving of attention and reward than females.

Past research has found that that women are constructed as fragile and needing protection in the media, and their competitions are described as non-serious and uncompetitive (Lenkic, 2018). This trivialisation is used as a method to discredit women who play sport and discourage them from continuing (Hjelseth & Hovden, 2014; Kaskan & Ho, 2016; Lenkic, 2018). Examples of trivialisation appeared in the dataset as demonstrated through the positioning of the AFLW as inferior to the AFL. This occurred particularly through descriptions of the competition as boring, unenjoyable and less entertaining than the men's competition, which was also found as a tool used to trivialise women in a study by Hjelseth and Hovden (2014). However, women were not actively discouraged from playing sport in the posts but were generally praised for their involvement in Australian Rules Football.

4.4 Implications

The findings of the present research, which demonstrate positive representations of the AFLW and women who play AFLW, suggest that women's involvement is having an impact on this culture surrounding Australian Rules Football, to make it a more inclusive space where women are accepted. This supports Willson et al. (2018) findings that suggested the establishment of the AFLW is having a positive impact on the culture that surrounds Australian Rules Football. Although, previously, football has been defined as a masculine domain (Lenkic, 2018), and the findings support that it is still considered in this way, the findings of the present study also suggest that this view is shifting. Posters demonstrated an acceptance of women entering the masculine domain of Australian Rules Football by characterising the AFLW in positive ways, particularly when they could see the introduction of the AFLW as benefiting themselves, through evoking nostalgia, or benefiting the sport generally. This suggest supporters of football may be more likely to be supportive of women's participation in a sport if their participation will increase the overall success of the sport. Perhaps one of the benefits of women entering masculine sporting spaces and playing typically masculine sports, instead of being involved in separate sports spaces that can be positioned as different and feminised, is that an opportunity exists to highlight similarity between the sexes instead of differences. This could potentially have an effect on our societal understandings of gender, sport and gender roles (Lenkic, 2018).

The findings from the present study demonstrate the potential that women's involvement can have on popular understandings of the sport (Willson et al., 2018). Women playing AFLW is not being constructed as problematic or difficult as previously found (Wrench & Garrett, 2018), but instead is being accepted, even if described as unenjoyable and inferior to men's sport. This

study suggests that women's involvement in sport is a positive action that can initiate social change. Women have been described in recent studies as being represented as the 'new frontier' in sport (Willson et al., 2018; Wrench & Garrett, 2018), and the findings from the present study support that women are indeed being represented, in the context of Australian Rules Football, as a new and beneficial addition for the sport, as demonstrated by posters characterisation of AFLW as beneficial for the advancement of Australian Rules Football.

Bruce (2016) analysis of global rules, that define how sportswomen are represented, found four persistent rules of representation, including: sportswomen don't matter, compulsory heterosexuality and appropriate femininity, sexualisation and ambivalence. The current study supported the finding that women are represented by posters using ambivalence, whereby the strength of women is juxtaposed against their weakness and the inferior quality of women's sport. Posters positively characterise the AFLW as being beneficial for the advancement of Australian Rules Football, which recognises their strengths, while also characterising women negatively as unenjoyable, and inferior. The current study however does not show examples of sexualisation and contradicts the finding that 'sportswomen don't matter' through the characterisation of women, by posters, as holding an important role in Australian Rules Football through evoking nostalgia and the advancement of the sport. This finding, that the persistent rules of representation are not entirely supported by the present study, further suggest that representations of sportswomen are changing. Bruce (2016) study also found four current rules of representation, including: athletes in action, serious athletes, model citizens and us and them (in which home nation sportswoman are presented as model citizens and serious athletes while women from other nations are not). The present study supported findings that women who played sports were being represented as model citizens and serious athletes, by the

characterisation of AFLW players as positive advocates for the sport. The 'us and them' rule may offer an explanation as to why there are positive characterisations of the AFLW, particularly of the AFLW evoking nostalgia. Posters demonstrate their support and interest in Australian Rules Football over other sports, and this 'us and them' mentality may be contributing to their positive characterisation of women who play football over other sports, as they fit within 'us'. This present study supports the findings that detail the current rules of representation of women, while not supporting the old rules of presentations, further suggesting that new rules of representation are being created and used within our society.

In the present study, the AFL governing body was criticised, in posts, for its management of the AFLW, particularly for its lack of support. Posters characterised the concessions the AFLW made to create the AFLW, including the lower remuneration for players, shorter seasons, and playing over the summer months, as a lack of support from the AFL governing body. Posters discuss the significant negative impact of these concessions on the quality of the competition. This finding in the present study, that posters characterise the AFLW in need of support, would suggest that supporters may have higher expectations for the AFLW than the AFL are currently able or willing to provide. The management by the AFL governing body was routinely a reason for the AFLW being characterised as being unenjoyable. This is an interesting point because it is a novel finding in the literature, that demonstrates posters characterising women as having a lower quality of competition due to factors out of their control such as management of the competition, rather than it being the result of characteristics inherent to women. This would suggest that posters characterise the AFLW as having more potential to succeed than it is currently being allowed. This has implications for the future of the AFLW, as it demonstrates that with further support and promotion, the competition could continue to prosper through improved

popularity and interest levels. There was also strong criticism in the posts for the AFL governing body's promotion. This finding suggests that the AFLW is not supported to the extent supporters expect or want it to be, and that women's football has potential to gain more supporters and hold more interest with the appropriate promotion and support. This is a novel finding, that suggests sporting organisations may not be catering appropriately to a public desire for a high standard of women's sport competition.

Positive descriptions of the AFLW as evoking nostalgia have implications for how society places value on women's sport. The finding that nostalgic representation is a positive characteristic of the AFLW, that encourages support and interest from the public, could have implications for how women's AFL is promoted and advocated for. Past studies of media representations of women in sport reported that coverage of women's sport was increasing, but that coverage is different from that of men's sport (Creedon, 2014). The analysis of the present study suggests that supporters are aware of the different levels of media attention and representation women receive compared to men, as demonstrated by posters characterising the AFLW as not receiving the support and promotion it needs to prosper. Posters advocate for an increase of promotion and support for women's football, and as a result, women's representation in the media.

What was particularly interesting about the findings is they had obvious emissions when compared to what had been found in other analyses of women's representation in sporting spaces on online discussion forums. The present study found predominantly more positive representation's than previous studies, and the negative representations have points of difference. Previous studies have demonstrated that hegemonic masculinity flourishes on internet discussion boards that discuss women's sport (Kian et al., 2011; Willson et al., 2018). This hegemonic

masculinity was found to be demonstrated through the objectification of women and displays of misogyny, and the authors suggested that it particularly flourished in online spaces due to posters anonymity (Kian et al., 2011). The current analysis did not find a theme of hegemonic masculinity, or examples of women being objectified. Hjelseth and Hovden (2014) found examples of women's soccer being characterised as abnormal or special. The current analysis did not find that women's football was characterised in this way. Women were characterised as inferior to men, but women playing AFLW was not positioned as an abnormal occurrence. Lastly, past studies have found many examples of women representation containing examples of eroticisation and sexualisation (Bruce, 2016; Hjelseth & Hovden, 2014; Kian et al., 2011). The current analysis found minimal examples of eroticisation and sexualisation. Women were predominately discussed in the context of their sporting ability and their participation with Australian Rules Football, which characterises women as predominantly athletes and demonstrates respect.

The reasons for these differences could potentially be due to the cultural context in which the studies were conducted. This is the first study to examine representations of any sport or sportswomen on discussion boards within Australia. Therefore, the results could be a representation of the differences between Australian culture, and American and Norwegian culture, where the previous studies have been conducted. One particular significant aspect of Australian football culture that has been identified by past research is WAG's, and it was suggested by the researchers that "any assessment of changes brought about by the professionalisation of women's football would need to consider the symbolic and institutional place accorded WAGs within Australian football culture" (Marks, 2019, p. 442). The concept of WAG's was not identified during the analysis of the data set, and therefore the present research is

unable to comment on if the representation of WAG's is having an influence on the representation of professional AFLW players. However, representation of AFLW players predominately as sportswomen, and the absence of women being sexualised or eroticised could suggest that AFLW players are viewed separately and differently to WAG's, but further study would need to be conducted in this area. The current study does confirm Marks (2019) finding however, that Australian football culture is highly masculine and relies on social norms that differentiate and segregate women and men, as demonstrated by the AFLW being characterised and inferior to the AFL.

Overall, the current analysis seems to represent the beginning of a shift in how the AFLW and its players are being represented, to contain more positive representations. However, this time of excitement and booming interest in women sport needs to be considered in the context of historical critique and the question of progress (McLachlan, 2019). As McLachlan (2019) found in their study of historical representations of women sport, the repetition of positioning women's sport in Australia as being in a time of great advancement or 'booming' is part of the structure that prevents long-term changes towards equality from being achieved, and that broader questions about gender equality within Australian culture should be asked to determine if the recent 'boom time' in women's sport has actually positively affected the lives of women in our society. This finding suggest that caution should be used when generalising the success of the AFLW and the impact it will have on achieving gender equality within sport. Further research should consider the impact of the AFLW on women and girls in Australian to society, to better understand the impact of the AFLW on achieving gender equality within sport.

It has also been acknowledged that worldwide the public perception and media representation of women's sport is in a process of change, and that further analysis of these

changes will be an addition to our current knowledge of the culture surrounding women's sport (Willson et al., 2018). The present research has identified changes within the representation of sportswomen as compared to previous studies. However future studies should be conducted to continue to analyse these changes, to further add to the knowledge of the culture that surrounds women's sport and the AFLW.

4.5 Limitations

A limitation of this study, that is the result of using online discussion boards, is that the posters demographic information remains anonymous. Posters on the discussion board used for the present study use a nickname or pseudonym to mask their identity, and there was no information available to the researchers about the posters gender, age, race or background. As Hall (1997, p. 5) discusses, representation 'is closely tied up with both identity and knowledge'. The present study is unable to discuss the identity of the posters, and therefore cannot assume relationships between a particular identity and how this would affect a person's representation of women, sport, and the AFLW. Future studies should aim to examine the relationship between demographic factors, in particular gender, and representations of the AFLW. This would gain a deeper understanding into the relationship between gender and sport.

There is a contradiction that exists in the literature about the extent to which online platforms generate and restrict constructions (Locke et al., 2018). Some research argues that online platforms have a great potential for advancing feminist agendas of equality because they offer a place to shape and break-down ideas and discourses (Baer, 2015). Other research argues that hegemonic masculinity is visible and flourishes in online spaces, particularly due to the anonymous nature of discussion boards (Kian et al., 2011; Willson et al., 2018). The discussion

board analysed in the present study contained both positive and negative representations of women, which both supported their involvement and participation in AFLW and showed masculine superiority. It is unclear as to whether the characterisations that were found in the data were generated or restricted by the online space in which the discussion was conducted in, and therefore the extent to which online platforms generate or restrict particular constructions should remain a key area for future research (Locke et al., 2018).

It is also unclear how generalisable the results of the study are, as the extent to which the posters on the discussion board in this study are representative of supporters of Australian Rules Football is unclear. This study examined one online discussion board, and future research should consider a wider range of discussion boards as there may be differences between posters and group dynamics on different boards.

The method of research for the present study, which involved looking at representations of the AFLW on online discussion boards, should also be conducted to look at representations of women who play different sports in Australia, such as soccer or rugby. This would further contribute to understandings about the public culture surrounding women's sport in Australia, and more deeply examine social norms that surround gender, women and sport in an Australian context.

Another interesting area for future research could be into specifically positive representations of the AFLW. As currently, the majority of the literature surrounds the negative representations, there is a limited understanding of positive representations of women's sport and what this means for societal understandings of gender and sport. Research into positive representations of women's sport could have implications for the future advocacy and promotion of women's sport.

4.6 Conclusions

The present study aimed to utilise the opportunity provided by the introduction of the AFLW, to examine the public's reaction to women's involvement in a masculine space, and a typically male sport. The use of online discussion boards to examine public discussion around women's sport in an Australian context, and discussion around women's recent involvement, as players, in AFLW, demonstrated unique and interesting results compared to previous studies on representations of women's sport in online spaces worldwide and previous representations of women's sport in Australia. The analysis of the data demonstrated that the public characterised with five key characteristics, which contained both positive and negative representations of the AFLW. While past research into media and online representations of women's sport have found these representations to be mostly negative, recent studies have demonstrated these representations of women's sport and sportswomen are shifting. The current study would suggest that representations of AFLW and sportswomen suggests that there is currently more positive representation of female footballers than previously found in other studies, with posters positively characterising the AFLW as evoking nostalgia and being beneficial for the advancement of Australian Rules Football. There were still however some negative characterisations found, including the AFLW being characterised as unenjoyable, displays of masculine superiority and posters demonstrated upholding social norms about women, gender and sport, particularly that females are inferior to males. The present research aimed to examine representations of the AFLW and women who play Australian Rules Football, to add to the limited literature surrounding women's involvement in the AFLW, and in the hopes of increasing understanding about the current state of public and spectator understandings of the AFLW and women's sport more broadly. The current study is an addition to current understandings of the

AFLW and the public and spectator culture that surrounds it. Further research however should be completed to test the generalisability of the results to representations of other women's sports and sportswomen in Australia. Lenkic (2018) suggests that through women participating in masculine sports, there will be consequences for how people understand the concepts of gender and sport. While there have clearly been some more positive representations of women created through women's involvement in the sport as players, demonstrations of understandings that males are superior to females in sporting spaces displays the need for continued work towards gender equality within sporting spaces. Interestingly, the present research found criticisms of the AFL governing body that suggests sporting organisations may not be catering appropriately to a public desire for a high standard of women's sport competition, and this has implications for the future decisions surrounding support and promotion of women's sport.

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