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“Stay in your lane, sweetheart”: Investigating the Gendered Experiences and Identity

Negotiation of Female F1 Fans on Social Media Platforms

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“To the women and girls in motorsports, to the huge and growing numbers of female fans in this sport. Here is a very good reminder for all of us we are here to stay, and we are right where we belong.” – Laura Winter, International Women’s Day, 2024

ABSTRACT

“Stay in your lane, sweetheart.” This expression begins to encapsulate the everyday gendered dismissal many female Formula One (F1) fans experience, or observe, when participating in sports fandom online. Although fandom is often depicted as a space of community and shared interest, sports culture has historically carried ideologies of masculinity, shaping assumptions surrounding fan identity. Consequently, these gendered assumptions work to influence who is granted belonging and legitimacy within sports fandom, and those who are not. For many women, expressing interest in sports invites scepticism, harassment and exclusion.

This dissertation investigates how gendered dynamics shape the experiences of female F1 fans on social media platforms. The research draws on pre-existing literature surrounding sports fandom, digital affordances, gender-based online harassment, and the coping-strategies women adopt. The research also draws on semi-structured interviews with ten self-identifying female F1 fans, to understand their experiences within F1 fan cultures on social media, and the everyday negotiations they engage in as a response. The findings of the female fans qualitatively interviewed in this study, reveal that these digital fan spaces are entrenched in cultural assumptions regarding gender, authenticity and legitimacy. In response, female fans engage in strategic resistance, carefully curating their digital presence through self-regulation, censorship, and participating in more female-only spaces.

This research contributes to broader debates on gender, digital culture, and sports fandom, by highlighting how belonging is often fought for. In the case of the F1 fandom online, female fans must constantly navigate and negotiate their fan identity, within a broader community that implicitly, or explicitly, reminds them to “stay in their lane.”

Key words: Formula One (F1), sports fan, fandom, authenticity, social media, participatory culture, gendered dynamics, exclusion, harassment, self-regulation

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Stay in your lane, sweetheart.”

That is what someone messaged me privately on a social media platform, when I had publicly expressed I was a Formula One (F1) fan, after posting a picture at the British Grand Prix. At first, I dismissed it, persuading myself it was just another patronising comment from an unknown individual online. But it stuck with me. Why was my passion for F1 immediately undermined, just because I am a woman? This was not an isolated experience either, and as my engagement expanded in F1-related spaces online, I increasingly noticed the various ways in which women like myself are pushed to the margins. Whether quizzed on knowledge or outright harassed, the optimistic vision of a sports fandom that offers community, appears significantly out of reach. Instead, it becomes a performative space which I find myself navigating with caution.

Historically, sports fandoms have been legitimised as masculine, rational, and culturally meaningful, greatly differing from media fandoms, which have been trivialised for being feminine, overly emotional, and irrational (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 2013; Toffoletti, 2017). Jenkins (2013) states that the former experience a more privileged status of fandom, taken seriously by society, the media, and academia, as opposed to the ridiculed latter. Yet, this distinction in itself is deeply generalised, embedded in gendered assumptions which reinforce the notion that authentic sports fan identity is inextricably linked to masculinity.

So, what happens when the sports fan is a woman?

This dissertation seeks to investigate this phenomenon by focusing on the experiences of female F1 fans on social media platforms, a group largely overlooked in both academic and public discourse. Although previous research has explored gender and sport online, it has focused on the treatment of influential sports figures including athletes or commentators, as

opposed to everyday fans (Kearns et al., 2023). This study aims to address this gap by centring the marginalised voices of ordinary women, whose experiences offer vital insights into how gendered hierarchies operate in everyday, digital fan spaces. Furthermore, much of the existing sports literature has prioritised other types of sport, namely football, rugby, and ice hockey (Pope, 2017). The cultural significance of F1 has increased in recent years, particularly due to the release of the 2019 Netflix docuseries *Drive to Survive*, which has been a key factor in the adoption of new female fans into F1 (Shah and Williams, 2024). Thus, by focusing on female F1 fans, this dissertation directly explores a population that has been under-researched, and highlights the need for further exploration.

The central research question (RQ) is:

‘How do female F1 fans negotiate their identities on social media platforms, and what does this reveal about broader gender dynamics in digital sports cultures?’

This central RQ is supported by three sub-RQs:

1. How do gendered dynamics shape the experience of female F1 fans on social media platforms?
2. What kind of behaviours do female F1 fans experience and/or witness on social media platforms?
3. How do female F1 fans respond to experiencing and/or witnessing negative behaviours on social media platforms?

The significance of this study extends beyond academic contribution, as it more broadly investigates social issues around gender, identity, and digital fandom. Sports culture carries its own unique histories, hierarchies, and cultural practices that determine how fandom is experienced. Consequently, masculine ideologies surrounding sports fan identity have the power to create assumptions of normative standards, where fans outside certain criteria are

perceived as other, and subjected to scepticism or exclusion (Crawford and Gosling, 2004; Osborne and Coombs, 2022). These dynamics reinforce a gendered gatekeeping structure, where sports fan authenticity is synonymous with masculinity (Pope, 2017). These exclusions are only intensified in the digital sphere, where accessible platforms not only afford visibility, but also amplify existing inequalities offline (Schiffrin et al., 2021; Fenton et al., 2023). Thus, in an era where digital spaces are central in our everyday lives, where we express our identity, and form bonds, it is vital to understand whose participation is granted, and whose is dismissed. By shedding light on these experiences, this research encourages fans to consider how their behaviours can contribute to gender-based discrimination in sports fandom online.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

Whilst fan studies have been investigated within media and communications, sports fandom is a distinct area, implicated with gendered issues, that warrants critical attention (Pope, 2017). Although research into female sports fans has gained some momentum, their experiences on social media platforms more specifically have been under-represented (Doehler, 2024). This lack of research is particularly noticeable amongst female F1 fans, where interest has grown significantly, largely driven by the popularity of the 2019 Netflix docuseries *Drive to Survive* (Shah and Williams, 2024). This Literature Review explores how gendered dynamics influence the experiences of female F1 fans, drawing from pre-existing scholarship surrounding sports fandom, digital platform affordances, and exclusionary gendered dynamics. Collectively, this Literature Review aims to reveal the challenges women face in gaining recognition as authentic fans, both in traditional and digital sporting contexts, highlighting the need for further exploration of the under-researched F1 fandom.

2.2. Female Sports Fans

Ideologies surrounding sports fan authenticity have consistently been through a masculine lens, characterised by statistic knowledge and live-match attendance (Crawford and Gosling, 2004; Coombs and Osborne, 2022). These portrayals have created normative standards, where any fan outside of these norms, are perceived as other and subjected to scepticism or exclusion (Coombs and Osborne, 2022). These dynamics reinforce a gendered gatekeeping structure, where sports fan authenticity is inextricably linked to masculinity (Pope, 2017).

Research examining female sports fans is gathering some pace within academia, particularly as a result of their increasing existence, which Pope (2017) refers to as the feminisation of sports fandom. Within this growing space, there have been some attempts to

define female fan types, though, the majority of research conducted is focused on a matter of generalised homogeneous assumptions, as opposed to a deeper reflection of diverse fan types and experiences (Pope, 2017; Kitching et al., 2023). Consequently, female fans have often been defined through heteronormative and feminised portrayals (Gieseler, 2017), despite that not all women experience and present fandom in the same way. Pope (2013) highlighted female sports fans vary and negotiate their presentations of femininity by outlining two female fan types: masculine femininities, and feminine femininities (see also Paechter, 2006). The former included resisting feminine activities when expressing their fanhood, whilst the latter aligned themselves with stereotypically feminine behaviours of expressing fandom (Pope, 2013). Those who practiced masculine femininities expressed insecurities based on internalised feelings of inauthenticity, wishing to be seen as entirely separate from the women that performed feminine femininities (Pope, 2013). Contrastingly, fans that practiced feminine femininities criticised the idea of challenging sports gendered dynamics, and despite many enjoying it, they viewed sports as a male-domain only (Pope, 2013). Thus, Pope's (2013) gender performance analysis provides an interesting insight into the implications between gender stereotypes, and levels of participation, in sports.

Similarly, Jenkins (2013) argues that masculine, rational sports fans are afforded greater cultural legitimacy, compared to feminine, unserious media fans. However, this overlooks the exclusions that exist within sports fandom itself. Generally, women feel unwelcome in sports discussions both offline and online (Pope, 2017; Toffoletti, 2017). Numerous scholars have highlighted how female fandom is scrutinised in ways male fandom is not, reinforcing gender hierarchies that uphold stereotypes surrounding the passive inauthentic female, and active authentic male (Toffoletti, 2017). Schultz and Linden (2014) discuss that women have only been welcomed as sports spectators under strict conditions, where they are expected to moderate male behaviour or increase attendance. When challenging these norms and claiming

to be emotionally invested fans, women are often met with scepticism (Toffoletti, 2017). Pope (2011; 2013; 2017) has criticised these assumptions made within previous sports fandom scholarship, which suggest that women are less devoted to sports than their male counterparts. For instance, scholars have consistently highlighted the inextricable link between female sports fans adoption into sport, often introduced through significant male figures in their life (Markovits and Albertson, 2012; Pope, 2017; Toffoletti, 2017; Jakubowska et al., 2021). Most significantly, a recurring theme in the experiences of female sports fans, is the assumption that their sports interest is not for legitimate reasons, such as genuine appreciation of athleticism, but rather due to sexual attraction for players (Pope, 2017). This assumption is across many types of sport, including football and ice hockey, where female fans have been dismissed as groupies that only spectate or attend matches because they find the players attractive (Crawford and Gosling, 2004; Dixon, 2015). These attitudes label women as inauthentic fans, who do not hold the same level of commitment to sport as their male counterparts (Pope, 2017).

Such policing of authenticity has not only delegitimised female participation, but also shaped the ways in which women face barriers in sports engagement, with many scholars noting that women often have to over-perform their passion to be taken seriously (Dunn, 2014; Pope, 2017; Tarver, 2017). Markovits and Albertson (2012) discuss that within the qualitative interviews they conducted with female sports fans, *all* women discussed the need to prove to men that they identify as a sports fan, recalling times they have felt cross-examined in their knowledge, and sometimes even ignored altogether. Crawford and Gosling (2004) found that these feelings of male reluctance towards accepting female sports fan legitimacy, is intertwined with a territorial fear of losing a male-dominated space. This is further evidenced in a recent study by Durham University (2022), where out of 1,950 male football fans surveyed across the UK, two-thirds of respondents exhibited sexist attitudes towards women's sport, with many highlighting that its increased visibility threatens traditional male dominance associated with

football. Though, it is important to highlight that authenticity is not only policed by male fans, but also enforced by women (Toffoletti, 2017). As previously outlined in Pope's (2013) discussion of feminine femininities and masculine femininities, behaving in feminine ways was viewed as damaging to the legitimacy and authenticity of female fans. For those who adopted masculine femininities, their need to distance themselves from fans performing feminine femininities, displays that women also reinforce the same exclusionary norms (Pope, 2013).

Overall, the existing literature reviewed on female sports fans, demonstrates that they must navigate complex gendered expectations, where their authenticity is questioned by men and women. Whilst these studies provide a critical insight into how women experience exclusion within sports fandom, much of the focus remains on other sports including football. Less attention has been given to F1, and regarding F1 fans more specifically, very limited studies can be found. The few studies that do exist primarily focus on audience statistics, particularly in relation to the Netflix F1 series *Drive to Survive* (2019), to understand the impact of a docuseries in sports fandom (Soble and Lowes, 2024; Shah and Williams, 2024). Thus, this dissertation aims to address a significant literature gap, by exploring the personal experiences of female F1 fans on social media platforms, which is an area that remains under-researched despite its growing relevance.

2.3. Sports Fandom Online

If limited scholarly attention has been given to the female sports fan experience within F1, even less has been devoted to understanding how these experiences unfold within the digital space. Much of the literature that can be found focuses predominantly on the affordances that new media technologies have provided, positively influencing the overall fan experience (Jenkins, 2006; 2013; Van Driel et al., 2019; Sturm, 2020). This is not to say that this is not important literature worth unpacking, as it will provide a foundation to help us review current scholarly understandings surrounding the influence of social media platforms on sports fandom culture.

Debates surrounding participatory culture have been involved in media and communications discourse for decades, where digital media has enabled fans to shift their engagement from passive consumers to active participants (Hall, 1980; Bruns, 2008; Livingstone and Sefton, 2016). Central to the conception of this shift was Jenkins (2006; 2013) and his influential scholarship on participatory culture, which argued that fandom is an active process involving participation through interpretation, content creation and community building. Fandom is a form of social community with embedded values including loyalty, belonging, and collectivity, where fans are not merely audiences, but also involved in the process of producing and circulating meanings (Jenkins, 2006; 2013). Central to participatory culture is the idea that fans are early adopters and creative users of new emerging media technologies (Jenkins, 2006; 2013). Social media platforms have afforded fans new ways to interact with media texts, and each other, ranging from high investment activities like content creation, to smaller acts of engagement including liking, sharing, and commenting (Picone et al., 2019). Whilst these actions may appear minor, Picone et al. (2019) argue that they collectively shape online discourse, and are fundamental features in nurturing digital fan communities. This is because fan relationships are often created around cultures of connectivity (Ballouli and Sanderson, 2012; Andrews and Ritzer, 2018).

Applying pre-existing literature regarding online fandom and participatory culture to a sports context, the implications are profound (Filo et al., 2015). Unlike traditional forms of sports consumption, where supporters could only engage in spectatorship during a match, social media affords sports fans new, personalised ways to interact everyday (Fenton and Helleu, 2019). Many sports clubs have their own social media pages, where they share content and news updates, to nurture a relationship between the organisation and stakeholder (Armstrong et al., 2016; Abeza et al., 2019; Fenton and Helleu, 2019). Hutchins (2019) refers to this phenomenon as the *mobile media sport moment*, emphasising that the portability of

smartphones and the proliferation of digital platforms have transformed sports fan consumption, given fans can access real-time information, and exclusive behind-the-scenes content anytime, anywhere.

Most significantly, interactive communication via social media has not only transformed between the sports organisation and fan, but also between fans themselves (Fenton et al., 2023). As noted by Van Driel et al. (2019), spectating sport is just one aspect of performing sports fan identity, as fans also desire active participation in discussions and extending knowledge. Many scholars have noted that sports fans are active in their media engagement (Ballouli and Sanderson, 2012; Sanderson and Kassing, 2014; Andrews and Ritzer, 2018), with Fenton and Helleu (2019) highlighting that sports is one of the most discussed topics on social media platforms including Facebook and X. Social media platforms allow fans to virtually converse with each other, regarding shared sports interests and the teams they support, thus it has become an important part of the everyday sports fan experience (Gibbons and Dixon, 2010). Sturm (2020) further emphasises the significance of the discussion that social media facilitates, referring to the *fan-as-an-interactive-participant* in the creation of fan activities around sports. Online fan communities, or electronic tribes as referred to when discussing online sports fandom (Norman, 2014), are characterised by a shared language of beliefs, values, and rituals, affording fans an environment that nurtures emotional connection and loyalty to a sports team (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2018; Meek et al., 2019). The fluid nature of online fan communities is also noteworthy, where the online sphere eradicates previous social boundaries, allowing discussions to form on a global scale (Norman, 2014). Andrews and Ritzer (2018) stress the significance of these forms of digital contributions through online discussion, arguing that sports fans are empowered to actively shape the interpretation and discourse of sports in real time. This form of user-generated content becomes an alternative space, where online fan interactions can challenge mainstream sports discourse,

shaping narratives that allow fans to engage with, and exchange their, adoration for the sports they follow (Andrews and Ritzer, 2018; Lawrence and Crawford, 2018).

2.4. Gender-Based Discrimination Online

Social media's affordances on community building, interactivity, and promoting fandom, has offered women an accessible virtual space, where they are empowered to express their fandom and create content on their own terms (Toffoletti, 2017; Kunert, 2021). In this way, it has been suggested that these spaces have enabled female sports fans a way to bypass and challenge traditional forms of sports gatekeeping, legitimising their participation as fans (Antunovic and Hardin, 2015; Toffoletti et al., 2021). Within these frameworks, social media platforms like X and Facebook have been celebrated as democratic and participatory models of media engagement, where women can collectively navigate sports fan identity (Coche, 2014; Toffoletti, 2017). However, many scholars have stressed that this framing of digital technologies and participatory culture can be overly optimistic, and risks overlooking persistent gender-based discrimination that continues to exist online (Kunert, 2021; Doehler, 2024). As argued by Numerato and Baglioni (2012), whilst trust, social connections, and shared values can benefit some individuals, they simultaneously disadvantage others, which can undermine sporting movements, or negatively impact society as a whole. This is encapsulated by cyberbullying and trolling practices, which are rife in digital spaces that afford users anonymity (Kian et al., 2011; Baccarella et al., 2018). A report by Amnesty International (2018) highlighted 23% of women experienced online abuse, and more recently, Vogels (2021) found that women reporting sexual harassment online has doubled in number since 2017.

Social media is an area where we have brought our own social behaviours (Schiffrin et al., 2021; Fenton et al., 2023). In a sporting context, this means that associations surrounding sport and hegemonic masculinity, are ideologies that can become replicated online (Kian et al., 2011). Sexist comments and abuse towards female fans are evident online. Through the

documentation of female fans experiences on internet message boards, Hynes and Cook (2013) revealed the rife existence of sexist remarks and unwelcome suggestive language, used to illegitimise the comments posted by women. Furthermore, Kunert (2021) highlights that when female fans reveal their gender online, gendered gatekeeping practices involving sexism, misogyny, and suggestive advances, are more likely to be found in relation to male-dominated sports. Therefore, the online realm can become a site of exclusion for female sports fans (Crawford, 2004; Antunovic and Hardin, 2015).

In a sports context, research into online abuse seems to be relatively underexplored (Burch et al., 2024). Whilst there has been some growth in literature, Kearns et al. (2023) highlight that most scholarship has focused on online abuse towards athletes (see also Phipps, 2023; Fenton et al., 2024). The experiences of female fans in digital fandoms have been underrepresented, in comparison (Doehler, 2024).

2.5. Online Coping Strategies

Given social media platforms can reproduce gendered hierarchies seen in traditional sporting spaces, this can impact the attitudes, behaviours, and wellbeing of those negatively affected, as well as potentially weaken their desire to participate altogether (Na et al., 2020; Fenton et al., 2023). Resultingly, emerging research within media and communications has offered insights into how women often adopt self-protective strategies online, particularly after observing what has happened to others (Chadha et al., 2020; Marwick, 2021; Fenton et al., 2023). Within these strategies, very few female fans respond to negative online behaviours by directly intervening and challenging them (Sveinson and Hoeber, 2015; Chadha et al., 2020). Rather, they often alter their own behaviour and engage in self-censorship, to weaken the risk of negative reactions online. For instance, through conducting qualitative interviews, Chadha et al. (2020) found that whilst female coping strategies changed depending on preference, many of the participants adopted self-defensive responses such as limiting who can view their posts,

blocking individuals, and filtering comment sections, to cope with harassment. These actions align with the concept of *small acts of engagement*, proposed by Picone et al. (2019), where some users subtly participate in fan spaces through simply liking or observing, rather than posting content themselves. A further layer of coping involves strategic self-monitoring, where women often avoid posting certain comments or images that are likely to evoke negative responses (Chadha et al., 2020). In a similar vein, Kanai (2018) notes that young women carefully craft their online identities to perform in a way that others consider as authentic. In a sports fan context, this may manifest through women minimising acts of femininity by downplaying emotional or aesthetic enjoyment, and instead, prioritising strategic knowledge to validate their presence (Crawford and Gosling, 2004; Pope, 2017; Toffoletti, 2017).

As well as individual strategies, women also adopt collective coping strategies by forming female-only fan groups, which offer a safe, validating space where they can discuss sport and freely perform their fandom (Lenneis and Pfister, 2015; Toffoletti, 2017; Kunert, 2021). Fenton et al. (2023) highlight that these micro-communities are very small, and formed in rejection of the existing sexism within online sport discussions on social media. For instance, micro-communities allow women to post personalised and narrative-driven content, which is a more feminised practice of fandom that would not be accepted in male-dominated online spaces, due to assumptions surrounding media, fan girls, and excessive emotion (Jenkins, 2013; Toffoletti, 2013; 2017; Azizi and Tambunan, 2018). This is further reflected in Kunert's (2021) study of female football fans on Tumblr, which revealed that participants felt safe in performing their fandom through visual practices including fan-art and gif-making, given the platform has a majority female population.

Both forms of individual and collective strategies adopted by women encapsulate scholarly criticisms of social media platforms for failing to sufficiently protect women from online abuse, and placing the burden of safety on the user (Marwick, 2021). Therefore, these

strategies reflect a consistent need for risk management, where women must moderate their own experiences (Fenton et al., 2023).

2.6. Research Aims and Questions

This research explores the experiences of female F1 fans online; a sports fandom largely absent from the current literature. In doing so, this study aims to highlight how gendered exclusions continue to manifest in male-dominated fan cultures online, and the coping mechanisms women resultingly adopt. The RQs are as follows:

Central RQ:

‘How do female F1 fans negotiate their identities on social media platforms, and what does this reveal about broader gender dynamics in digital sports cultures?’

Sub-RQs:

1. How do gendered dynamics shape the experience of female F1 fans on social media platforms?
2. What kind of behaviours do female F1 fans experience and/or witness on social media platforms?
3. How do female F1 fans respond to experiencing and/or witnessing negative behaviours on social media platforms?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Strategy and Design

First, it is important to discuss the stance that this research adopted, regarding approach and philosophical orientations, given these greatly influence how social research is carried out (Clark et al., 2021). This research assumed an inductive approach, adopting an interpretivist epistemological and constructivist ontological position. It focused on subjectivist assumptions of social reality, as understood by the participants involved (Clark et al., 2021). This approach was chosen given it provides rich data, allowing deep understanding regarding gendered experiences of female F1 fans on social media. Such in-depth data would not have been possible through a scientific positivist approach, which emphasises systematic measurement as appropriate to understand reality (Clark et al., 2021). Although it can be argued that there is a loss of objectivity when using this approach, this limitation was outweighed by the rich qualitative data gained. This approach allows for consideration of wider socio-cultural contexts, which is particularly important within media and communications studies, as it is an area tied to complex human behaviours (Deacon et al., 2021). This supported in understanding what is happening culturally, and how individuals made meaning of this, rather than simplifying data to a cause-effect style of rationality.

Furthermore, this study adopted a qualitative case-study research design, given it specifically focused on the phenomenon of gendered experiences in the F1 online fandom. To answer the research questions (RQs), the framework employed for data collection was open-ended semi-structured interviews. Using a qualitative case-study research design, alongside open-ended semi-structured interviews, allowed for exploration of various nuanced perspectives, ensuring reoccurring themes were highlighted.

3.2. Sampling

To aid in answering the RQs, the total sample included ten participants ($P=10$), and the population under investigation was women aged 21-25 years old, who identify as F1 fans and ‘actively participate’ in the F1 fandom on social media platforms. In defining active participation, this study draws on Jenkins (2006; 2013), who argues that active engagement manifests in many forms, ranging from user-generated content, involvement in discussion, and knowledge building. Whilst this data does not represent the entire population, this is not a claim this research has made. It is recognised that it is impossible to study everyone, everywhere (Higginbottom, 2004), particularly due to uncontrollable factors including time, cost, and accessibility. This data is underpinned by qualitative analysis, therefore, the sampling and selection process prioritised the collection of rich and insightful information.

This study employed a purposive, non-probability sampling approach, combining convenience and self-selection techniques, which is particularly appropriate when exploring specific experiences or perspectives (Higginbottom, 2004). Recruitment took place via my personal social media, where participants were requested to volunteer, if interested. Whilst it can be argued that this approach was selective in the study’s exposure, given it was only circulated on social media platforms, this research topic focused on female participants who actively engage in the online sphere. Therefore, non-social media users were irrelevant, as they were outside the research scope. An advantage of purposive sampling is its focus on selecting individuals who are likely to produce the most valuable data (Clark et al., 2021). Therefore, the employment of a purposive sampling technique helped ensure that participants were relevant to the topic under investigation. When necessary, a snowball sampling technique was also incorporated to broaden the participant pool, given the niche sampling criteria. P3, P6, and P10 were recruited via this snowball method.

To select relevant participants who could provide in-depth insights into the chosen topic, the following sampling criteria was implemented:

- Participants must be female and identify as an F1 fan
- Participants must actively engage in the F1 fandom online, through a range of social media platforms (e.g. Instagram, TikTok, X)
- Participants must be comfortable to share their experiences in a research setting

3.3. Methods of Data Collection

Semi-structured open-ended interviews were the most appropriate technique to aid in answering the RQs, given its sensitive and people-oriented nature, encouraging participants to provide detailed personal experiences (Valentine, 2013). The conversational approach nurtured trust between myself as the researcher and the interviewees, which helped facilitate a safe environment. This was particularly important for this study, which involved sensitive discussions surrounding negative behaviours that women have faced online. Another key advantage of using semi-structured open-ended interviews was its flexible nature, which allowed participants to freely express their thoughts, whilst covering areas of interest (Clark et al., 2021). These factors of flexibility, sensitivity, and depth helped collect rich data, increasing both reliability and validity of the study's findings.

This study's focus was the experience of female F1 fans online, drawing on scholarship from sports fandom, digital platform affordances, and exclusionary gendered dynamics. With these concepts in mind, the semi-structured open-ended interviews were designed to operationalise my RQs, and address the conceptual framework discussed in the Literature Review.

The central RQ was:

‘How do female F1 fans negotiate their identities on social media platforms, and what does this reveal about broader gender dynamics in digital sports cultures?’

This was supported by three sub-RQs:

1. How do gendered dynamics shape the experience of female F1 fans on social media platforms?
2. What kind of behaviours do female F1 fans experience and/or witness on social media platforms?
3. How do female F1 fans respond to experiencing and/or witnessing negative behaviours on social media platforms?

The semi-structured interview questions were carefully designed to operationalise the RQs, and align with the conceptual framework established in the Literature Review. Within the interview guide, questions 2, 2b, and 4 served to contextualise participants engagement and familiarity with digital platforms, supporting the framework’s attention to participatory culture. These background questions helped situate later accounts of experiences within a broader understanding of fandom involvement.

RQ1 was reflected through questions 9 (‘As a woman...have you felt differences in how you’re treated compared to others?’) and 10 (‘Do you think there is a gender difference in whose voices and opinions are perceived as most valid or influential in F1 online discussions?’). By encouraging participants to describe interpersonal and broader cultural implications, these questions aimed to capture how gender intersects with fandom engagement in digital contexts. These questions were grounded in the pre-existing literature on gendered participation in male-dominated sports fandoms (Pope, 2017; Toffoletti, 2017).

RQ2 was directly addressed through questions 5 and 6 in the interview guide, which asked participants if they have personally experienced or witnessed negative behaviours, including harassment and discrimination, in F1-related communities online. Questions 5a and 6a encouraged participants, if comfortable, to describe the form that these behaviours took, providing the data needed to understand the range of behaviours, and how they occur.

Finally, RQ3 was operationalised through question 7, which asked if experiencing or witnessing negative behaviours had impacted the participants online engagement. It was also reflected in follow-up questions including 5c ('How did you respond?') and 6b-6d, which probed for reasoning behind certain choices of action or inaction. These questions were designed to encourage responses surrounding decision-making processes, connecting to the conceptual framework of female coping strategies online.

By structuring the interview around direct and witnessed experiences, the interview guide ensured that the data collected reflected the research aims, questions and theoretical framework. The full interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

3.3.1. Data Collection in Practice

The interviews took place online via Teams, lasting between 25-55 minutes long. Upon receiving permission from the participants, all ten interviews were recorded and transcribed. This was an imperative element of the research process, given recording and transcription meant that I did not have to rely on memorising participants responses, which could have limited the studies validity if I did not remember correctly. By recording and transcribing, I was able to repeat participant's answers, allowing for a more thorough examination of what was being said, as well as the tone answers were vocalised (Clark et al., 2021).

3.4. Methods of Data Analysis

Discussions surrounding the method of data analysis is just as important to acknowledge. This is because the method of data analysis demonstrates how raw interview data was transformed into meaningful results, justifying how conclusions were reached. The qualitative method of data analysis chosen was thematic analysis, given it effectively identifies, analyses, and organises key themes within a dataset, whilst also acknowledging any differences through exploring multiple experiences (Nowell et al., 2017). A key advantage of thematic analysis, which sets it apart from other qualitative methods of analysis, is that it is a highly flexible approach (Clark and Braun, 2017). This made thematic analysis an appropriate method to utilise within this study, as it aligned with the research aims to explore the diverse experiences of female F1 fans who participate on social media, whilst defining broader patterns. Resultingly, this analysis method helped gain an in-depth understanding of the raw data collected, supporting insights that are both descriptive and interpretive. Whilst it could be argued that thematic analysis can be vague in how themes are identified, this is combated by justifying how themes have emerged, as well as explaining why they are meaningful within the study (Clark et al., 2021). Overall, this data analysis method was most appropriate for this study, because it is flexible, accessible, and as argued by Nowell et al. (2017), easily grasped. This was helpful given I am new to research.

3.4.1. Data Analysis in Practice

In practice, a six-step thematic analysis framework was followed, as guided by Clark et al. (2021) in their generic approach to qualitative data analysis. This framework was adapted to suit the collected data, leaving a five-step process of analysis, which involved:

Data Familiarisation

First, I had to ensure that I familiarised myself with the raw data collected through the semi-structured open-ended interviews. This involved written transcription of the interviews, to

make it easier to identify themes and important quotes, helping to support detailed and structured analysis. After transcribing, I read through the response's multiple times, to truly understand the collected data.

Initial Coding

After familiarising myself with the data, I began to generate initial codes. This was achieved by assigning labels to important quotes from the interviews carried out, which at this stage, generated a large number of codes.

Code Evaluation

Given initial coding generated a large number of codes, this quantity needed reduced. This was achieved by grouping similar codes into broader categories, to form higher-order codes and initial themes. The chosen software was Word, given it is familiar and accessible. Therefore, it was a user-friendly way of storing responses, where I categorised my data within grids to track emerging codes. This allowed for more broader identification of commonalities and differences amongst participants.

By streamlining the dataset, I aimed to move from a descriptive to an analytical insight, to capture a distinct and critical analysis of my research topic. This was with the purpose of enhancing rigour by ensuring consistent interpretation, justifying why a theme was established, and how it related to the research.

Label Themes

This involved establishing themes by assigning them with descriptive names, which captured the meaning of the codes that informed them. It was crucial during this stage that the names chosen successfully addressed the dataset, to provide a genuine insight into the data collected, and how these addressed the RQs.

Write-up Insights

The final part of this process was to write-up the insights, which are detailed in the Research Findings and Discussion. This was an incredibly important area of the thematic analysis, as it encapsulated why chosen themes were significant and interesting for the study. To organise the findings through a developed, cohesive narrative, that linked back to the conceptual framework outlined in the Literature Review, it was important to consider the correlation between different themes. This was crucial, as it highlighted why the insights related to the research focus. To further justify the themes, direct quotes from participants were used in the Research Findings and Discussion, to support interpretations.

3.5. Reliability and Validity

Discussions surrounding reliability and validity in a qualitative study refer to the measures taken to increase confidence in the findings (Clark et al., 2021). Without them, questions of bias and inaccuracies may be raised, which could jeopardise the credibility of the research findings, and render the entire study as undependable.

To enhance validity of the study, semi-structured interviews were selected due to their flexible nature, which encouraged free expression, reflection and elaboration (Clark et al., 2021). Whilst it could be argued that flexibility can threaten reliability, given the multitude of perspectives, this was beneficial for this study, as it recognised different experiences and nurtured a natural conversation (Boyle and Schmierbach, 2024). This approach allowed myself, as the researcher, to gently probe deeper into key areas, clarify meanings, and encourage reflection, enhancing the richness and accuracy of the data collected.

Reliability is achieved through a transparent and consistent approach to data collection and analysis. For instance, an interview guide was used to ensure all participants were asked questions framed in the same way, whilst allowing space for nuance. Recording and

transcribing all interviews meant I did not have to rely on remembering participants responses, which could be examined in-depth, increasing both reliability and validity of the study (Clark et al., 2021). Furthermore, during analysis, a systematic process was adopted using and adapting the six-step framework from Clark et al. (2021). This ensured that the emerging themes were grounded in the data through a replicable process. Such transferability is further supported through the use of direct quotes, when presenting themes in the Research Findings and Discussion. As well as using direct quotes to support themes, it also allows readers to make informed judgements about how the findings may apply to other contexts or groups.

3.6. Limitations

Like all research, there are inevitable limitations out of my control as a researcher. These are outlined below under three key areas: assumptions and biases, methodological limitations, and delimitations.

3.6.1. Assumptions and Biases

The study assumes participants were honest in responses about their experiences in F1-related online spaces. However, there is a possibility that some participants may have withheld information due to social desirability bias, particularly when discussing sensitive topics (Clark et al., 2021). Furthermore, my own identity as a female F1 fan may have introduced interpretive bias. Whilst shared identity could shape which themes are emphasised during interpretation, it can also help encourage openness between myself and the participant, which is essential for a safe and trusting environment (Clark et al., 2021). Ongoing reflexivity has been practiced through regular supervisor discussions, and transparent decision-making, ensuring I remained self-aware of my own positionality during the study.

3.6.2. Methodological Limitations

The qualitative nature of the study means it cannot be applied to a large population, in comparison to quantitative studies, as the research relied on a small sample of female F1 fans who responded to requests for participants via social media. It is likely that those who agreed to participate, hold strong opinions regarding the topic, which may have introduced a degree of self-selection bias. Whilst both aspects limit generalisability, the study was concerned in seeking nuanced, subjective experiences of a particular group, rather than to produce statistically representative data.

Furthermore, virtual interviews via Teams may have limited opportunities for rapport-building, compared to in-person. However, they also offer greater flexibility and privacy, which could have increased comfort when discussing sensitive topics. Whilst the entire process was online, from recruitment to interviews, this reflected the study's focus on digitally engaged participants. Those that were not digitally inclined were outside the research scope.

3.6.3. Delimitations

This study focused exclusively on female F1 fans active in digital spaces, who were comfortable to discuss their personal experiences in a research setting. Whilst this is a niche group, these choices were intentional to keep the study focused and manageable, particularly due to time constraints. Whilst this could limit the transferability of findings to other genders and those inactive online, the measures discussed above in the validity and reliability section were implemented to enhance credibility.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Ethics is an important part of research, to ensure the study is safe for participants and myself. In terms of ethical stance, I adopted a deontological view, meaning research was conducted in an inherently moral manner (Clark et al., 2021). It was my duty as a researcher to ensure

complete visibility of the research taking place, compliance with the University of Leeds ethics policy, and protecting the interests of all participants.

To achieve the above, I followed a structured process, to uphold the integrity of the study. Approval for the research was obtained through the submission of a dissertation ethical review form, signed by my supervisor. Participants were provided an information sheet detailing the interview topics, a consent form prior to the interview, and were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time. This was particularly important due to the sensitive nature of the study, thus during the interview, participants were further reminded of their right to skip questions or withdraw. Anonymity and confidentiality were preserved throughout, with all identifiable information removed during transcription.

In accordance with GDPR and the University of Leeds data management policy, all data collected was securely stored on a password-protected computer, in my personal university One Drive. All data was retained during the process of this dissertation, and will be securely destroyed upon entire completion. Finally, to eliminate personal bias, and ensure that misrepresentation is minimised, all raw interview transcripts and coding data can be accessed via the OneDrive link in the footnote¹.

¹ COLLECTED DATA

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Female Adoption into F1: From Invitation to Exclusion

Whilst this research focused on female F1 fans experiences in online spaces, we first must understand how women became fans at all. A common thread across the interviews included the way in which female fans were introduced to F1, where six out of ten interviewees described that their initial exposure occurred offline, often during childhood, and was mediated through significant male figures in their lives. This pattern aligns with existing literature surrounding female adoption into sports fandoms, echoing various scholars who note that many women trace their entry into sports fanhood, back to male influence (Markovits and Albertson, 2012; Pope, 2017; Toffoletti, 2017; Jakubowska et al., 2021). This insight emerged organically, in response to the first interview question: ‘Please can you tell me about how you first became a fan of Formula One?’ The participants exposed to sports by important male figures in their life spoke extremely fondly of these early experiences, often describing them as bonding moments. For instance, P1 reflected warmly on growing up alongside motorsports, a passion she and her father shared. In a similar vein, P8 discussed feelings of nostalgia surrounding the sport, which she used as a way to create conversations that interested her poorly grandfather. Overall, participants fondly reflected on their fan identity at this early stage in life, and did not vocalise feelings of questioning their presence within sports spaces. This offline origin narrative is significant, because it highlights the gendered dynamics through which women enter male-dominated sports fandoms. This is consistent with Schultz and Linden (2014), who have highlighted that female fandom is often framed as secondary, or derivative, with their spectatorship traced back to a male connection (see also Pope, 2017; Toffoletti, 2017).

Watching race weekends, via television or in-person attendance, reflects only a small representation of how fans perform their sporting identities. As discussed by Van Driel et al. (2019), spectatorship alone is no longer sufficient, as fans increasingly seek to participate in

discussions, exchanging knowledge, and building community. Social media has fundamentally affirmed this need, enabling fans to interact with sports content anytime, anywhere, in personalised ways through real-time access to news, behind-the-scenes content and fan interaction (Filo et al., 2015; Fenton and Helleu, 2019; Hutchins, 2019). The majority of participants in this study reflected upon this shift, describing how their fan practices extended beyond the race itself to following their favourite teams, drivers, and creators online. Notably, P1 and P10 admitted to managing their own fan accounts. The above mirrors the broader cultural shift described by Jenkins (2006; 2013), where social media platforms have fostered a participatory culture, enabling fans to evolve from passive consumers to active creators of meaning-making content.

However, whilst this deeper engagement has allowed for richer participation and connection, it also exposed a double standard. Although participants fondly reminisced on their early exposure to F1, a striking paradox emerged, this being that these very male figures who encouraged female interest in the sport, are part of a wider culture that later dismisses, questions, and undermines them. This tension directly addresses RQ2, as it highlights the types of gendered dynamics female F1 fans encounter online, revealing how gendered hierarchies continue to shape access, voice, and credibility in F1 discussions. Several interviewees (e.g. P1, P6, P10) revealed that the encouragement they received as young girls began to erode when they were able to start asserting their own knowledge, opinions, and gain more visibility within F1 discussions online. This shift reflects a conditional form of inclusion, where women are welcomed as passive spectators, but are scrutinised when they transition into active contributors (Schultz and Linden, 2014; Pope, 2017; Toffoletti, 2017). These patterns align with historical ideologies of sports fandom, which have defined authenticity through a masculine framework rooted in strategy, live attendance, and emotional restraint (Crawford and Gosling, 2004; Coombs and Osborne, 2022). Consequently, women are often perceived as

illegitimate others within these masculine standards, particularly when they digress from passive spectatorship and become visible participants in online discourse (Toffoletti, 2017). For instance, P1 described how small factual errors were seen as opportunities for individuals to discredit her expertise, often associating her gender with a lack of knowledge. Similarly, P2 noted that women posting about F1 online are assumed to be superficial fans interested in the drivers' appearances, echoing previous scholarship surrounding the groupie stereotype (Crawford and Gosling, 2004; Dixon, 2015). These experiences reveal not only exclusionary attitudes but also highlight the emotional labour that women must navigate to assert their place as fans, often through over-performing knowledge, to be taken seriously (Dunn, 2014; Tarver, 2017).

The paradox of invitation followed by resistance directly correlates to RQ1, by revealing how gendered power dynamics shape female experiences within digital sports fan spaces. The broader literature has frequently shown that women are accepted within sports culture only under restrictive conditions (Schultz and Linden, 2014). Therefore, what began as an inclusive entry point into the sport, would later collapse to more complex gendered dynamics, as female participants' engagement deepened. In this sense, the exclusion of female fan experience online is not a digital anomaly, but an amplification of historical patterns of marginalisation in sports culture.

4.2. Gendered Gatekeeping

The above notion of conditional inclusion is not only reflected in women's shifting reception, as they move from passive spectators to active contributors, but it is also actively enforced through gendered gatekeeping practices (Kunert, 2021), that work to monitor and challenge their legitimacy within online fan communities. Gendered gatekeeping was one of the most persistent and emotionally resonant themes to emerge from the data, particularly in relation to RQ1 and RQ2. When asked who they felt was discouraged from participating in the F1 fandom

online, participants overwhelmingly indicated women. Crucially, this was not framed as an isolated issue, but rather a reflection of the historic patterns and cultural beliefs, which continue to implicate F1 as a sport, and its online culture (Schiffrin et al., 2021). This finding is suggestive that the gendered gatekeeping female fans experience online is not just the result of individual bias, but a systemic issue rooted in F1's legacy, which influences how legitimacy is policed in digital fan spaces. F1 has long been shaped by masculine ideals of speed, dominance, and mechanical expertise, reinforced by the male-dominated visibility within the sport, which *all* participants highlighted. For instance, P2 acknowledged that whilst the sport is trying to become more inclusive, "...it's 20 men [drivers], the team principals are all men...is this going to be a sport where women can confidently be a part of?" (p.10). As P8 more bluntly expressed, "It's a rich white man's sport. So, if you're not one of those three things, you don't know what you're talking about" (p.12). These perceptions illustrate the historical construction of F1 as a masculine domain, which becomes internalised within its fandom (Schiffrin et al., 2021).

Beyond statistics of female under-representation in the sport, participants also reflected on the symbolic positioning of women within F1 media itself, and how this has correlated to their own perceptions of gendered belonging. P1 and P6 recalled that growing up, the most visible women in the sport were grid girls. P1 described how, as a child, she wanted to be a grid girl because she believed "that was my only place in the sport" (p.25). Despite the discontinuation of grid girls, this portrayal of women persists in new forms. P6 and P8 both commented on the continued visibility of wives and girlfriends of sports figures (WAGs), and the way that accomplished women in the sport are publicly positioned through their relationships to men. These observations illustrate how female visibility in F1 is mediated through male figures, reinforcing a narrative echoed in broader sports literature, that female presence is permitted, but only in a passive state (Schultz and Linden, 2014; Toffoletti, 2017). Most significantly, this is also reflective, once again, of the groupie stereotype, a pervasive

cultural trope that frames female sports fans as interested in the male athletes, as opposed to the sport itself (Crawford and Gosling, 2004; Dixon, 2015; Pope, 2017). This stereotype delegitimises female fandom by reducing their engagement to superficial interest, rather than genuine passion. As several participants noted, the irony is that whilst women are often dismissed for only being attracted to the drivers, the representation of WAGs has historically been one of the only socially accepted ways women have been visible in F1 at all. This contradiction reveals a deeper tension within the sport more broadly, where female legitimacy is narrowly defined through a masculine lens.

The above becomes even more troubling when these attitudes are internalised by fans and carried into online spaces, where cultural patterns are amplified and reproduced (Kunert, 2021; Schiffrin et al., 2021). Whilst heated debates are inevitable in sports fandom, with both P2 and P7 acknowledging that much of the online hate they have witnessed involves team rivalries, participants drew a sharp distinction between legitimate sporting disagreement and gendered dismissal. Rather than critiquing an opinion, participants (e.g. P1, P3, P10) described how they were often dismissed on the basis of *who* they are, not what they said. This echoes the findings of Hynes and Cook (2013), who documented how sexist remarks were often used to discredit women online, and is further highlighted by Kunert (2021), who argued that when women disclose their gender in online spaces, they become more susceptible to targeted harassment. The nature of hate women receive online is not fixed, it varies in tone, language, and intensity. P1 actively creates F1 content in the digital space, and as she explained, “...normally I can tell whether it’s constructive or not, because they’ll mention my gender somewhere in the comment” (p.14). She shared examples that ranged from subtly undermining and infantilising language including “I didn’t like that girl’s opinion on this” (p.15), to more direct verbal abuse such as “stupid woman” (p.13). Although the tone of these comments differs, the underlying sexist intent is consistent, which makes a deliberate effort to highlight

the individual's gender as a way to invalidate their voice. The fact that this hostility so often centres on gender rather than content, suggests that it is less about the sport itself, and more about policing who is allowed to participate, reinforcing a narrative where women remain outsiders in a traditionally male-defined space (Crawford and Gosling, 2004; Pope, 2017; Osborne and Coombs, 2022). These dynamics demonstrate how digital platforms, despite their participatory promise, remain implicated with gender-based exclusionary practices (Kunert, 2021; Doehler, 2024).

4.3. The Policing of Fan Expression

A recurring stereotype emerged across all interviews, which was the assumption that women engage with F1 solely because they find the drivers attractive. Every participant reflected on this dismissive stigma, either as something they had personally encountered, or witnessed within the F1 fandom online. This reflects RQ1, by demonstrating how gendered dynamics shape the way women are permitted to express their fandom. It also directly reflects RQ2, by exposing a common negative behaviour that female fans experience, which is the questioning of their motives in the fandom. Both create an online culture where female expressions of fandom are scrutinised, especially when these expressions are stereotypically coded as feminine.

The fangirl identity in particular, is a term implicated with gendered assumptions of superficiality, obsession, and emotional attachment (Jenkins, 2013; Pope, 2017; Toffoletti, 2017). P10 offered a clear articulation of these negative connotations, stating, "You're just some crazed woman that only really cares about how attractive someone is" (p.19). She recognised that this identity is weaponised to delegitimise women who express their fandom, in ways that fall outside the boundaries of accepted fan behaviour (Gieseler, 2017; Pope, 2017). However, her assertion "I'm a fan *and* a fangirl" (p.19), subtly challenges the above binary. Rather than rejecting the feminised label, P10 embraces it, affirming that emotion, attraction,

and narrative pleasure can coexist with legitimate fandom. Whilst scholars like Jenkins (2013) and Gieseler (2017) argue that the fangirl identity is often weaponised, this data reveals that some women are resisting gendered expectations by redefining and taking ownership of the fangirl identity.

The policing of fan expression is particularly evident through the scrutiny of fan edits, which presents the tension between feminine-coded expressions of fandom, and those deemed more authentic. This connects to the previous theme of gendered gatekeeping, where female participation is strictly policed when it does not conform to masculine standards of engagement (Osborne and Coombs, 2022). P6 reflected on how users screenshot TikTok fan edits to mock them on other platforms, targeting the parasocial tone as evidence of inauthentic fandom. Furthermore, P6 highlighted that whilst there are many talented motion graphics creators, their talent is often dismissed because it is not a legitimate act of fandom. This reinforces criticisms by Pope (2017), who argues that aesthetic attraction and genuine sporting passion are frequently framed as mutually exclusive entities that cannot coexist. What is interesting, is that P6 subconsciously referred to the creators of fan edits as girls, before pausing and correcting herself, “They might not be girls” (p.14). This slip, and subsequent self-correction, subtly reveals how the production of emotionally expressive content, is internalised even by women as a feminised practice (Pope, 2013; 2017; Toffoletti, 2017). The assumption that such creative forms of fandom are inherently female-coded highlights the gendered boundaries that structure how fan behaviours are understood and valued (Pope, 2013; Gieseler, 2017; Kunert, 2021). Even when women recognise the artistic merit or narrative complexity of fan edits, the act of associating them with girlhood reinforces the notion that these expressions exist outside the perceived norms of authentic, rational, and thus masculine, fandom (Toffoletti, 2017). This moment serves as a microcosm of how gendered frameworks shape the perception, and

misperception, of legitimate fan engagement, even amongst those trying to push back against such boundaries.

4.4. Navigating Online F1 Fandom as a Woman

For many participants, involvement in F1 fandom online was not simply an expression of interest for the sport. Instead, it involved a persistent process of identity management through moderation. Having explored themes surrounding gendered dynamics and negative behaviours in online F1 fandom (RQ1 and RQ2), this final section turns to how participants respond to these challenges. This directly addresses RQ3, by examining recurring strategies women adopt to navigate online spaces. The following identified themes will reflect that many participants found themselves constrained by online fandom spaces, as opposed to liberated.

4.4.1. Self-Regulation

A key theme that emerged in exploring how female fans navigate F1 online spaces was the strategic use of self-regulation. Participants described the need to filter how they expressed their fandom to avoid scrutiny (e.g. P3, P4, P6, P10). This persistent process of carefully selecting how they display their fandom is a conscious form of self-protection, suggesting that women feel they are watched closely and judged harshly online. Such a phenomenon is reflective of studies on gendered hierarchies that are reproduced within online spaces, which can negatively impact an individual's behaviour and wellbeing (Na et al., 2020). This aligns with the experiences of P10, who reflected on the anxiety and internal conflict she felt every time she considered posting online. She stated, "Every time I tweet something, I'm thinking...do I look like I'm actually a fan?" (p.17). From this quote alone, it is evident that her concern is not rooted in a lack of knowledge, but rather a pervasive fear that any mistake could confirm gendered assumptions about female belonging in the F1 fandom online. Moreover, P10's anxieties are mirrored in broader patterns of female self-regulation in online

fandoms. As Toffoletti (2013; 2017) and Kanai (2018) highlight, women often craft their online identities by minimising expressions of femininity or emotional engagement, to avoid being discredited. Alike other sports-related fan communities, in the F1 online fandom, this can manifest in women feeling pressured to demonstrate technical knowledge to validate their presence, particularly when faced with assumptions that they are not true fans unless they can exhibit expertise (Crawford and Gosling, 2004; Pope, 2013; 2017; Toffoletti, 2017). P10's fear of being judged for lacking "wheel knowledge" (p.16) reflects this dynamic, where women feel required to downplay femininity in favour of strategic knowledge, to secure legitimacy in the fandom. This internalised anxiety, shaped by her witnessing harassment towards other women in the fandom, directly connects to RQ3. P10's strategy to appear strategically invested in the sport, is adopted into her own routine of online self-regulation. P10 admitted "I feel like I'm not worthy to be a fan" (p.15), criticising that it "comes from the feeling of constantly trying to justify yourself" (p.15). Her reflections highlight that, for many female fans, the fear of being discredited discourages open expression of fandom, undermining their sense of belonging altogether.

Whilst most participants engaged in self-regulation by minimising characteristics of femininity, P1 presented a notable anomaly. Rather than being disempowered by gendered assumptions, P1 chose to strategically lean into them, to gain increased views and positive engagement. The significance in this response lies not only in the fact that P1 was the only participant to reflect in this way, but also in what it reveals about the complexities surrounding the negotiation of femininity, in male-dominated online fandoms. Although many participants echoed what Pope (2017) described as the need to distance oneself from feminine femininities, to be seen as a legitimate fan, P1 directly subverted this logic. For instance, rather than dissociating herself from feminine signifiers, she performed them explicitly, noting that her videos performed particularly well if she wore a push-up bra. This account complicates the

literature surrounding coping strategies through self-regulation, where Chadha et al. (2020) and Fenton et al. (2023) identify the downplaying of femininity, low-visibility engagement, or withdrawal as common strategies to mitigate harassment. Instead, P1's account suggests that self-regulation can simultaneously function tactically.

However, P1's choice to embrace her femininity should not be regarded as an entirely liberating form of empowerment, and although delivered with humour, her statement "It's not what misogyny does to you, it's what it can do for you" (p.17), is deeply concerning. As explored earlier within the gendered gatekeeping theme, F1 has long presented femininity as something to be looked at, rather than listened to. This aligns with Pope's (2017) discussions surrounding the idea that female legitimacy within male-dominated fandoms, is often narrowly defined through a masculine lens. Thus, whilst P1's account challenges literature surrounding self-regulation practices, her experience is representative of the constrained conditions within which women must operate in these communities. Resultingly, her experience does not reject the presence of gendered barriers, rather, it highlights how women can *choose* to navigate these barriers through compliance.

4.4.2. Censorship

Several participants who described themselves as observers in the online fandom, detailed the ways in which witnessing negative online behaviour towards women, had actively discouraged them from contributing more visibly within the fandom. P4, for example, only posts F1 content on her private Instagram account, which is followed by close friends only, as opposed to her public Instagram account. P4 explained that she used to post F1 content on her public account, but after receiving negative comments, she anticipated further judgement which led her post on a private account instead. This experience reflects the self-censorship strategies described by Chadha et al. (2020), where women limit their online participation to mitigate the risk of harassment. In P4's case, shifting to a private account is a clear example of what Picone et al.

(2019) define as small acts of engagement, where users that feel vulnerable in online spaces often engage subtly, through low-visibility modes of participation.

Others chose not to participate at all, with some explaining that there is a direct link between witnessing negative behaviour online, and their own decision to not engage as actively. This was highlighted in the interviews with P2, P5, P6, and P7, who expressed mutual feelings surrounding an interest in posting F1 content, but are ultimately discouraged due to the fear of exposing themselves to negativity. This disengagement again reflects literature surrounding self-censorship strategies, where women limit their engagement based on the negative behaviours that they have witnessed other women receive online (Chadha et al., 2020; Marwick, 2021; Fenton et al., 2023). Rather than a lack of interest in online fandom participation, these women's decisions to not post are tactical and emotionally informed responses, to the gendered dynamics of fandom. Their choices encapsulate what Na et al. (2020) observe as a broader pattern, in which the replication of offline gender hierarchies within digital spaces can impact participation behaviours. In this way, the decision to withdraw is not a sign of disengagement from the fandom, but a response to hostile conditions that threaten their sense of belonging.

Additionally, censorship is not only an individual process through low-visibility acts of participation, but it is also an outward practice, where female fans attempt to censor the visibility and impact of harmful content produced by others. Many participants (e.g. P1, P2, P3, P7, P9, P10) described engaging in platform-specific affordances such as muting key words, deleting comments, blocking users, and reporting abusive behaviour. These strategies reflect a broader culture of risk management within online fan communities, where women are often responsible for moderating their own experiences, due to the lack of sufficient structural protections (Marwick, 2021; Fenton et al., 2023). In most cases, however, participants chose to disengage from negative encounters altogether, with many expressing that directly

intervening is futile. For some, this feeling lies in the belief that reactivity escalates hostility, with P1 noting that “You can’t fight fire with fire” (p.11). For others, their dismissal towards intervening is due to a lack of confidence in the outcome, with P2 bluntly stating that “...there’s not really much you can do” (p.6), which was later echoed by P8 “...there’s only so much reporting a comment can do” (p.16). Altogether, these findings illustrate that female participation in online fandoms is often shaped by a continuous process of risk assessment. Rather than being passive observers, these women are actively navigating a burden of managing their own safety online. This not only highlights the inadequacy of platform-level protections, as noted by Marwick (2021), but it also reinforces the argument that navigating harm is a responsibility disproportionately placed on users themselves (Fenton et al., 2023). In this context, women’s self-censorship is less a retreat, and more a reflection of the constrained autonomy they are afforded in digital fan cultures.

4.4.3. Female Solidarity

Whilst the individual coping strategies highlight the correlation between personally experiencing or witnessing negative behaviours in the online F1 fandom, and feeling the need to alter personal expression, they do not entirely capture the collective responses that emerge when exclusion is systemic. This final theme will allow the discussion to move beyond individual adaption, and towards a more structural understanding of how women create a space for themselves, within male-dominated fandoms online.

Some participants discussed the importance of female-led spaces online, which not only facilitated feelings of safety, but also offered a sense of validation and recognition for fandom expression. For instance, P3, P4, P5, and P10 detailed how they actively gravitate towards content created by women. Both P3 and P5 used the same phrase to describe these female-led spaces, stating that “it’s for the girlyies” (P3, p.3), with P3 continuing that she felt “more confident to talk in their comments” (p.4). These statements alone reveal the significance of

online environments, where women feel safe to contribute without the fear of judgement. This mirrors Lenneis and Pfister (2015), Toffoletti (2017), and Kunert (2021), who emphasise that female-only fan groups serve as collective coping strategies that enable women to express themselves more freely, compared to mainstream fan spaces. Thus, these spaces become areas of emotional support, where participants can simply exist as fans, without the pervasive need to justify their belonging. Ultimately, female-led communities within the broader online F1 fandom act as sites of digital resistance, where women can support and amplify each other's presence and voices, particularly in a fan culture that too often questions their right to be there at all.

Furthermore, P3 also reflected positively on her involvement in *Girls Across the Grid*, a girls-only fan group on Facebook and WhatsApp, explaining that she feels as though she won't be judged for her strategic knowledge regarding the sport. In a similar vein, P10 shared that she is involved in a women-only F1 group on the career-oriented platform LinkedIn, suggesting that these micro-communities extend into professional networking sites. These examples illustrate how women engage in micro-communities to not simply share their passion for the sport, but also to avoid the gatekeeping that is often present in the broader F1 fandom online. This comment directly aligns with Fenton et al. (2023) and their arguments that these types of micro-communities form in response to the broader gendered exclusions that women face in online sport discourse. Within these female-dominated spaces, women do not feel the need to prove their legitimacy through masculine-coded performances of sports fandom (Crawford and Gosling, 2004; Pope, 2017). Notably, the power of female solidarity online was also shown to extend beyond the digital realm. P3 described using *Girls Across the Grid* to meet up with other female fans, strengthening her sense of belonging through offline friendships. Likewise, P4 described attending a F1 fan event in Singapore, and forming friendships with other female fans she met there. Most significantly, P4 noted that their

discussions included a shared reluctance to participate in F1 online discourse visibly, on forward-facing platforms like TikTok, echoing the digital caution and self-regulatory behaviours detailed previously. These examples illustrate how female solidarity can create meaningful spaces both online and offline, offering emotional safety, shared understanding, and a resistance to dominant gendered dynamics in F1 fan culture.

Although these female-only fan spaces were described as meaningful and affirming, it is important to highlight that only a minority of participants in this study, namely P3, P5, and P10, actively engaged in such groups online. This limited engagement may reflect broader accessibility issues, or simply a lack of awareness of these communities amongst fans. Though, it also suggests that, whilst collective coping strategies hold great potential for facilitating safety and belonging, they are not yet a widespread or guaranteed experience for all female fans. Such a finding complicates the optimism expressed in scholarship such as Lenneis and Pfister (2015), Toffoletti (2017), and Kunert (2021), who stress the empowering potential of female-only online fan spaces. Whilst their research highlights the value of these micro-communities, the findings of this study suggest a more fragmented online landscape, where solidarity is not equally distributed. This extends the arguments of Fenton et al. (2023) who state that whilst these spaces emerge in response to exclusion, they are indeed very small, particularly in relation to dominant, male-coded fan cultures. Thus, although female-only groups offer a form of resistance and safety, the findings of this research suggest that there is an ongoing need for more systemic interventions within the wider culture of F1 fandom online.

5. CONCLUSION

This dissertation set out to explore how women experience and navigate the male-dominated landscape of online F1 fandom. Guided by the central research RQ, '*How do female F1 fans negotiate their identities on social media platforms, and what does this reveal about broader gender dynamics in digital sports cultures?*', this study has highlighted the nuanced strategies of self-regulation, censorship, and female solidarity online, which shape women's participation on social media. Whilst fandoms can promise ideologies of community and shared passions (Jenkins, 2006; 2013; Andrews and Ritzer, 2018; Fenton and Helleu, 2019), the experiences of the female fans qualitatively interviewed in this study, revealed that these spaces are entrenched in cultural assumptions regarding gender, authenticity, and legitimacy.

By drawing on relevant literature regarding sports fandom, digital affordances and gender-based harassment online, as well as qualitatively interviewing ten female F1 fans aged 21-25 years old, the central RQ was addressed through the following sub-RQs:

1. How do gendered dynamics shape the experience of female F1 fans on social media platforms?
2. What kind of behaviours do female F1 fans experience and/or witness on social media platforms?
3. How do female F1 fans respond to experiencing and/or witnessing negative behaviours on social media platforms?

In addressing RQ1 and RQ2, this research revealed how gendered dynamics continue to shape the behaviours women experience and witness in sports fandom online. The findings highlighted there is a persistent questioning of female legitimacy as authentic F1 fans, where participants frequently detailed how they are required to navigate an exclusionary space, simply because of their gender (Coombs and Osborne, 2022). Negative behaviours manifested through

the policing of fan expression, and the use of undermining language, as a way to illegitimise female participation in F1-related online spaces. These gendered dynamics are rooted in the legacy of F1 itself, a sport historically dominated by masculine ideals of speed, competitiveness, and technical knowledge. Consequently, these experiences are not simply an isolated issue, but rather a reflection of historic patterns and cultural beliefs that have framed women as outsiders in F1, which is mirrored in the policing of legitimacy in digital fan spaces (Schiffrin et al., 2021). Whilst positive experiences were highlighted through female solidarity, this was only mentioned by a minority of participants. Although affirming in practice, the potential of female-only groups to foster solidarity is not a guaranteed experience for all female F1 fans. In relation to the broader male-dominated F1 online culture, these micro-communities are often overshadowed.

In relation to RQ3, this study found that participants responded to exclusionary behaviour in several ways. Most significantly, the findings revealed that identity negotiation for female F1 fans is an active decision-making process, which varied depending on personal preference. These strategies, which were the responsibility of the user (Marwick, 2021), included self-regulation, selective visibility, and at times, participation in female-only fan spaces. Despite the differences in coping strategies, all participants reflected on a form of emotional labour where they desired to feel some sense of belonging in the fandom, but had to act accordingly to reduce risks of gender-based harassment.

The findings of this research have made several key contributions to the media and communications field. It extends upon current literature surrounding gendered participation in digital sports cultures. Whilst much scholarship has focused on female public sports figures and the harassment they face (Kearns et al., 2023), this study addresses a critical gap by centring the voices of female F1 fans, an underrepresented group in both academic literature and the sport itself. Applying a gendered lens to F1 is especially valuable, due to the lack of

scholarly attention given to motorsports, compared to other sports like football. Finally, by focusing on everyday fan practices rather than institutional or public figures, this study reveals how ordinary users shape the gender politics of fandom, through their online interactions. It highlights the often-over-looked negotiations adopted by women to navigate gendered dynamics online.

5.1. Limitations and Directions for Future Study

Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. As previously detailed in the Methodology, this dissertation focused on a small sample size of female F1 fans aged 21-25 years old. Whilst this was crucial for understanding gendered dynamics specifically in F1 fandom, future research could expand the sample to include a wider pool of female fans from a larger age range, and could be expanded to include other marginalised communities. For instance, future studies could investigate fans from diverse backgrounds, including race, class, and sexuality, and how these intersect to shape unique fan experiences. This would provide a more nuanced understanding of how different forms of identity can influence personal experiences of sports fandom online.

Furthermore, as this study focused on social media platforms more broadly, future studies could take a more targeted approach by investigating individual platforms. Social media platforms vary in their structural affordances, user engagement, and forms of content. Therefore, it would be interesting to see how gendered experiences of fandom differ across social media platforms, and how women negotiate their fan identity in response.

These future research possibilities could build on this study by further understanding and exposing the cultural barriers that persist within digital sports fandom. As this dissertation has made clear, women are too often met with hostility and exclusion, told in various ways to “*Stay in your lane, sweetheart.*” What is left is a space where belonging is not offered but

fought for. A burden disproportionately placed on women, to navigate a fandom that was not built with them in mind.

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7. APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Time per interview – 25:00–55:00

Background

1. Please can you tell me about how you first became a fan of Formula One?
2. What online platforms do you use to engage with the Formula One fandom?
 - 2a. For each platform you mentioned (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, etc.), how often do you tend to engage with the F1 fandom on that platform?
 - 2b. How would you describe your level of engagement in Formula One online (may need to prepare for some kind of prompt here? ‘level of engagement’ – e.g. do they post their own content? Get involved in online discussions? Do they lurk or observe?)
3. Are you a member of any F1-specific groups on these platforms (refer back to platforms mentioned in Q2)? If so, which ones (if comfortable sharing)?
4. Have you ever participated in discussions in the Formula One fandom online? If so, how would you describe your experience(s)?

Online Harassment

In this section, I'd like to ask about any experiences of what we might call “negative behaviours” online. This could include things like harassment, discrimination, bullying, disrespect, or other forms of unwelcome or negative interactions.

5. Have you personally experienced any negative behaviours in the F1 fandom online?
 - 5a. If you feel comfortable to share, what was your experience?
 - 5b. How did you feel when encountering this experience?

5c. How did you respond?

6. Have you witnessed any negative behaviours in the F1 fandom online?

6a. If yes, what did this involve?

6b. Did you take any action, such as reporting, intervening directly, blocking the person, or removing yourself from the situation?

6c. If you did/did not take any action, why?

6d. With your experience, would you do anything differently if it were to happen again?

7. Has witnessing or experiencing negative behaviours impacted your engagement in the F1 fandom online?

7a. Have you changed your behaviour in response?

7b. If so, how have you changed your behaviour?

7c. Can you give me an example?’

8. Do you think the F1 fandom online is welcoming to all fans?

8a. If not, who do you feel is discouraged from participating, and why?

Gender and Participation

9. As a woman in the F1 online community, have you felt any differences in how you’re treated compared to others, or in comparison to what you observe for other women? If so, how?

9a. Why do you think this is?

10. Do you think there is a gender difference in whose voices and opinions are perceived as most valid or influential in F1 online discussions?

10a. Please explain why/why not

10b. (if yes) why do you think this is?

Future Perspectives

11. Do you believe that negative behaviour, like harassment and discrimination, in F1 fandoms is getting better, worse, or staying the same, and why

12. What do you think could be done to make these online spaces a more inclusive user experience?

13. Is there anything else about your experience as a Formula One fan that engages in the fandom online, that you would like to share?

14. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

The title of the research project

“Stay in your lane, sweetheart”: Investigating the Gendered Experiences and Identity
Negotiation of Female F1 Fans on Social Media Platforms

Invitation paragraph

You are being invited to take part in the above research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide if you wish to take part

What is the purpose of the project?

The purpose of the project is to understand female fan experiences within the F1 community on social media platforms, to gain an insight into the barriers that women may face in male-dominated fan communities. The research aims to understand personal experiences and ways that women may choose to cope when experiencing negative behaviours.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen by the researcher due to your involvement in the F1 fandom on social media platforms. For this reason, the researcher has chosen you as they believe you will help provide insightful experiences and opinions.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide if you wish to take part or not. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still

*withdraw at any time without it affecting any benefits that you are entitled to in any way. **You do not have to give a reason.***

What do I have to do? / What will happen to me if I take part?

The research involves an online interview over Teams, which will be 25-60 minutes long. The question style will be open-ended (meaning yes/no answers will be avoided), in order to have a deep understanding of your personal experiences. There will be around 20 questions, and perhaps some follow-up questions if needed. Please answer all questions openly and honestly.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Given the sensitive nature of this topic, questions may be upsetting in nature. You can withdraw at any time if you are uncomfortable.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will highlight the negative behaviours that women continue to face in online communities, and how women must negotiate their identity in response

Withdrawing from the study

Interviews – If participants would like to withdraw their responses, please contact myself (Grace) from interview completion up to 2 weeks after the interview. This is because after the 2-week period, I will have begun data analysis.

Use, dissemination and storage of research data

Research data such as direct quotes will be used in the findings chapter of the research project. However, all identities will be kept anonymous. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed, and transcriptions will be in the appendix of the dissertation. Recordings of the

interviews will be kept until the dissertation has been accepted and finalised by the University. After this, all interviews and data will be deleted.

What will happen to my personal information?

Your identity will be kept entirely anonymous within the research paper, so that you are not identifiable. Personal information will be kept until research data has been disposed of.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

All the contact information that we collect about you during the research will be kept strictly confidential and will be stored separately from the research data. We will take steps wherever possible to anonymise the research data so that you will not be identified in any reports or publications.

What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research project's objectives?

Information involving personal experiences such as negative behaviour online when posting content. This is important for the research topic.

Contact for further information

Name: Grace Taylor

Email: me21gt@leeds.ac.uk

Ethics approval: This study has received ethics approval from the University of Leeds and Dissertation Supervisor, Todd Graham

Concerns or Complaints

Participants with any concerns or complaints should be advised to contact the PI/CI/Research Team for a local resolution in the first instance and if there are any issues or concerns about

which participants remain dissatisfied, then the Research Ethics Team should be contacted via ResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk who will then consider next steps.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

The audio and/or video recordings of your activities made during this research will be used only for analysis. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings. '

Please contact the Information Governance Team at DPO@leeds.ac.uk for any data related queries regarding the use of images in research and for any ethics related queries contact ResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk in the first instance.

Finally ...

The participant will be given a copy of the information sheet and, if appropriate, a signed consent form to keep.

Thank you for taking the time to reading through this form! And thank you for participating in the research.

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent to take part in “Stay in your Lane, Sweetheart”:
Investigating the Gendered Experiences and Identity Negotiation of Female F1
Fans on Social Media Platforms

****Researcher* – Please ensure you edit each Consent statement below to fit with the Participant Information Sheet for your study and remove guidance text intended for you***

If you agree to the statement, please sign with your initials below

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet/letter dated [15/02/2025] version number 1 explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences [Up to 2 weeks post-interview, as highlighted in the Participant Information Sheet)	
In addition, should I not wish to answer any question or questions, I am free to decline.	
I understand members of the research team [and any authorised parties as identified in the PIS] will have access to my identifiable responses.	
I understand that identifiable data collected about me as part of this research project may be linked with other data as described in the PIS	
Where my data has been anonymised/pseudonymised I understand I will not be identified or identifiable in the report/s or publications that result from the research.	
<u>Agreement for open data sharing:</u> I agree that the (de-identified) research data collected from me can be shared publicly and openly, as explained in the Participant Information Sheet	
I understand that other researchers may use my words (direct quotes) in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if all direct identifiers (such as names, locations, birth dates and contact details) are removed and I cannot be identified.	

Participant Consent to take part in “Stay in your Lane, Sweetheart”:
Investigating the Gendered Experiences and Identity Negotiation of Female F1
Fans on Social Media Platforms

****Researcher* – Please ensure you edit each Consent statement below to fit with the Participant Information Sheet for your study and remove guidance text intended for you***

If you agree to the statement, please sign with your initials below

I understand that relevant sections of the data collected during the study, may be looked at by auditors from and on behalf of the University of Leeds	
I agree to take part in the above research project	

Name of participant	
Participant’s signature	
Date	
Name of lead researcher [or person taking consent]	Grace Taylor
Signature	
Date*	

*To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant.

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/ pre-written script/ information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be kept with the study’s main documents which must be kept in a secure online UoL sever location or as detailed in the approved Participant Information Sheet.

Secretariat, Research Ethics, Version 1.3, September 2024

Appendix D: Signed Ethics Form

COMM3910 Communication Dissertation / COMM5600M Dissertation and Research Methods Ethical Review Form

1. Basic project details

Your name	Grace Taylor
Student ID	201491443
Name of supervisor	Todd Graham
Provisional title/ topic area	“Stay in your lane, sweetheart”: investigating the gendered experiences and identity negotiation of female F1 fans on social media platforms

Ethical review is required for all research carried out in the University involving people (human participants), including research undertaken by students within a taught student module. Further details of the University of Leeds ethical review requirements are given in the Research Ethics Policy available at: <https://secretariat.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/109/2023/12/Research-ethics-policy.pdf>.

For ethical approval on this module, you should discuss research ethics with your supervisor and ask them to review and approve this form. You must submit your form with your supervisor's signature to the submissions area in Minerva by the published deadline (see module handbook), or before you begin fieldwork (whichever is soonest). **Please note that you must not commence fieldwork until this form has been approved and signed by your supervisor and the module leader if necessary.** You must complete this form even if your research does not involve people.

Please note that you must NOT complete research with participants who are under 18, unable to give ‘[informed consent](#)’, or are ‘vulnerable’ (e.g., prisoners, asylum seekers, the homeless). This module does not have ethical approval for research with these groups. Also, you must NOT store any participant data on your personal devices. All data related to research participants must be stored on your University One Drive storage facility.

Further Research Ethics Guidance for Dissertations is available in Minerva. Please refer to this Guidance when completing this form.

2. Summarise the aims, objectives, and method of the research (max 300 words).

Provide a summary of the research, outlining the aims and objectives and / or research questions and the proposed methodology. Please explain how you will conduct the research (e.g., how will research participants be identified and recruited and what will they be asked to do, or for online research, how will people's data be selected, used, and analysed?)

Research Summary

The research conducted has an aim to understand the experiences of women who participate in sports fandoms online, in particular the F1 (Formula One) community. The dissertation aims to present the link between gender and harassment, and whilst there has been literature based on this notion particularly within online gaming communities, there is a significant gap in sport fandoms. I hope to address this gap, through focusing on Formula One; a sport that has historically been male-dominated.

Methodology

Alongside my literature review I will also conduct qualitative analysis of semi-structured open-ended interviews.

Semi-structured closed-ended interviews will be conducted with female participants only, to collect rich data on female experiences within the F1 online community, as this is what my research is focused on. I will use a purposive, non-probability sampling approach, combining convenience and self-selection techniques, to select volunteers that are likely to produce the most valuable data. The study will be circulated via my own public social media. All participants' identities will be kept anonymous, given an information sheet and consent form before the interview, and informed that they can withdraw from the research at any time. I will also provide a raw appendix of interview transcripts to the University, to avoid misrepresentation of participations.

3. Confirm if you plan to conduct fieldwork with (data on) people

	Yes	No
Will your dissertation involve conducting research on people (this includes online research methods and researching data on people / secondary data analysis)? Tick as appropriate.	x	

If you ticked No to Question 3, you do not need to take further action in respect of ethical approval. Please proceed to the declarations in Part C.

If you ticked Yes to Question 3, you need to complete Part A.

Part A: Ethical Considerations Raised by Your Research

4. What is the source of the data used in your research? (Indicate with an 'X' all that apply)

New data collected for this research	x
Data previously collected	
Data already in the public domain (including Internet-based research)	
Other, please state:	

5. How will the data be collected? (Indicate with an 'X' all that apply)

Through one-to-one research interviews	x
Through focus groups	
Self-completion (e.g. questionnaires, surveys, diaries)	x
Through observation	
Data previously collected	
Data already in the public domain	
Other, please state:	

6. Personal safety: risk assessment

Will your fieldwork be outside the University campus?	Yes	No
		x

If you answer Yes to Q. 6 you will need to complete a separate risk assessment form and send this to your supervisor to review. Supervisors will need to approve the risk assessment before signing this form.

7. Will the project involve any of the following (Tick as appropriate)
(Please check the Dissertation Research Ethics Guidance Notes when completing this section)

	Yes	No
Discussion of sensitive topics, or topics that could be considered sensitive	X	
Prolonged or frequent participant involvement		X

Researching people without their knowledge and consent		X
Cause potential harm to participants or others (including researcher(s))		X
Potential conflicts of interest		X
Researcher(s) in a position of authority over participants		X
Cooperation of an intermediary to gain access to research participants or material		X
Internet-based research or other visual / vocal methods where participants may be identified who may not expect their communication to be accessed by third parties:		X
Translators or interpreters (other than self)		X
Fieldwork taking place outside the UK [See point 3 Personal Safety above]		X
Other (please state):		

NB: you must NOT complete research with participants who are under 18, unable to give 'informed consent', or are 'vulnerable' (e.g., prisoners, asylum seekers, the homeless).

8. Research data management

Will the research involve any of the following activities at any stage (including identification of potential research participants)? (Please check the Dissertation Ethics Guidance Notes when completing this section)	Yes	No
a. Examination of personal records by those who would not normally have access		X
b. Sharing data with other		X
c. Use of personal contact details other than email and telephone numbers (e.g. postcodes, faxes, home / work address)		X
d. Publication of direct quotations from respondents	X	
e. Publication of data that might allow individuals to be identified		X
f. Use of audio / visual recording devices		X
Explain in this textbox what will happen to the data you collect once you have completed the module: Guidance on management of your research data and on data protection is available in the Dissertation Ethics Guidance Notes. Audio transcripts will be stored in a password protected file in my University One Drive account, alongside questionnaire answers. This data will be deleted from my account following official confirmation from the University that I have passed the module.		

NB: You must NOT store data on your personal devices: all data related to research participants must be stored on your University One Drive storage facility

If you answered Yes to any of the items in Questions 7 and 8, please ensure you complete Part B of this form which requires you to explain how you will conduct your research ethically. As noted above, if you answered Yes to Question 6, you must complete the separate risk assessment form and send this to your supervisor to review before signing this form.

If you answered No to all the items in Questions 7 and 8, you do NOT need to complete Part B of this form. Please now complete Part C.

Part B: Addressing the Ethical Considerations Raised

- 9. For the ethical considerations indicated in Questions 7 and 8 in Part A of this form, provide further details and explain how these issues will be addressed. Please refer as appropriate to the Dissertation Research Ethics Guidance Notes, and the University's [Research Ethics Policy](#), the module reading list, and other resources on ethics and good practice in research available in Minerva.**

Response to ethical considerations identified in Question 7:

The topic discussed may be sensitive as it is based on real-life issues surrounding gender and online harassment. Participants will have full transparency of the scope and nature of the research, participation will be voluntary, and I will clearly communicate that participants can withdraw at any time.

All identifying details of participants will be anonymous, to protect their identity in stored data and published findings. Sensitive data will not be shared to avoid exposure or harm of participants. Sensitive topics may create distress, as an ethical measure, I will also provide participants with resources for support.

Response to data-management considerations identified in Question 8:

Participants will be provided a detailed information sheet prior to the interview, which I will also read out, explaining in-depth the purpose of the research, aims, objectives, and why their participation is necessary. It will also be made clear how the research findings will be reported, and what I will do with the data during and upon completion of the research. It will be clear that participants can withdraw from the research at any time. A consent form which they must hand-sign will also be provided before any research is conducted. There will be no coercion of participants to take part, and no participants will be under the age of 18, to ensure informed consent has been obtained correctly.

All data obtained will be kept on my University One Drive in a password protected folder (rather than my personal laptop). Information will be stored until official confirmation from the University that I have passed the module, to which data will be deleted. Names associated with the data will be anonymised, and participants contact details/data will be kept in separate password protected files.

Part C: Dissertation Research Ethical Approval: Declaration

Student declaration (for all students)	Tick as appropriate
I confirm that the research ethics form is accurate to the best of my knowledge.	x
I have consulted the University of Leeds Research Ethics Policy available at https://secretariat.leeds.ac.uk/research-ethics/university-protocols-and-policies/ and the dissertation research ethics guidance notes.	x
I understand that ethical approval will only apply to the project I have outlined in this application and that I will need to re-apply, should my plans change substantially.	x
If my research will be conducted outside the University campus, I am aware that I need to complete the separate risk assessment form and send this to my supervisor to review.	x
For students conducting research with (data on) people	
I am aware of the University of Leeds protocols for ethical research, particularly in respect to protocols on informed consent, verbal consent, reimbursement for participants and low risk observation. If any are applicable to me, signing this form confirms that I will carry out my work in accordance with them.	x

Student's signature: 

Date:15/01/2024.....

For Supervisors	Tick as appropriate
No further action required	

I confirm that the dissertation project is in line with the Guidelines for COMM5600M Dissertation and Research Ethics / COMM3910 Communication Dissertation.	X
I have discussed the ethical issues arising from the research with the student and their risk assessment (if necessary) and I agree that all issues have been accurately and fully addressed at the time of signing this form.	X
Further actions required	
Refer to module leader for further review.	



Supervisor's signature:

Date: 10 February 2025