

“WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT FOOTBALL?": INVESTIGATING CYBERBULLYING AGAINST FEMALE FOOTBALL FANS THROUGH DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS*

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This study complies with research and publication ethics.

Abstract

Football has gone beyond being just a sport for many years and has become a cultural area where gender roles are reproduced. The male-dominated structure of this sport limits women's participation in football culture in various ways. The stereotypical roles that gender imposes on individuals still lead to football being largely perceived as a "men's sport"; this situation causes female fans to be excluded and targeted in both physical and digital environments. Relatedly, this study aims to examine cyberbullying practices towards female football fans on *Instagram*, an area where gender inequality in digital media becomes visible. Within the scope of the research, female user comments on football-related *Instagram* posts were examined using discourse analysis; reactions to the comments, aggressive expressions, and sexist language patterns were analyzed in detail. In order to deepen the analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 university students from different departments, and the reasons for cyberbullying towards female fans, the social dynamics behind these attitudes, and the digital reflections of male-dominated sports culture were examined through participant statements. The findings, through discourse analysis conducted on comments directed at female football fans on *Instagram* and in-depth interviews, reveal that women are excluded and subjected to cyberbullying in football. The perception that football is a sport for men is dominant in both online comments and participant opinions. The fact that women are not seen as "real fans" causes both their knowledge base to be belittled and them to become targets of sexist discourse on social media. Although participants state that gender roles should be questioned, traditional perspectives that women are not suitable for football are still strong. It is recommended that steps be taken to increase the visibility of women in football, especially on social media.

Keywords: new media, social media, women, football, cyberbullying.

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“SEN FUTBOLDAN NE ANLARSIN?”: KADIN FUTBOL TARAFTARLARINA YÖNELİK SİBER ZORBALIĞIN SÖYLEM ANALİZİ VE DERİNLEMESİNE GÖRÜŞMELERLE İNCELENMESİ*

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Bu çalışma araştırma ve yayın etiğine uygun olarak gerçekleştirilmiştir.

Öz

Futbol, uzun yıllar sadece bir spor olmanın ötesine geçerek toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinin yeniden üretildiği kültürel bir alan haline gelmiştir. Bu sporun erkek egemen yapısı, kadınların futbol kültürüne katılımını çeşitli şekillerde sınırlamaktadır. Toplumsal cinsiyetin bireylere yüklediği basmakalıp roller, futbolun hâlâ büyük ölçüde bir “erkek sporu” olarak algılanmasına yol açmakta; bu durum kadın taraftarların hem fiziksel hem de dijital ortamlarda dışlanmasına ve hedef alınmasına neden olmaktadır. Bununla bağlantılı olarak bu çalışma, dijital medyada toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsizliğinin görünür hale geldiği bir alan olan *Instagram*’da kadın futbol taraftarlarına yönelik siber zorbalık uygulamalarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma kapsamında, kadın kullanıcıların futbola ilgili *Instagram* paylaşımlarına yönelik yorumları söylem analizi yöntemiyle incelenmiş; yorumlara verilen tepkiler, saldırgan ifadeler ve cinsiyetçi dil kalıpları ayrıntılı olarak analiz edilmiştir. Analizi derinleştirmek amacıyla farklı bölümlerden 20 üniversite öğrencisiyle yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmış ve kadın taraftarlara yönelik siber zorbalığın nedenleri, bu tutumların ardındaki toplumsal dinamikler ve erkek egemen spor kültürünün dijital yansımaları katılımcı ifadeleri aracılığıyla incelenmiştir. *Instagram*’da kadın futbol taraftarlarına yönelik yorumlar ve derinlemesine görüşmeler üzerinden yapılan söylem analiziyle elde edilen bulgular, kadınların futbolda dışlandığını ve siber zorbalığa maruz kaldığını ortaya koymaktadır. Futbolun erkekler için bir spor olduğu algısı hem çevrimiçi yorumlarda hem de katılımcı görüşlerinde baskındır. Kadınların “gerçek taraftar” olarak görülmemesi hem bilgi birikimlerinin küçümsenmesine hem de sosyal medyada cinsiyetçi söylemin hedefi haline gelmelerine neden olmaktadır. Katılımcılar cinsiyet rollerinin sorgulanması gerektiğini belirtse de kadınların futbola uygun olmadığına dair geleneksel bakış açıları hâlâ güçlüdür. Özellikle sosyal medyada kadınların futbolda görünürlüğünü artırmak için adımlar atılması önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: yeni medya, sosyal medya, kadınlar, futbol, siber zorbalık.

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Introduction

Football is more than just a sport; it is a global phenomenon with cultural, economic, and social dimensions. Today, football, which is played in more than 190 countries and has the potential to bring large masses together, has taken its place in social memory and has become an important tool for socialisation and collective identity construction. Football, which paves the way for intercultural interaction thanks to major events organised worldwide, also makes its impact felt in many areas, from diplomatic relations to international trade, and from tourism to politics.

Although the historical development of football dates back thousands of years, its modern institutionalisation dates back to 19th-century England. During this period, football, which was played intensively by male students and workers, was coded as a “men’s sport” with its structure based on physical strength, and the representation of women in this field was limited for many years (Erdoğan, 2008, p. 18). This historical background causes football to continue to exist as a field woven with gender-based inequality even today. Women’s efforts to take part in the world of football are faced with various exclusionary practices in both physical and digital environments.

The prevention of women’s participation in football is a reflection of gender inequality. The acceptance of sports as a male-dominated field has limited women’s presence in this field; gender inequalities seen in economic, social, and cultural fields have also negatively affected women’s development in sports. Due to its physical endurance and competitive structure, football is considered a sport suitable for men in social gender norms, and gender inequality is felt more in football than in other sports.

With the acceleration of digitalisation in recent years, football has also begun to be represented intensively on social media platforms. Especially on highly interactive platforms such as *Instagram*, posts about football have increased. However, female users who comment on football on this platform are frequently faced with sexist and discriminatory discourses; they are exposed to exclusionary and aggressive attitudes defined as “cyberbullying” in the digital environment.

In this context, this study aims to uncover the discursive and social mechanisms (reconstruction) of cyberbullying against female football fans on *Instagram*. The term “reconstruction” here refers to how female fan identity is socially and culturally constrained and excluded from the status of “true fan” through online comments, reproduced through discursive strategies such as othering, epistemic discrediting, mothering/moralisation, and sexual/bodily humiliation. For this purpose, comments containing cyberbullying behavior towards women on the *Instagram* platform were evaluated using the discourse analysis method. In addition, interviews were conducted with 20 selected participants using a semi-structured interview technique in the context of the reasons for cyberbullying towards women football fans, women football fan-

dom, and gender inequality in football. It is seen that other similar studies in the literature address the concepts of gender inequality in women's football, cyberbullying behavior of football fans, and gender inequality in sports.

The themes of women's football, fandom, digitalisation, and cyberbullying have been addressed from different perspectives in the literature. While Koçak and Taşdemir (2022) examined gender inequality in women's football historically, Öztürk & Koca (2018) evaluated the place of women in football in the context of a social sphere. Çakıroğlu (2022) and Karaca (2019) analysed cyberbullying tendencies through fanaticism and spectator behavior. Şengül Gültekin and Kaçay (2024) examined the transformation in fan culture with a focus on digitalization; Çırak (2020) addressed digital effects on football actors. While Talimciler (2017) examined images of masculinity in fan culture, Şimşek and Öztürk (2024) evaluated the relationship between cyberbullying and fanatic behavior in light of psychological and demographic variables.

Previous studies have examined gender and discrimination in football within a general framework (e.g., Koçak & Taşdemir, 2024; Öztürk & Koca, 2018) or have addressed cyberbullying in the context of fan psychology and fanatic behavior from a quantitative/psychological perspective (e.g., Çakıroğlu, 2022; Şimşek & Öztürk, 2024). While these studies provide important insights, they do not directly analyse how platform-specific discursive practices -specifically, *Instagram* comments- function in the "reconstruction" of female fan identity. Different from previous studies, this study focuses on a topic that has not been sufficiently examined in the literature: cyberbullying behavior against women specifically on *Instagram*. Positioned at the intersection of gender inequality, female bias, and digital violence, this research analyses the forms of cyberbullying that women are exposed to on *Instagram* in particular. In other words, this study, while revealing the linguistic strategies in *Instagram* comments through discourse analysis, also offers a methodological and theoretical contribution to the literature by delving into university students' perceptions of the discourse and the social grounding of these discourses through interviews. In this context, the study aims to make an original contribution to the field.

Reflections of Gender Inequality in Football

Sports are an important social phenomenon that affects not only physical development but also the socio-cultural and economic structure of societies. In this context, football is a powerful communication tool that brings individuals together, strengthens social solidarity, and interacts with large masses by overcoming age, gender, and cultural differences.

Football has the potential to affect individuals' attitudes and behaviors beyond social interaction and cultural exchange. However, this potential also carries the risk of reproducing gender inequality. Gender, unlike biological

sex, is a set of socially attributed roles, duties, and expectations (Vatandaş, 2007, p. 30). While these roles are clearly observed in the field of sports, the fact that football has historically developed in a male-dominated structure has led to the exclusion of women in this field.

As Clarke & Clarke (1985, p. 67) stated, while football was designed as a physical and symbolic competition area for men, women were kept away from this area and directed to activities deemed “appropriate”. This historical structure has led to women not being sufficiently represented in football and gender norms shaping the functioning of football.

The ban on women’s football by the FA in England in 1921 demonstrates the institutional dimension of this discrimination (“How the FA Banned Women’s Football in 1921”, 2022). Similarly, FIFA has long ignored women’s football. Such institutional approaches have caused football to function as a structure that reinforces gender inequality.

Women’s footballers do not have equal conditions with men’s footballers in many areas, such as media attention, salary, recognition, and access to tournaments. Low popularity leads to less economic and social support for women’s football, which structurally limits women’s participation in sports. Similar discrimination is observed not only among players but also among other components such as technical staff, managers, and fans (Aslan & Öztürk, 2012, p. 11). This inequality is reproduced in the language and attitudes of all actors in football, from clubs to the media and fan groups. The prevalence of sexist discourses leads to women facing constant pressure to prove themselves in the field of football. For example, Kerem Demirbay’s statement to a female referee, “Women don’t understand offside,” and the sexist comments that followed on social media clearly demonstrate this situation. The German Football Association’s sanctions against this incident (“The Black Mark of Football: Sexism”, 2019) reveal the importance of institutional responses to similar discriminatory attitudes. Therefore, the exclusionary structure of football towards women continues not only historically, but also at cultural, structural, and linguistic levels.

The emotional attachment to football teams is not only a sporting interest; it is a multi-layered form of belonging that includes social, cultural and psychological dimensions. While family, culture, social structure and values play a decisive role in the identity construction of individuals, football shapes this process as an effective social institution on a global scale. Fans both experience emotional satisfaction and find the opportunity to get away from the stress of daily life through the bond they establish with their teams. At the same time, this bond provides social status and the interaction established with the clubs reinforces the identity of fandom.

The industrialisation of football along with the digitalisation process has led to radical changes in the forms of fandom. According to Talimciler (2017,

p. 36), this transformation has transformed fans from passive spectators to active consumers; the loyal fan profile has been replaced by more critical and demanding individuals. Social media has become a medium where fans communicate directly with clubs, express their opinions, and organise. This environment has transformed into a digital social space where the identity of the fan is reproduced and team affiliation is strengthened. In this context, one of the important concepts regarding football fandom is "male fandom". Football is historically a cultural space where male identity is constructed and masculine practices are exhibited. Hegemonic masculinity indicators such as violence, homophobia, and sexist swearing are reproduced in this area.

Female football fandom on the other hand is a transformative social phenomenon that challenges this masculine structure. Women following the matches, being present at the stadium, and gaining visibility in the digital environment contribute to the questioning of gender roles. Female fans are leading the way in increasing inclusiveness in football and transforming cultural norms. Social media is an important platform that strengthens the presence of female fans in football. Women both produce content about football and draw attention to gender inequalities on digital platforms. This contribution allows football to gain a more democratic and pluralistic structure. International institutions such as FIFA have not remained indifferent to this transformation and have developed policies to increase the participation of female fans. These developments contribute to the reshaping of football from a male-dominated field to a culture sensitive to gender equality.

Digitalization and Cyberbullying in Football: The Dark Side of Fan Culture

With the digitalisation of football, social media has become a tool for fans to not only obtain information but also express their feelings and voice their opinions. Fans actively participate in the changing nature of football on these digital platforms and shape these areas. However, this process has also made one of the darker aspects of football culture, the phenomenon of "cyberbullying", more visible. According to Tokunaga (2010, p. 278), cyberbullying is the repeated sharing of hostile and aggressive messages in a digital environment with the aim of harming others. In football, this situation occurs through actions such as insults, threats, sexist discourse, and dissemination of false information directed at football players, technical staff, managers, fans, and especially football players' families. This type of digital violence damages not only individuals but also the inclusive structure of football.

Anonymity on social media encourages individuals to use more aggressive and unfiltered language; in times of failure, this anger often turns into digital bullying. The war language and aggressive tone in sports media feeds this aggression, making women fans and commentators in particular targets. Sexist discourses towards women limit their presence in football and damage their self-confidence. This situation both prevents the democratisation of football

and causes the contributions that women can make to the game to remain invisible.

Method

The study employed a qualitative multi-method design. According to Creswell (2014), a 'qualitative multi-method' design refers to the use of more than one qualitative data collection strategy (e.g., discourse analysis, interviews, observations) within the same study to gain a richer, more comprehensive understanding of a research problem. Rather than combining qualitative and quantitative methods, this design stays entirely within the qualitative paradigm while employing different techniques to triangulate and deepen findings. Accordingly, in the current study a discourse analysis was firstly conducted on *Instagram* comments to identify recurring linguistic strategies and themes. Discourse analysis aims to examine meaning-making processes by evaluating the use of language in written or spoken texts within the context of social structures and relations (Fairclough, 2003).

In the second phase, the resulting themes were incorporated into an interview guide and explored through 20 semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews progress within the framework of questions predetermined by the researcher while also allowing flexibility for new questions to emerge during the conversation. According to Dömbekçi and Erişen (2022, p. 145), in this type of interview, the researcher directs the process in line with a guide, and the flow of the interview is shaped by the participants' responses. The interview data were then coded using thematic analysis. In the final phase, the findings of the discourse analysis were compared with the interview themes (triangulation) to assess which discursive strategies were purely performative or rhetorical and which contributed to broader social perceptions and behaviors (e.g., justification, legitimation). This design enabled us to capture both prominent examples of online discourse and the perspectives of users.

Research questions

Within the scope of the research, how the concepts of gender, gender inequality, and female football fandom are shaped and reproduced through cyberbullying discourses on *Instagram* was questioned. Relatedly, our research questions are as follows:

- a. What are the main discursive strategies that exclude women football fans in *Instagram* comments?
- b. What themes and what linguistic forms do these strategies employ?
- c. How do university student football fans (interviews) perceive, legitimize, or question these discourses?

d. What social mechanisms (reconstruction) do the congruence/divergence between discourse analysis findings and interview data support?

Sampling

In the study, firstly, *Instagram* comments were collected from match/post-match posts. The dataset consisted of three official football club accounts (*Galatasaray*, *Fenerbahçe*, and *Beşiktaş*) and *bizbize.roportaj*, a highly engaged community/news page, with a total of 10 publicly available posts that contained 81,967 comments in total, from which 95 subject-related user comments were collected, and 39 of these comments are included/revealed in the research. These comments were made by approximately 30 unique users. Data collection covered the period between November 28, 2024, and January 18, 2025.

Accounts and posts were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) public accessibility, (b) relevance to the theme of football fandom in the Turkish context, and (c) active posting during the sampling period. Exclusion criteria included private accounts, commercial advertisements, and posts unrelated to football. Only comments written in Turkish were included in the analysis. Data were gathered manually through systematic observation and documentation, without the use of automated scraping tools, in order to comply with ethical standards for social media research.

The research was conducted with a total of 20 university students, 10 female and 10 male, residing in Yalova and interested in football, gender, and cyberbullying. Participants expressed their views on the subject through semi-structured interview questions. Interviews were conducted with the voluntary participation and explicit consent of the participants; personal data was kept confidential, and their identities were anonymised. The aim of this method was to obtain in-depth data on the research topic and evaluate it through discursive analysis. This sampling strategy was chosen to focus on the experiences of young adult *Instagram* users; however, this means the results cannot be generalised to the wider population. This limitation is explicitly addressed in the discussion section, and future studies with larger, more geographically and age-diverse samples are recommended.

Analytical procedure

All comments were first subjected to open coding, in which meaningful units of text were identified and labelled without the imposition of pre-defined categories. In the second stage, these initial codes were grouped into higher-order themes through an iterative process of thematic development informed by critical discourse analysis principles.

Reliability and ethical considerations

Inter-coder reliability procedures were applied to strengthen the rigor of the thematic analysis, as detailed above. All quoted material in the text has been anonymised by replacing usernames with neutral identifiers (e.g., [IG_C01]) and removing any potentially identifying details.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Yalova University Ethics Committee (Protocol No: 2025/108).

Findings and Analysis

In the study, firstly, cyberbullying comments directed at female football fans through the comments detected on the *Instagram* platform will be analysed, and then data analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews will be conducted.

Discourse analysis of cyberbullying comments on *Instagram* towards female *Football fans*

Female football fandom is the fandom that is one of the most important stakeholders of football, carried out by women. Female fans struggle to break the perception in society that 'football is a men's sport' and are subjected to cyberbullying when they comment on football. One of the social media platforms where cyberbullying behavior towards female football fans is the most common is *Instagram*. Cyberbullying behavior towards female fans on *Instagram* occurs in various ways. These are sexist language, swearing/slang, mocking, harassment, humiliation, threats, or hidden prejudice. The anonymity culture of social media and the indifference of clubs to the situation cause cyberbullying to be generally carried out by underage fans. It is observed that cyberbullying behavior towards female fans on *Instagram* increases when teams fail.

It is observed that cyberbullying behavior towards female fans on the *Instagram* platform is done mostly on the official accounts of football clubs, alternative news pages, individually managed accounts, or community pages. The posts generally include the football clubs *Galatasaray*, *Fenerbahçe*, and *Beşiktaş*, known as the big three in Türkiye. These clubs have the largest fan base in total, and the accounts that receive the most comments on the *Instagram* platform and where sexist cyberbullying is staged belong to these teams. Sexist language is a social problem that makes its presence felt in every segment of society. Sexist language in society is also reflected on social media platforms. In the vast majority of *Instagram* comments examined in the study, it is seen that cyberbullying towards female fans is done through sexist language.

"Women don't know football"

A post shared by the official account of *Galatasaray Sports Club* on the *Instagram* platform received 1,427 comments from users ("Winner Team's Winner Coach", 2024). A female user's comment on *Galatasaray's* post was followed by an othering comment centered on her gender:

"I assume you don't know the terms because you are a woman. Because if a lady with Gs made a comment, she is probably someone who supports a team because of her father's experience or because of success or because of handsome players" [IGC01].

This comment used an expression that reflects gender inequality towards female users. The male user, who attributed women's interest in football to reasons such as taking role models from their family, being focused on success, or supporting a team because of handsome players, made a comment based on social perceptions. The male fan stated that women can only support a certain team for these reasons and thus alienated the female fan.

In another comment, the male fan, who assumed that female fans did not know football terms, belittled the female fan based on her knowledge of football:

"Even the girls in the comments understand football better than Ali Koç" [IGC02].

The male fan who commented drew the reaction of the female fans with this comment, while some of the male fans supported the person. Male fans to the user:

"Women don't understand football; they write here what they hear their fathers say after the match" [IGC03].

"Girls don't understand football" [IGC04].

"Football is a men's sport"

Another post shared by the official account of *Galatasaray Sports Club* on *Instagram* received 35 thousand comments from users ("Good People Definitely Win in the End", 2024). Some of the sexist comments made by male users to female users who commented on *Galatasaray's* post are as follows:

"Go play in the sand; this is the place for tough guys" [IGC05].

"Please stay as a cat and dog mom; football is not your thing" [IGC06].

As seen, male users state that football is tough and that women have no place in it. In the comment, the user expressed his opinion that the tough structure of football is not for women by bullying the female user through her motherhood qualities.

Another post shared by the official account of *Galatasaray Sports Club* on the *Instagram* platform received 1,797 thousand comments ("UEFA Europa League in Week 7", 2025). In the post, it is seen that cyberbullying comments were made to a female fan who stated that she did not want to see a player whose performance she did not like in the match:

"Then when we say women do not understand football, you criticize us" [IGC07].

"Who are you? What is your title? If you do not have knowledge or manners, shut up" [IGC08].

Male fans who made sexist comments in the post are questioning women's football knowledge. Male fans want women not to be interested in football and not to comment on football. They questioned the fan identity of a female fan who made a comment they did not like. Fans who do not accept criticism of the team they support think that those who make criticisms do not belong to the team. It reflects a sexist perspective that questions women's knowledge and interest in football. Such statements are shaped by male fans excluding women's views on the world of football and seeing them as "unauthorized" in this area.

Since football has historically been perceived as a male-dominated sport, some men do not welcome women having a say in this field. The fact that men belittle women's comments and want them to be "well-mannered" points to the deep roots of gender roles. This situation not only questions women's knowledge of football but also prevents them from expressing their opinions about sports. When male fans do not accept female fans criticising the teams they support with passion and devotion, this reinforces gender inequality. Expressions such as "shut up" or "be well-mannered" question the existence of women in the world of football and limit their participation in this area.

A female user commented on another post asking for a transfer to her team. Another female fan suggested defending the team's rights along with the transfers and was met with condescending comments from male social media users:

"Look at someone who wants a transfer. She's never shopped at GSSTORE in her life, and now she's saying, "Make a transfer" [IGC09].

Here, the male fan thinks that in order to make a request from a football club, the club's licensed products need to be purchased. With the industrialization of football, the income clubs earn from product sales becomes even more important. In football clubs where transfer budgets reach huge figures, product sales are required for transfers. Thinking that female fans do not buy products, they question their sense of belonging to the team. Because of this belief, female fans are bullied with a condescending attitude.

Use of slang that degrades women

A post shared by *Galatasaray Sports Club's* official account on *Instagram* has been commented on by users 2,564 times ("First Half Result: A. Hatayspor 1-0", 2025). Cyberbullying comments were made towards female fans in the post. Male fans made comments containing profanity:

"Shut up, f*ck you" [IGC10].

In the comments, male fans used sexist profanities toward women and tried to degrade them. Some female and male fans who read the comment reacted to the situation and supported the female fan. Fans who questioned the reason for the insult used sexist profanity while doing so. Sexist profanities are quite common in society. Since these profanities made on women's bodies are engraved in people's minds, they are also frequently used by women, and this sexist language in society is also encountered in comments.

There were 7,911 comments on another post shared by the official account of *Galatasaray Sports Club* on *Instagram* ("Our First 11 Against A. Hatayspor", 2025). There were slang comments directed at female users, stating that women do not understand football:

"Oh, shut up, woman; what do you know about football!" [IGC11].

As in the comment above, sometimes a user makes more than one sexist and derogatory comment. The male fan who responded to these comments made a sexist comment targeting the mother and wife of his fellow man:

"Say hello to your wife", "I will support your mother" [IGC12].

"Get out of here, f*ggot [IGC13].

The male fans used expressions targeting the female body. While making this comment, the male fan displayed the same attitude as his fellow man and degraded women. The sexist expressions are an example of male fans displaying a similar attitude to their fellow man and degrading women. This situation reveals how insults towards mothers and wives, who are considered sacred in society, are normalized in the sports environment. Gender inequality in football and social misperceptions pave the way for the emergence of such sexist discourses. The existence of women in the world of sports is threatened by such cyberbullying behaviors, which makes the struggle for gender equality difficult. In this context, it is seen that sports is not only a field of competition, but also a platform where social values are shaped.

Another post from *Galatasaray Sports Club's* picture on *Instagram* received 2,887 thousand comments from users ("El Patron", 2024). In the post, the female user who commented on her thoughts about football using sexist language using the expression "I interpreted it as Beşiktaş's husband" was responded to by male users. The comment made by the female user shows that the masculine language in football is also used by women. Women, who are

constantly exposed to sexist language in football, comment on football using this language themselves:

“Why shouldn’t he be your husband? “How did he hit you and you’ve become a wh*re” [IGC14].

“Woman, just shut up f*ck you” [IGC15].

Male fans use sexist language when insulting and swearing. The fact that these swearings are considered normal in society has normalized the use of this language in football as well. In football, it is very common for two teams to address each other as ‘husband and wife’. Expressions such as “your husband has arrived” from the winning team to the losing team, “your husband is here” from the x team’s husband to the y team are reflections of the roles that society assigns to women and men in the concept of gender in football. The fact that the husband is considered superior to the woman and the use of the term “husband” for the winning team is an example of this situation. In this example, it is seen that the figure of the husband, who is seen as superior in social gender roles, is also accepted as a symbol of superiority in football and sexist expressions are used against women through this figure.

Women’s primary duties: Housewifery and motherhood

A post shared on *Instagram* by the official account of another major team, *Fenerbahçe Football Club*, has received 2,381 comments from users (“Goal Scorers of the Night”, 2025). In the post, it is seen that insulting, belittling, and sexist comments were made to female fans who commented on football:

“Sister, football is not your thing; mind your own business” [IGC16].

“Go home and cook; don’t talk nonsense here” [IGC17].

“Go wash the dishes and make tea” [IGC18].

These comments criticised the football knowledge of female fans. Male fans who thought that women had little football knowledge made comments that women should stay away from football. Male fans who thought that women did not know the concepts related to football stated that women should focus on housework, which they considered their primary duty.

There are over 16 thousand comments on the post shared by the official account of *Galatasaray Sports Club* on the *Instagram* platform (“End of the Match, *AZ Alkmaar* 1-1 *Galatasaray*”, 2024). Sexist comments were made to a foreign female football fan:

“I am not even Turkish but Galatasaray is the best club in the world 🥰❤️ TRES”.

A male user responded to a foreign female fan who commented [IGC19] with a sexist comment in English:

“Please go to the kitchen!” [IGC20].

The female fan's comment was responded to with a sexist comment in English. Such sexist attacks are a common example of cyberbullying against women, regardless of age, country, or nationality. The expressions used in the comment belittle the presence of women in the world of sports and reinforce gender-based discrimination. This situation poses a serious problem in terms of gender equality and undermines the potential of sports to be an inclusive area.

On a community page on *Instagram*, sexist and insulting comments were made towards a female fan ("I Came After Leaving My 8-Month-Old Son", 2025). In the video shared on *Instagram*, a female fan who stated that she left her 8-month-old baby and came to the match is giving technical information about her team. Sexist and insulting comments were made towards the female fan because she left her baby and came:

"Sister, go and make your meal at home. The man is hungry at home" [IGC21].

"That is not motherhood" [IGC22].

"Okay, sister, go and take care of the child" [IGC23].

"A woman who leaves her 8-month-old baby and comes to the match cannot be entrusted with a child" [IGC24].

"You did a good job. She says it without any shame. She left her 8-month-old baby and came. Come and expect motherhood from her" [IGC25].

The general perception in society is that women should always be home with their children. It is considered unusual, bad, and even shameful behavior for a woman to leave her baby and go to a match. According to social gender roles, women must always put their children first. It is absurd for society for a woman to leave her baby and follow football, which is perceived as a male sport. Due to all these social judgments, a female fan who goes to a match, leaving her main duties, is subjected to cyberbullying. The insults made to female fans and the questioning of their motherhood in the comments show society's perspective on female football fandom.

According to the cyberbullying fans, the baby needs its mother physiologically, and the father's care for the baby is inadequate. This situation is directly related to the roles that the concept of gender assigns to women and men. The role given by society is that the man provides for the household while the woman raises the child.

In this post, there are also male and female fans who appreciate and support the female fan for her football knowledge and who see the incident as unusual and make jokes, mock, and belittle:

"Brother, did you step on the bread? What is it to look after the child and send the wife to the match?" [IGC26].

"Sister, you are more fanatic than most men" [IGC27].

"Sister made a better comment than those who do not understand football on TV" [IGC28].

"Brother, we ask you to raise the child because the number of such conscious fans should increase" [IGC29].

As can be seen, another type of cyberbullying against female fans is in the form of implicit prejudice. A comment is made appreciating the female fan's knowledge of football, but in fact, this appreciation harms the normalisation process in society by making the event extraordinary. Users who interpret the female fan's knowledge of football and level of fanaticism by using male fans as criteria do not realize that they are making a sexist comment while appreciating. This perception in society is an obstacle to the representation of women in football and the development of football.

Examining Cyberbullying Against Female Fans on 'Instagram' Using Interview Method

Comments made on *Instagram* posts are very important in terms of showing the place of women in football and society's perspective on female football fandom. These comments reveal how gender roles attributed to men affect the formation of fan identity. In particular, comments that question and belittle the presence of women in the world of football stand out as a mechanism that reinforces gender inequality.

In the interviews conducted to deepen the research, the reasons for cyberbullying behavior among fans were tried to be determined, and the aim was to evaluate the results obtained from the findings. In this section, the findings obtained from interviews conducted with people who are fans or sympathetic to a team are examined under six subheadings classified under the title "Investigation of Cyberbullying Towards Female Fans on *Instagram* Using the Interview Method":

1. Perception of Gender and Equality
2. Football as a Male Sport
3. Perception of Football and Female Fans
4. The Dark Side of Football: Cyberbullying
5. Reactions and Emotions Towards Cyberbullying
6. Awareness-Raising Suggestions to Include Women in Football

Perception of gender and equality

Societies are built on certain norms, values and rules that shape the lives of individuals. During this construction process, individuals are assigned cer-

tain roles and expectations beyond the characteristics they are born with. The imbalance in the roles and expectations that the concept of gender imposes on individuals reveals the concept of gender inequality. According to Bal (2016, p. 16), gender inequality is any restriction or discrimination based on gender that prevents women from recognizing and exercising their rights and freedoms in political, economic, social and cultural areas. This discrimination negatively affects the existence and future of women in social life, but male and female participants in this research think that these roles should be re-evaluated today:

As a society, we assigned different roles to women and men two thousand years ago. We told women, 'You stay at home and cook; I'll bring the ingredients.' Today, cooking and finding ingredients are not that difficult. There is no need for such a division of tasks (P3, Male, Age: 21).

Individuals aim to live within the framework of universal values that are common to all societies. Women who struggle towards this goal must always strive harder and break certain perceptions in order to be equal to men in society:

We have biological differences that we are born with, but these differences do not make us superior or inferior to each other; on the contrary, they complement each other. Society has added other cultural, sociological, and psychological differences to these biological differences in order to protect its own interests. For example, one of our biological differences is that women can give birth, but women should not be forced to do this just because they can (P11, Female, Age: 23).

Football as a male sport

Football, which requires physical strength, endurance, and speed, is currently considered a male sport due to its historical origin and society's adoption of wrong perceptions. The widespread belief that women do not have enough skills for football shows the effect of gender stereotypes on individuals. This situation restricts women's presence in the field of sports and leads to football being associated only with men, not just as a physical struggle but also as an emotional experience:

Football, in my opinion, is a sport more suitable for the male gender. Women do not have enough skills for football. You need adrenaline, action, and a fierce struggle to enjoy football. Women have no place in men's football. I think there is such a perception in society. We accept it this way because we see it this way in society (P2, Male, Age: 21).

Social expectations shape the way women watch football within the framework of respecting men's space. The fact that football is accepted as a stress reliever for men reveals that women's presence in this area is not welcomed. The identification of football with men creates a barrier that prevents women from participating in and supporting sports. It is not considered appropriate

for women fans to be in the stadiums by society; this situation shows that women have internalised social judgments:

I think football is a men's sport. There are very few things that men are passionate about; football is one of them. There is a lot of swearing and slang in football, and football is not an environment suitable for us. Men need football to relieve their stress. Women can relieve their stress even by shopping, but men do not have many such areas. Society does not welcome women football fans. I think it is very repulsive for women to act like men in the stadiums. It is also repulsive for society. Women can only follow football at home or from the boxes in stadiums, but what are we doing in the stadiums? Football is a men's area; I think we should leave it to them (P6, Female, Age: 20).

Industrialised football takes shape according to the expectations of society and the culture of society in order to expand its area of influence. The industrialisation process of football has accelerated with the introduction of communication technologies into our lives. Social media, which is a reflection of society, plays an important role in establishing the perception that "football is a man's sport." The idea that social media reinforces the perception that football is a man's sport is an important element in terms of showing how social perceptions are shaped. The low rate of women sharing about football on social media platforms reduces the visibility of women in football and causes men's football to come to the fore:

I think that social media fuels the perception that football is a man's sport. The number of women who share football on social media is very few (P18, Female, Age: 20).

Perception of football and female fans

Fandom is one of the most important elements for football. Football is considered incomplete without football fans. What makes a football match meaningful is the presence of fans who support their team as the 12th person along with the football players on the field. Belonging, one of the basic emotions of humanity, is an important factor in the formation of football fandom. In fandom, there must be a high sense of belonging to a football team, attention must be paid to attending matches, and some kind of sacrifice must be made for the team supported. These behaviours, which are considered a prerequisite for being a fan, make football a passion for fans, while at the same time serving as an element that distinguishes a fan from others.

As important stakeholders in football fandom, male fans are a reflection of the fan culture in society with their endless devotion to their teams. The culture of masculinity/manliness encountered in every area of social life has also been adopted by football fans (Talimciler, 2017, p. 29). This culture evaluates the ways women understand and experience football by comparing it with men's understanding of fandom, and as a result of this comparison, a kind of fan hierarchy is created. While men's football fandom is considered more

valuable or valid, women's fandom is perceived as less important or inadequate. This situation leads to women's contributions to football culture being ignored and their experiences in this area being devalued:

The dimension of women's football fandom is important. Women can go to the stadium and watch the match or support it in any way, but there is the kind of fandom we do that I don't think women have a place in. The reason why there is no such thing is that there is barbarity and hooliganism. You never know what will happen in the match. If there was a woman in front of me, I would have harmed the woman, or a male fan would have harmed the woman next to me. How much can a woman protect herself? (P14, Male, Age: 21).

Security concerns at football matches are an important factor that negatively affects women's desire to be in stadiums. Hooliganism and violence constitute the negative aspects of sports events, and this situation causes women to feel unsafe. The idea that women may be harmed in stadiums reinforces the perception that stadium environments are risky, based on the idea that women are fragile beings, and becomes a factor that prevents women from taking part in such environments. There are gender roles, security concerns, religious and cultural reasons behind this situation. Society, which considers women as little girls who never grow up and as beings in need of protection, restricts women's areas of interest for security reasons. For women who are expected to act according to social norms, football ceases to be a means of entertainment and becomes an area where they struggle and whose existence is constantly questioned:

I feel sympathy for a team but I do not define myself as a fan. I do not go to matches. I think that society sees a woman who is interested in football as a masculine woman and thinks that women should not be fans. We, as women, cannot go. I also understand why women cannot go because there is a lot of hooliganism in the match environment, they may also get hurt. Swear words fly in the air due to the passion given by the match atmosphere. Men approach women's knowledge of football in a 'know-it-all' way again. They are prejudiced. They think that we do not know football because we do not understand it (P5, Female, Age: 22).

The dark side of football: Cyberbullying

The basis of cyberbullying in football is prejudices about football that have been passed down from the past to the present. Football has been perceived as a male sport to such an extent that even the most knowledgeable woman in society knows less about it than a man who has never followed it in his life. Male fans who feed themselves with this stereotype in society regard women's knowledge of football as less than their own, regardless of the content of their comments. This prejudiced situation, combined with the passion for fandom, causes women to be subjected to insulting and swearing comments about football on social media:

I think they cyberbully because they don't see women as belonging to football.

This way, they feel good. I am the leader of a women's fan group of a football club at my university; I watch almost all the matches, and I know offside and other rules. I was bullied a lot because I talked about football. I was also subjected to cyberbullying to the extent of mockery (P10, Female, Age: 21).

The idea that cyberbullying stems from sexism reveals the reflections of gender inequality on social media. Questioning the involvement of women in areas such as football is a result of this sexist perception. This situation shows how social norms and expectations shape the behavior of individuals. Fan identity requires establishing an emotional bond. Negative comments about the team create anger and discomfort in users. This situation also reveals that sports is not only a physical activity but also a psychological and emotional experience. The loyalty that fans feel towards their teams increases their sensitivity to criticism:

Although I do not approve of this situation (cyberbullying), sometimes I agree with the person who does it. Because I go to the match to support my team, I suffer on the roads. It does not matter if it is successful or not; I go and support my team in any case, and then the person who watches the match at home or the summary comments on social media. This drives me crazy, to be honest (P19, Male, Age: 24).

Getting angry when negative comments are made about the team reveals an emotional aspect of fan identity. Fans can be sensitive to criticism due to their loyalty to their teams. This shows that sports is not just a game, but also an experience that shapes individuals' identities. In football, according to male fans, supporting or criticizing a team that they feel loyal to and work for on social media is not fandom. Male fans explain the reason for cyberbullying behavior with the requirements of fan identity:

I get angry when negative comments are made about my team. I get up at 10 in the morning for a match at 8 in the evening. Those who criticise the team should get up and come to the match if they are really interested. There is a saying in the stadiums that 'love requires action', it does not happen by typing on the keyboard. When they criticise the team from where they are sitting, I go crazy (P1, Male, Age: 22).

Reactions and emotions towards cyberbullying

Women are usually the target of cyberbullying behaviors in football fandom. Men who use sexist insults and slang words against women in stadiums restrict women's presence in the football arena, causing gender inequality to become more prevalent. The sadness felt when witnessing these negative behaviors towards women on social media shows that sensitivity should be developed against such actions:

I did not engage in cyberbullying behaviour towards women fans on social media, but I witnessed this behaviour. I was very upset about this situation and wanted her to respond and oppose it. I wanted her to complain because the 'complain' feature on social media was deleted when the same comment was made. A person should

seek their rights, and one-on-one verbal fights should not be entered into (P12, Female Age: 21).

Women who are subjected to bullying on social media exhibit various behavioural models in the face of this situation. Female fans think that cyberbullying should be eliminated with deterrent methods. There are fans who think that comments that go beyond the boundaries of criticism should be penalised with security features on the social media platform. Fans who think that women's rights should be sought in a legal sense predict that this problem, which stems from gender inequality in society, can be solved in this way:

I was subjected to cyberbullying on social media with comments like 'What do you know? Go cook.' I feel sorry for the men who comment on cyberbullying because they will continue their lives with such a mentality. When female fans are cyberbullied on social media, I think that if necessary, a screenshot should be taken and a report should be made to cybercrimes (P8, Female, Age: 20).

On the other hand, male social media users who interpret the origin of the cyberbullying problem as related to elements such as family education and gender norms do not see reporting as an effective action. This way of thinking about cyberbullying is also influenced by the culture of impunity on social media:

I don't think Instagram is the right platform for this because this behaviour goes back to when you left your mother's house. From that moment on, you try to do the same things 10 years later, regardless of what you learned about life. This is not an issue that can be fixed with Instagram (P20, Male, Age: 22).

Distrust of social media platforms is increasing day by day. On these platforms, where people can be threatened with anonymous accounts, the number of users who exceed the limits of freedom of expression and attack personal rights and freedoms is increasing. The fact that the 'report' feature is not used effectively on social media reveals the difficulties that female fans have in seeking their rights. This situation also reveals the inadequacies of social media platforms in ensuring user safety.

Awareness-raising suggestions to include women in football

Football, which has millions of followers all over the world, needs to be represented correctly on social media. The fact that women, who are the main element of society, are worn out through an entertainment tool is a social problem. Many stakeholders need to work together to solve this problem, which deepens the polarisation in sports in society.

According to the participants, women's greater involvement in the world of sports is possible not only by supporting women's football but also by making this sport more known in society. In this context, the promotion and support of women's football stands out as an important strategy for achieving gender equality:

We need to make women visible to prevent inequality in football. This can be done with women's football. Women's football should be promoted. How many people might be watching? I am a fan too, but I can't tell you the name of a female football player. Sponsors should support clubs when they make advertisements that will attract the attention of women fans (P15, Male, Age: 22).

According to the participants, the representation of women in the sports world, such as female referees, football players, and technical directors, is also of great importance in terms of gender equality. The dominance of men in these professional groups causes women's roles in sports to be limited:

I want to see a female referee, a female football player, and a female technical director. Unfortunately, in society, these professional groups are always dominated by men (P7, Female, Age: 22).

In addition, according to the participants; creating areas specific to women will make their stadium experience safer and more comfortable. Determining special ticket prices for women will increase women's interest in stadiums. Economic barriers are a factor that makes it difficult for many women to attend sports events. In this context, offering affordable tickets will allow more women to attend these events. Increasing women's participation in sports events is an important step towards achieving gender equality. Attracting women to stadiums is important for sports to become more inclusive:

We need to attract women to stadiums to prevent inequality. For example, a section of 5000 people can be allocated in each stadium where they can watch matches exclusively for women. It could be selling tickets to women at more affordable prices (P17, Male, Age: 19).

Also, social media has the potential to be an important tool in promoting women's football. Effective social media strategies can increase the visibility of women's football clubs and athletes. Using social media to reach young audiences in particular can increase interest in women's football. Social media platforms provide the opportunity to organise creative campaigns to support and promote women's football:

Instead of closing down a women's football club, the club can be made functional by generating a lot of income through sponsorship and social media promotions. If they were to give the same place to women and men football players in advertisements, equality could be achieved for women. This would provide recognition and attract women to football. Women's football clubs should be supported. I think social media is an important tool for this... (P9, Female, Age: 21).

Discussion and Conclusion

The responsibilities imposed by gender norms on individuals create the problem of gender inequality in society. The cultural, historical, sporting and political values that make up societies are affected by gender inequality. Despite its worldwide popularity, football has also become an area where the

problems brought about by gender inequality are combated. One of the biggest problems is the increasing sharpening of the distinction between men and women in football.

Social media is the most significant assistant in football, profoundly influenced by digital advancements during the digitalization process. The perception that football is not suitable for women is like a curse passed down from generation to generation through social media. Women who love, are interested in, and follow football are forced to live under the shadow of this curse. Being a male fan means creating an eternal commitment to the team. In this context, women's football fandom is a situation that is constantly questioned. The absence of female fandom in gender roles prevents women from commenting on football, expressing their opinions, and being present in football.

On *Instagram*, a platform where women are marginalised by society through football, female users who comment are sometimes subjected to cyberbullying by their peers, but mostly by male users. In this study examining the effects of cyberbullying on women on *Instagram*, comments were analysed to understand the mindset of individuals who bully; then, in-depth data on the subject was obtained through semi-structured interviews with female and male football fans.

According to the data obtained from the discourse analysis applied to the comments, it was determined that insults and slang expressions that degrade women were used against female fans who commented under football posts on *Instagram*, the perception that football is a male sport was clearly shown, the idea that women do not understand football was dominant, and the duty and place of women is to be mothers at home.

Then, as a result of the semi-structured interviews conducted in order to obtain more detailed data, findings that include cyberbullying comments on the *Instagram* platform were obtained. According to the findings obtained from the interviews, both female and male participants think that the social gender roles that have been imposed on women for centuries should be re-evaluated and updated today. Although this idea is prevalent in the participants regardless of gender, both male and female participants have a dominant view that women are delicate beings who need to be protected and that football, which requires adrenaline and action, is not a sport suitable for delicately disposed women. This view supports and reproduces the view that football is a sport for men, and social media is thought to be a media medium that reinforces this view.

Moreover, fandom, especially by men but also by women, is defined as following all matches and going to the stadium to watch the matches of the team they support. Women cannot be defined as real football fans because they do not fulfill/cannot fulfill these "duties" for the team they support, and it is also stated that watching a match in a stadium is not suitable for the "delicate"

female disposition.

As an extension of the failure to accept that a woman may have equal or more football knowledge than a man, female football fans have stated that they are subjected to cyberbullying both face-to-face and on social media. Male participants, on the other hand, see cyberbullying that women experience as 'justified' because they comment without fulfilling the duties required by 'real' fandom.

In order to prevent cyberbullying on social media against comments made by female football fans, some female participants suggested that comments containing cyberbullying content should be reported to the platform administrators, while male participants evaluated this solution as an inefficient suggestion. This situation both reveals the problems of the 'impunity' culture on social media platforms and shows that the roots of cyberbullying behavior towards female fans are a deeper social problem beyond what is written on a social media platform.

The suggestions made by the participants regarding bringing football closer to the female gender are that women should be made visible in football, women should be included in professional groups related to football, women's football should be promoted, steps should be taken to encourage women to watch matches in the stadium 'safely,' and advertisements about football/football players should be made, especially on social media, in a way that will attract women's attention.

As a result, it was understood that cyberbullying comments on *Instagram* are at a level that threatens women's existence in football. When the results obtained from the interviews were evaluated, it was understood that male fans who engage in cyberbullying behaviour do this behavior based on social norms. Preventing cyberbullying behavior towards women is a social duty in order to protect the future of women in football.

Furthermore, in order to prevent cyberbullying against female fans and change the perception in society that "football is a men's sport", football clubs and other stakeholders of football need to produce projects that support female fans. Traditional media and social media should also be included in the process to make these projects more effective. A budget should be allocated to support women's football and women-focused projects from sponsorship and advertising activities that clubs generate a large income from. In a sport where fans are the most important element of football, awareness-raising events should be organised in the stands to include fan groups in the process. Every crime that goes unpunished by the law in society causes a bigger problem. In order to prevent cyberbullying against women on *Instagram* and other platforms, legal processes should be supported by football clubs. Football clubs, NGOs, and fan groups should stand by women who are subjected to bullying. Social awareness should be created to train female coaches, techni-

cal directors, football players, and managers, and remarkable projects should be carried out on social media and other areas with state support.

While the findings provide valuable insights into the discursive mechanisms of cyberbullying targeting female football fans on *Instagram*, the study's sampling design imposes certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The interview participants were all university students residing in Yalova, recruited through purposive and convenience sampling, which may have introduced self-selection bias. Individuals who volunteered to participate might have had heightened awareness of gendered dynamics in sports fandom or more direct exposure to online harassment, thus shaping the thematic patterns identified. Moreover, the relative homogeneity of the age group (young adults) and educational background could have constrained the diversity of perspectives, particularly those of older fans, non-students, or individuals from different socio-cultural contexts. These factors may have limited the representativeness of the findings, and caution should be exercised when extending the results to broader populations. Future research would benefit from incorporating a more geographically and demographically diverse sample, as well as employing stratified or random sampling techniques to mitigate bias and capture a wider range of discursive practices.

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