"Football is influenced by Money and Winning.": The intersectional effects of the commodification of football on English South Asian Women.

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To God be the Glory first and foremost. Secondly I dedicate this to my Mum and Dad back home as well as my Aunty and Uncle here in the UK. If it were not for your love and encouragement, alongside God's grace then I would not have come this far in my academic journey. Thank you.

Abstract

Elite women's football in England is going through a period of commodification whereby the Women's Super League (WSL) is receiving record breaking TV rights deals with the average revenue per club almost doubling from 2021 until now. Such levels of commodification would lead to increased racial diversity on-the-pitch as undervalued minority talent can be cheaply purchased to yield high returns on investment relative to wages. However, despite this South Asian women remain severely under-represented both on the pitch and within coaching positions with no South Asian representing the senior England Women's National Team and only nine coaches countrywide holding the highest coaching qualification (UEFA Pro License). Furthermore, this under-representation also operates within media as the discussion of South Asian female representation in football is rather mute. This dissertation seeks to address this by exploring how the commodification of football creates intersectional boundaries for South Asian women on-the-pitch, on the dugout and in the media room. Using semi-structured interviews and inductive thematic analysis this investigation argues that the commodification of football objectifies footballers which isolates South Asians unable to fit in among their majority white teammates, it prioritizes the characteristics of the coach being a technocratic authoritarian which plays up to white male hierarchies that render South Asian women invisible. Finally, it de-prioritizes South Asian representation discourse as the main aim of the sports media is to commercialize the sport to attract future consumers which allows for discursive practices of silencing upon South Asians within media.

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Ethics Approval Confirmation and Declaration

"The School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your ethics application and we can confirm that your ethics application has received a favourable ethical opinion."

Research Question: How has the commodification of women's football created intersectional barriers against the development of English South Asian Female footballers and coaches as well as limit its discourse in the media?

Methodology: Semi-structured interviews.

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Introduction

Participation in sport has become a highly valued asset for governments as they provide positive social integration within diverse populations (Spaaij, Knoppers and Jeanes, 2019). Elite football on a socio-cultural level is often held up highly in this regard as post-racial and meritocratic with Simon Kuper and Stefan Szymanski (2014: 118) claiming it to be due to football's market transparency that erodes discrimination. Since it is visibly clear to identify good players from bad, it was economically shrewd to employ undervalued minority players and overperform relative to increasing wages during the hyper-commercialization of English Men's Football during the 90s thus explaining the eventual integration of black players within the men's game. Although this logic has been replicated greater in the women's game with regards to LGBTQ representation, this assumption comes under serious question in England when accounting for race, particularly among South Asian women who make up half of England's largest racial minority group, representing around 3.45% of the British population (Office for National Statistics, 2022). While Black representation has risen with there being five players called up for the England Women's National Team (Lionesses) squad in their April 2025 Nations League fixtures against Belgium. Up from just two that represented the Lionesses at the 2023 World Cup in Australia and New Zealand (Gerty, 2023; 2025). South Asian women still remain unrepresented at senior level within the Lionesses, although a number have registered caps at youth team level most notably Aman Dosanj, Asmita Ale and Sareet Kaur Binning who currently captains England's U-16s. The Lionesses and English Women's Football stand out as the subject of focus as the Lionesses recent successes winning Euro 2022 and finishing second at the 2023 World Cup has propelled them into the public sphere. Meanwhile, the English Women's Super League (WSL) is experiencing a period of hyper-commercialization with their record breaking sponsorship with Barclays worth £15 million a year for three years (Sanders, 2024) and the average club revenue almost doubling from £2.7 million in 2021/22 to £5.7 million (Deloitte, 2024). According to Kuper and

Szymanski's (2014) in theory clubs should now be targeting and employing undervalued South Asian talent to outperform wages as they could purchase and develop the world's best South Asian female player on the cheap. However, the failure of this theory warrants questioning over the commodification of football as Lim (2025) and Barker-Ruchti et al., (2015) argue the downsides of the commodification of football as it strips players off their humanity and renders them objects. This dissertation seeks to contribute to this discourse by introducing intersectionality to determine how the two combine to create barriers denying the development of South Asian women.

Literature Review

Questions on the racial diversity of English women's football are not new with Brabdury (2013), Magee (2008) and Velija and Silvani (2020) arguing that women's football is still largely administered by white men who utilize informal employment processes to maintain a cycle of white leadership and deploys discursive practices of denial and silencing to suppress public criticism of racism using the example of Eniola Aluko's case against former Lioness manager, Mark Sampson. Although these sources open the door to investigate the effects that a white majority coaching staff has on a racially diverse squad along with the reasons as to why coaching is white and male dominated in the first place (nine British South Asians currently hold the UEFA Pro coaching license, the highest coaching award) (The Football Association, 2025). The academic literature on this issue is largely skewed towards the Black voice which raises another question as to why the South Asian voice is underrepresented within representation discourse and the effects it has keeping them off the pitch. South Asian academic literature largely comes from Ratna (2010; 2011; 2013) and Ahmad (2011) who argue that South Asian women are in the constant process of negotiating their identities in order to fit in among their white teammates with Ahmad (2011) particularly focusing on how the identity question of the hijab saw South Asian Muslim women abandon English Women's Football to participate in the Women's Islamic Games. These sources face the challenge of being outdated with

over a decade having passed and significant changes having occurred within the women's game. Most notably the professionalization of the WSL in 2018 which introduced the English women's game to commercialization and FIFA's official acceptance of the hijab in 2014 (BBC Sport, 2014) which outdates the findings of Ahmad. The most contemporary source focusing on the representation of South Asians is the Sky Sports (2024) documentary, "Football's Hidden Talent." Although it identifies a critical statistic that South Asian women make up 11.4% of the grassroots participants with that number plummeting to 0.91% in the development phase (U-12 to U-16) and 0.82% of scholars (16+). Their qualitative interview data depends on the testimonies of South Asian working in executive positions for anti-discrimination organizations instead of heeding the voices of current South Asian footballers and managers. Their interviews are captured but ultimately with the intent of promoting their careers and potentially creating new role models. Although it is important to frame them in such a positive light, their opinions on the barriers around their development should be valued as currently active participants within English football. With these research gaps having been identified, although this dissertation does not intend to provide a singular universal explanation for the underrepresentation of South Asian women in women's football, it offers an intersectional analysis of the effects that the commodification of football brings on the development of South Asian players and coaches on top of an explanation as to why there is minimal discourse surrounding South Asian underrepresentation. Ultimately, the research question being answered is "How has the commodification of women's football created intersectional barriers against the development of English South Asian Female footballers and coaches as well as limit its discourse in the media?" This dissertation found that the commodification of football intensified the isolation of South Asian female footballers within their predominantly white clubs during their development phase. It also maintained the profile of manager as a white male by rendering South Asian women as invisible and it maintains the discursive practice of silence within sports media which limits the narratives of South Asian representation.

Chapter two is a justification of the theoretical frameworks utilized in my analysis which are a combination of Cultural Industry (CI), Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Intersectionality. Chapter Three, is the methodology of my data collection and synthesis which are a combination of semi-structured interviews and inductive thematic analysis would be described. This would be accompanied with a brief description of the limitations of this approach and the study as a whole. Chapter Four would describing and analysing the themes generated from the data. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings before signalling the next direction that this academic discourse should take in football's attempts to be more racially inclusive within the women's game.

Theoretical Framework

Theodor W. Adorno's (1975) concept of the "Culture Industry" is what would be used to define commodification. This Marxist concept from the Frankfurt School argues that cultural industries standardizes and mass produces cultural goods like film, radio, magazines and sport to promote consumerism and generate profit. Commodification occurs as cultural experiences such as sport are transformed into products for sale and mass consumption (Adorno, 1975: 13). Women's football at the elite level is now not merely a recreational activity that expresses one's physical talent but it is a commodified spectacle aimed at entertainment and profit (Lim, 2025: 2). Barker-Ruchti et al., (2015) explores the effects it has on players and coaches as the player becomes measured by their sporting outcomes hence treated like a machine rather than a thinking individual. The coach meanwhile, operates as a technocrat responsible for developing the talents of the player thus creating an authoritarian coach-player relationship which further objectifies the player. Lastly, Özsoy (2018: 181) incorporates the media in the evolution of sports communication as big business in the 90s, which is comparable with the WSL striking a £65 million five-year television deal with Sky Sports and BBC from the 2025/26 season (Garry, 2024), creates a sports and media nexus. Sports programmes become a lucrative form of advertising which benefits the media whilst the increased competition for

broadcast deals provides a rich source of income for the sports organizers. As a result, the media no longer reports on sport as a public service neither does sport provide the media with access merely to increase public awareness (Özsoy, 2018: 181). Their actions are driven by commercial forces which manipulates the masses into passivity by producing standardized cultural products that inhibit critical thinking and reinforces the dominant social order (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2012). A key example within football is how normalized it is to label academy graduates with terms like "products" and academies as "producing" them which subconsciously reinforces the idea that players are assets first before they are human (Harmer, 2022). The drawback of this theory is that it groups players, coaches and the media as single entities when in reality they consist of multiple identities whose experiences of the commodified game would vary. Although this theory provides the framework of understanding modern women's football, it must be complimented by other theories that recognize the role of identities in facilitating different experiences that inhibit the development of South Asian women in particular. Which is why intersectionality works alongside CI within this dissertation.

Intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (1991), is essential in understanding how identities overlap and interact with one another to create different experiences within the same context be it the commodification of football within the playing squad, coaching department and or media. Valentine (2007) provides a useful lens as she argues that people view themselves differently according to the spaces they inhabit, with some spaces being more likely for them to feel included than others as the dominant group within the space has the power to construct the hegemonic culture. This links with Butler's (1990) theory of performativity as in order for one to fit in within the hegemonic group, they have to negotiate which identities to play up and which ones to play down for them to be successfully integrated. Alexander and Knowles (2005) expound on this by arguing that identities can be produced either by the people themselves claiming attachment to a certain group or by the external group providing racial "ascriptions." This is crucial as it points out the performance of identities is not just how it is encoded but also how it is decoded by the audience to determine whether the identity is fitting or not for the majority group. Furthermore, it accounts for the

difference in experience between South Asian women and mixed South Asian women as their appearance of "looking white" allows them to avoid certain racial ascriptions as they are classified as white. This is useful in explaining the dynamics between players, coaches and the media particularly how South Asian women operate within those fields that although everyone is going through the process of commodification (all the players are being viewed as objects) their identities result in contrasting experiences. Intersectionality provides a voice for the South Asian female experience but it is also important to understand the mechanisms with which the dominant group within the space in football, construct and maintain their hegemonic culture along with how that creates barriers for South Asian women. The final framework that satisfies this is CRT.

English women's football on the pitch is predominantly white and off it is white and male (Szymanski, 2023) so CRT essentially encourages scholars within the sociology of sport to ask the simple but vital question, "has race been considered in this context?" and "whose knowledge and experience is valued in this setting?" (Kilvington, Lawrence and Fletcher, 2024: 3). Feagin's (2006) white racial frame is useful as it understands how minorities are imagined within white dominated spaces. The white racial frame refers to the white collective memories and histories which includes negative racial images, stereotypes and interpretations. The white-dominated structure provides the platform to reproduce such pervasive racial meanings that frames minority groups below a racial hierarchy that puts whites at the top whilst also rendering racism invisible which explains how racial micro-aggressions are passed off as "banter" (Kilvington, 2019: 143-144). This is useful in exploring the continued presence of racial microaggressions and the role it plays in providing different experiences to South Asian women operating within football as compared to their peers. Furthermore, the frame incorporates the distinctive language and imaging tools used to enforce racial hierarchies (Kilvington, 2019: 143-144). Spaaij, Knoppers and Jeanes (2019) expound on this using by utilizing Foucault's (1972) power and knowledge nexus to highlight the discursive practices used by those in positions of power to keep women and people of colour underrepresented in sports organizations. This would be critical in explaining why South Asian discourse around their representation within women's football

still remains marginalized, relatively so to other minorities particularly Black women. All in all these three theories would provide a comprehensive understanding of how women's football marginalizes South Asian women. CI sets the atmosphere of modern day football driven by commercial interests which objectifies players, encourages authoritarian technocratic coaches and creates a media landscape built to satisfy commercial interests. Intersectionality explains how different identities are received by this landscape differently and CRT explores how the commodification of the game maintains its whiteness.

Methodology and Limitations

This investigation was interested in exploring the lived experiences of British South Asian women either operating as players, coaches or in the media. The players provide a contemporary on the ground perspective of the squad dynamics and coach-player relationships that exist within women football clubs. The coaches provide a structural outlook on how coaches are educated along with their various norms and media explores why there is little discourse surrounding South Asian representation. Considering the backdrop of this investigation revolves the absence of South Asians among the Lionesses, the definition of English would follow the criteria of FIFA's (2021) latest eligibility rules. Regarding one's South Asian heritage, the participant would have to claim birth and/or historical familial link to countries that make up the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) which include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (United Nations, 2022). Semi-structured interviews were utilized in generating the data for the investigation as it provides a critical space for participants to tell their stories on their own terms, analyse myths that make up common culture about race and women and uproot distorted ways of thinking about race and gender that create tacit acceptance of dominant white and male norms within football (Delgado, 1995: xiv; Singer, 2005: 370).

A total of 7.5 hours of interview data was collected through 30 minute Zoom interviews each from

five "players", five football "coaches" and five "media." The players should at least be currently

playing at amateur level, with at least three having played for both a majority club (one mostly

consisting of white players) and a minority club (whereby it is mostly made up and run by minority

ethnicities) in order for a comparable analysis between the dynamics, norms and levels of inclusion

felt by them between those clubs. Coaches should at least hold a UEFA C Coaching Qualification as

this is the first level involving face to face learning which is necessary in determining the kind of

coaches produced or encouraged to be produced. Media represents both mainstream journalists and

social media creators who produce consistent football related content on any of these platforms;

Instagram, TikTok or YouTube. It is important to note that these categories were not rigid as the

careers of all the participants are all complex and fluid with many having experience in at least two of

them. Two of the coaches played at high level academies before transitioning into coaching, the

same applies with media as two of them also previously played at high level academies before

transitioning towards media and finally three players are concurrently occupying a coaching role

even if it is mostly voluntary. This dissertation embraces this fluidity and it would use it to primarily

make comparisons between different generations particularly with the players. Participants in Media

and Coaches were older than the Players so their playing experiences were juxtaposed to determine

any changes/advancements/regressions in their experiences. Knowing that these interviews may risk

psychological harm to participants as they may have to retell incidents of racial/gendered abuse, no

direct questions on the matter were made with subtle prompts being utilized instead such as "Tell

me a time when you felt like you had to prove yourself?" and "Which clubs did you enjoy playing the

most and which one the least and why?" All participants were anonymized alongside the clubs they

play(ed) for with participants being labelled using the format "Player 1," "Coach 1" or "Media 1."

With regards to sampling, a snowball approach was utilized in recruiting participants as it

empowered them to shape the research via including the voices they believed should be heard.

Moreover, due to the lack of contemporary data documenting ethnic and gendered diversity in

women's football, this approach was key in ensuring the gathering of a purposeful and meaningful sample of voices (Kilvington, Lawrence and Fletcher, 2024: 7). The interview was advertised publicly using a poster created describing the purpose of the study, and was shared primarily on Instagram with a QR code attached for potential participants to book an online meeting at their time of choosing through the Cal.com scheduling software.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim using a combination of the TurboScribe software alongside manual transcriptions to clear out any errors. Cognizant of my identity as a Black male, the data was coded using inductive thematic analysis through the Nvivo software. This form of analysis is useful as it first allowed for the identification and creation of themes only "through careful reading and re-reading of the data" (Rice and Ezzy, 1999: 258). Furthermore, with it being inductive rather than deductive, it separates the data from my theoretical interests (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 83) as by "critically not knowing" the participants produces the knowledge (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2021: 465-466). Interview transcripts were organized into multiple descriptive codes before then being grouped thematically which organized them to the central themes of discussion. These themes are: (1.) The isolated object, (2.) The invisible manager and (3.) Breaking the Media silence

Despite the aforementioned use of thematic analysis, a limitation of this research is the fact that the researcher is a Black man meaning regardless of how the results were analysed, it was the work of a non-South Asian woman. Furthermore, my gender may have created a barrier for the participants to explore more gendered centric issues. The future solution to account for this would be to work with contacts of charitable football organizations specializing in South Asians in sport to identify and access our sample. Furthermore, this investigation would warrant an expansion of researchers to incorporate at least a female individual who would also participate as an interviewer. Lastly even with the benefits brought about using snowball sampling, the approach led to a heavy bias in London participants as a result of recruiting within the personal and professional contacts of the participants with only one coming from Leicester despite the midlands boasting a higher proportion of the total

Asian population (21.3%) than London (20.7%) (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Future research should explore other regions to determine the existence of geographical factors in the experiences of South Asian women in football.

Findings

The isolated object

The first key theme deduced from the analysis is the feeling of isolation among South Asian female footballers as a consequence of football's commodification which objectifies them as they are ultimately defined by the skills. According to Barker-Ruchti et al (2015: 4) as high-performing sports shift towards market results, actions soon become investment driven with stakeholders such as national sporting organizations, sponsors and coaches becoming "investors" with expectations of returns on investment. This transforms the athlete into assets with fixed expectations to fulfil market demands (Johns, 1998). Coach 5 summarises football as *"influenced by money and winning"* alongside being a *"squad culture…if you weren't part of it then you won't get the full experience."* Player 3, Coach 2 and Coach 3 all implicitly support the idea of football being driven by wins as their experiences playing the game were under conditions where little time was put on teambuilding. *"I only went in for like football, that's it."* (Player 3).

As a result, being part of the *"squad culture"* is now necessary for inclusion as they operate outside the confines of the club. However, the majority white makeup of this *"squad"* creates an intersectional barrier to the minority South Asian women as they are confronted by the racial stereotypes that are imagined within that white dominated space. This forces their minority South Asian teammates to negotiate which identities to play up or play down in order to fit in (Rottenberg, 2003) and enter the *squad*. Elling, De Knop and Knoppers, (2001) argued that within sport

integration between majority and minority groups involving women, it was more common for the

majority girls to make friends through sport than the minority girls which substantiates the idea that

youths look for friends with similar backgrounds to themselves (Walseth and Fasting, 2004: 119).

The testimonies support this as all Players as well as two Coaches and Media admitted to their lack

of inclusion being particularly pertinent in their teenage years which may explain the sharp decline

in South Asian women participation from 11% at grassroots to 0.82% from 16 onwards. Player 5 and

Media 3's testimonies stand out.

"But obviously the girls, I think, I feel like the girls from other teams, I did struggle at first like,

you know, get to know them quite well and vibe with them the same way, just because

purely for cultural differences, maybe or different interests outside of football. And it's weird,

because I'm not really a talkative person off the pitch anyway, but I do still feel more

confident around coloured people. I don't know why that is. I mean, maybe it's just me. But

yeah, I think this season was probably my most confident season in women's football. Like

before, when, you know, I felt like I was the only coloured person. I wouldn't really, for

example, I wouldn't dribble with the ball past like two, three players, which I would do when I

was, you know, a kid and I was playing with, you know, my cousins and stuff." (Player 5)

"when I got older and then I was going into like football rooms and I was like trying in trials

or teams like the first thing everyone would be like oh it's Bend It Like Beckham look it's a

Bend It Like Beckham girl and it was just a bit like it kind of reinforced in my head like you've

just seen my brownness like it wasn't like a very welcoming thing like people who didn't know

you'll call me Bend It Like Beckham before knowing my name oh yeah yeah and that for me is

like a bit disrespectful it's like me comparing it's just not on right you don't you just don't do

that so I remember it thinking in my head like yeah you just like subconsciously like fed the

fact that I'm brown and I'm like okay it's not in my head clearly I'm like I'm different in a way

and I think people were doing it in a funny manner but I'm like but it's not funny because you're just you're comparing me to one brown girl that you've seen on football so I don't know like it's not the film that's the issue I think it's people's subconsciousness." (Media 3)

Player 5 despite not identifying as talkative, plays down her confidence due to the cultural differences which had an effect on her style of play. She became more risk-averse attempting fewer dribbles and take-ons with her majority white teammates compared to her South Asian cousins which adds a new layer of intersectional research in football as one's style also constitutes their identity. In the context of commodification in football where stakeholders demand results from their "assets" this performative strategy may prove detrimental as their play becomes worse thus their value within the team is diminished.

Media 5, meanwhile during her playing days presents the second facet of performativity whereby negotiations of one's identity is also determined via how they are "read" by others creating situations whereby identity readings may not be seen as fit (Ratna, 2013: 111) and as a result a different identity marker is placed. An identity was constructed around Media 5 based on the fictional character of Jess from the movie Bend it Like Beckham. Despite her reference to the humour surrounding it, this is a form of racial micro-insults which despite being disguised as banter, it diminishes her South Asian racial heritage and her individual identity (Kilvington, Lawrence and Fletcher, 2024: 10). In short, the player base is not a valuable source of inclusivity as South Asian women are forced to negotiate their identities. If successful then they would be classified as an insider however, from the testimonies of this comes at the cost of either suppressing one's identity or facing racial micro-insults which is no wonder why the participants struggled to be included.

Coaches meanwhile assume a critical role in the inclusion of South Asian female footballers with their idea of what a coach is being a sort of pseudo family figure. However, with the demands of

football necessitating return on investments from the players, the coach transforms into a mechanic on the objectified player which at best limits man-management communication or at worst provides opportunities for the "expert" to impose their racial understandings which alienates their minority players even more. Coach 3 highlights this when explaining her coaching philosophy in the aftermath of her playing days.

> *"I didn't get that but I would want to provide that if I was in an academy setup. I want the kids to feel like they have an older sister not a coach. Somebody they can bounce some ideas off. A friend where they can be like 'I'm struggling with this' and I can be like 'Yeah, how can we make it better for you. Help me come up with a solution.'* (Coach 3)

Inman and Tewari (2003) identified the family as an important contributor to the psychological functioning for South Asian diaspora with its provision of a tight knit ethnic community, providing avenues for psychosocial adjustment and integration for immigrant groups. It is also worth pointing out that the testimonies consistently highlight the importance of family particularly parents as enablers of their footballing talents which challenges the stereotype of South Asian apathy towards football. Player 1 was accompanied by her father on long train rides to and from training, Player 4 was similar as her father took her *"everywhere"* with regards to football and Player 3 was motivated by her parents to start a football YouTube channel where she can showcase her skills. Opposition only came with regards to the levels of financial security a career in football brings. Considering the South Asian diaspora still ranks high regarding poverty with Bangladeshis and Pakistanis ranking highest of ethnic groups (23-26%) with Indian following right after (9-11%) (Davies and Collings, 2021: 23) education is viewed as the "safe" option for South Asian females experiencing a dual career balancing sport and education (Gledhill and Harwood, 2015). Media 1 was told to stop playing in order to focus on her GCSEs by her parents but she holds no regrets as the women footballing landscape was such that a career in the sport would bring financial instability. However, this

sentiment appears to be changing with the next and current generation ironically as the commodification of women's football has seen increased investment and interest in the sport allowing parents to comply with their children's dreams so far as they are able to witness potential financial upsides. Player 5 at first experienced backlash from her extended family for playing football instead of prioritizing education but as her successes became more tangible, primarily being called up to represent the Pakistan Women's National Team, the doubters "weirdly" turned into supporters.

With that in mind, clinical literature on South Asian immigrants has suggested that disruptions in nuclear and extended family support may create feelings of isolation and acute distress (Ahmed and Lemkau, 2000). This situation regularly comes up within the context of academy football whereby South Asian female players are detached from their family ties and as a result, turn to their coaches. Lyle (1999) argues that coaches highlighted mutual understanding as being one of the most important elements of a coach's philosophy. However, this mutual understanding is centred around developing the player's abilities rather than knowing them as an individual creating a coach-player dynamic of expert and learner (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2015: 5) as highlighted by Media 2 during her time spent playing at an academy.

> *"I was away from family as well. I didn't live with family at the time. I lived like two hours away, three hours away. So like you can imagine. Yeah. So I didn't have family around. I had my friends and obviously friends are different to family. And to be fair, some of my family, some of my friends are my chosen family. But it's very, very different from having that initial support system that you used to have when you were growing up to no longer having that constantly. Like my parents never came to any of my games when I lived several hours away because it was just too difficult to come. So you can imagine like not having that support system from having it constantly growing up. I don't think one of my family members came*

to any of my games across three years. Those three years, which is fine because obviously I

understand it. Like it just made me realize that I really do rely heavily on that support. And

like I very much started football to be around family. So like now that I wasn't around my

family and now wasn't getting the initial support that I needed just to like push me a bit to

get back to playing. So when I was down, I needed that, let's go, come on. Like, I needed that

pat on the back. I needed that extra hug. But I never really got that. But then that's the

environment. But then also, like, knowing that, because of it being very different, sometimes

it did feel like raw. Okay, you know what, I don't know if I'm included in this." (Media 2)

The coach was expected to fulfil the vacated role of her family, however, the absence of a *hug* or *pat on the back* along with her admission of that just being the environment suggests that this level of communication is outside the coach's remit as they are primarily tasked with engineering the player's abilities first. Furthermore, with the player having been relegated to a product, it creates the atmosphere for the coach to utilize their white frame and create their own identity of the player that reinforces racial stereotypes. Not only has the players been commodified but they have been branded through the use of racial stereotypes. Player 3 recounts one of her experiences with her coaches.

"we've got new managers still showing up week in, week out,

they made a little nickname for me, which I wasn't happy about, and you can probably guess

what it was, and I was, like, you know, little curry bunch of hot chocolate, and I'm just like,

oh, that's great. So, yeah, so then I got bullied that way."

The coach's nickname was encoded to revolve around banter but it was decoded by the player as bullying due to it being based off racial stereotypes of South Asians liking curry. The fact that they were new is also important as it shows that they chose not to start by knowing their players via

communication and building empathy but instead they defaulted to racial stereotypes as means of creating meaning from their players. The coaches who were expected to fill the emotional void left by family, instead fail to resonate with them and at times perpetuated racial stereotypes as a result of identifying them as a player first before a person. As a result, participation within a minority club became a viable alternative with the likes of Player 3, Player 4 and Coach 2 now being key members within their minority clubs. Although they compete at a lower level, they provide valuable source of inclusion as Player 3 highlights.

> *"At (Minority club), it's a very different, like, thing, you build up relationships on the pitch and off the pitch, which actually make the team way, way better, and jell way, way better, and that's what we were lacking at (Majority Club), the way they were making us feel so exclusive, like, there was no, no inclusivity there, there was a lot of just, it was very divided, and so I only went in for, like, football, that's it, left, we didn't stay for any, like, food together, like, we didn't have anything like that, and then that was that."*

There exists controversy over the usefulness of minority clubs in integrating societies as their data in Germany shows that sports competitions among majority and minority clubs become arenas for ethnic conflict (Walseth and Fasting, 2004: 117). However, with Player 3's appreciation of the minority club's ethos of relationship building, the very existence of minority clubs could be attributed to the failure of majority clubs to integrate South Asian women (Lovell, 2003). All in all, South Asian players face compounding experiences of isolation within the club setting. They are objectified with their talents forming their identity but as the playing squad create bonding communities, the participants faced racial barriers to entry in fitting in. Furthermore, the coach compounds these experiences by enforcing their objectification whilst utilizing their power to define them using racial narratives as they are never defined more than an asset. These findings are particularly helpful in explaining the aforementioned high dropouts of South Asian female

footballers during their late teens (Football's Hidden Talent , 2024)

<u>Invisible manager</u>

The first section of the findings highlighted the role coaches contribute towards the creation of

intersectional barriers on South Asian female footballers. The coach's mentioned within the

testimonies primarily identified as white male and this section explores how the commodification of

football creates the identity of what Kuper and Szymanski (2014: 70) call the "white messiah" in a

football coach and how that alienates the development of South Asian women in this field. All

participants testified to have been coached by majority white men. The total female count was seven

but six of them were white with only one coach being a female South Asian and that was under a

minority club. From a coach's perspective the commodification of football orients the coach to be a

technocrat that adjusts the objectified player to maximize their talents and provide returns on

investment (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2015: 5). Furthermore, this creates a coach-player relationship built

on rank and power with the player being the expert and the player the follower which calls for the

coach to become authoritarian in nature (Jones, 2009). All in all the type of coach expected is a

technocratic authoritarian which allows white men to draw on their collective memories and

histories of racial and gendered stereotypes (Feagin, 2006) which creates hierarchies that puts them

on top and South Asians at the bottom to the point of invisibility. Beginning with the process of

earning one's qualification, Coach 3 who is currently undergoing her UEFA C admitted that there is

minimal emphasis on developing coach's man-management techniques.

> *"I don't think they talk about how you should get to know your players. They do a little bit,*
>
> *they've touched the subject but not fully. They could be better."* (Coach 3)

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According to the official Football Association (2023) course structure for their UEFA C, there is a module set on "Understanding the player and their game" which may suggest that the coaching scene is prioritizing the importance of creating the relationship with the player as a person. However, this attempt is proven to be superficial in practice as Coach 5, who is currently on her UEFA B course highlights how the very structure of the coaching qualification fails to understand her and her Muslim faith.

> *"The problem is, I can't take part in these sessions, because I'm against males. So a lot of people say you learn what's taking part, but because I'm in an environment for males and my religious reasons, I don't want to be in contact with men. So I don't want to be playing a game and where I can bump into them and stuff. So if that was an environment full of female coaches, I will be able to partake in the sessions. So for me, that is still kind of a barrier not being able to play in these sessions. So as coaches, we have to deliver to our peers. And so when I deliver, they take part, but when they deliver, I can't take part."* (Coach 5)

From UEFA C onwards, fellow coaches are expected to role play as players during practical sessions (The Football Association, 2023). However, the religious faith of Coach 5 prevents her from interacting in these sessions since they are mostly alongside men. The failure of the course to make any arrangements to accommodate represents a failure in truly "understanding the coach" with the sessions just going along without her emphasizing the technocratic coach whose prime objective on the player's abilities without knowing them personally. Meanwhile, Coach 5 being side-lined renders her invisible as a coach as the emphasis on technocracy allows the white-dominated space to imagine the minoritized group with the stereotype of absence.

Shifting towards the remit of the coach requiring to be an authoritarian, the notion endorses masculine tendencies which under male dominated spaces, assumes South Asian female coaches as incapable of leading a team. Coach 1 accounts for this whilst being assessed for her UEFA C.

> *"So in the course they come down to visit you. So I think when you turn up there they kind of build a picture of you being like "Ok, this South Asian female, she's coaching under seventeen boys, how are they gonna react." Because you just assume under seventeen boys would have attitude to a female kind of thing. So when we did the training session the boys were listening to me. What I wanted to get out of the session, they did. So it was fine and at the end we did a review and feedback session on what he thought and the first comment he gave me was "When I saw these boys come into the training session, I did not think that they were going to listen to you. So it is a good credit to you and the club that you have created a positive environment where they are doing what they are told." So I thought of it as a bit wrong in a way. Because you are already making judgements about what the situations are than actually seeing people in the grassroots or in their environments and the whole point of the course is to provide you with information so you can go back to your own teams at whatever levels you are playing at."* (Coach 1)

At first this could be interpreted as Coach 1 proving herself within the white male dominated space of coaching. But it is more indicative of the "risk" factor that has long denied coaching positions from minorities (Kuper and Szymanski, 2014). The suspicion that the boys would not pay Coach 1 respect draws itself off sexist stereotypes regarding women's personalities (Spaaij, Knoppers and Jeanes, 2019: 368) being incapable of handling the masculine demands of coaching. This is the same risk factor that was on the assessor before the session that exists in most of coaching hiring processes that would make the likes of Coach 1 invisible among candidates due to her supposed incapabilities of commanding respect unlike white men.

Transitioning into the world of employment, even when South Asian women secure coaching roles, when paired up with men, their coaching capabilities are not recognized and are in fact redefined to suit traditional gender and racial roles. Coach 1 highlights this when discussing her career thus far.

> *"In like away games, managers would assume that you would be the secretary or the admin lady then I would walk to them and be like "No I'm the manager" and then they take a different tone to it. I've had a manager at the end of one game who came over, shook my hand and did not say anything and I have abbreviated my name especially in messages so that people know that I am a female or get the hint for it. So preseason, I messaged a manager for a friendly and he had turned up to this friendly and he went up to my dad assuming he was me other than my name being a female and coming over to me. So it's kinda like, it tends to be more of the managers on the opposition team that don't have the awareness that women can be a part of a boys management team."* (Coach 1)

By abbreviating her name to make it more clear to opposition coaches online, Coach 1 demonstrates performativity in downplaying her race by making her name sound more anglicized in order to pass off as white (Rottenberg, 2003). However, despite this effort it failed in securing her recognition as the opposition manager, through his white frame, relied on his racial and gendered pre-dispositions to deem it not possible for the South Asian woman to be capable of holding such a coaching role. Instead he placed that role on her father due to his masculinity and interpreted her actions of sending the emails as club secretary or admin work which plays best on racial and gendered stereotypes of South Asian women primarily occupying office roles. Not only is this evident of performativity ultimately being subservient to the white frame in determining who fits in and who does not, it also demonstrates the relative privilege of South Asian men as compared to women in coaching. The father of Coach 1 passed as a coach compared to her in the eyes of opposition coaches because of his gender which suggests that South Asian men have one less identity obstacle to overcome in order to fit in. Coach 4 meanwhile, represents a different form of invisibility in her

coaching role that adds another layer of intersectionality. She admits that her identity as half white

and half South Asian has allowed her to dodge racial discrimination because she "*looks white.*"

However, she cannot escape the gendered language tool that questions her authority and intellect.

> *"if I was coaching with a man, which I often was, they would like automatically defer to him*
>
> *on like technical stuff, tactical stuff. And then they would come to me if like they'd hurt*
>
> *themselves. They needed to see the physio. They wanted to go to the toilet, things like that.*
>
> *Those sort of like maternal, like nurturing things. But what I would say is, is that's because*
>
> *those stereotypes are often reinforced by the other male coach. Sometimes players would*
>
> *present to a male coach and be like, oh, I've hurt my foot. Go and see Coach 4. Oh, I'm not*
>
> *sure if she stood there and I want to make this run here. So I think, yeah, it took me a while to*
>
> *sort of have the confidence to deal with it. And I think sometimes it's difficult as well, like*
>
> *when you're coaching week in week out with the same person and they're, they've like, they*
>
> *lean the tactics board against you or they, do you know what I mean? They almost just use*
>
> *you like a prop rather than, and I was more qualified as well. A lot of the men that I coached*
>
> *with, I was actually more qualified than, but that's a whole other thing that their egos didn't*
>
> *want to even address that. So yeah, I struggled with it."*

Even though Coach 4 was more qualified than her male colleagues, they still managed to usurp her

within the club hierarchy through the use of distinctive language tools to enforce their racial and

gendered dominance (Kilvington, 2019: 144). By deferring injury issues towards Coach 4, it reinforces

traditional gendered roles of the woman being confined to in-house issues whilst the responsibility

of leading befell the man. The act of leaning the tactics board on her reinforces this from a racial

perspective as it plays up to the stereotype within football that the white man held the "brains" of

any footballing operation (Kuper and Szymanski, 2014). Typically this would be complimented by the

role of black men providing the "brawn" but in this case the complimentary package is authoritative

brains of the white man with the motherly kindness of the South Asian woman which de-legitimizes

Coach 4's qualifications and renders them invisible. Although, Coach 4 was able to circumvent racial prejudice through her mixed heritage that allowed her to be classified as white unlike Coach 1 whose race branded her as a secretary. Coach 4 was still undermined by her gender that created the perception of her inability to function as a strategist which in turn sidelined her and made her invisible to the less qualified white male coach..

All in all, the commodification of football prioritizes the authoritarian technocrat which plays into the white racial frame that fails to recognize the presence of South Asian women within the coaching qualification spaces. Furthermore, it distinctively creates barriers for South Asian women as the technocrat plays into notion of white intelligence in football which racially inhibits South Asian women whilst the authoritative demand creates a gender barrier on the assumption that women are incapable of leading. This blurs out South Asian female coaches both in the learning and employment processes which explains why women's coaching is still permeated by white men as highlighted by the Players participants.

Breaking the media silence.

The final theme identified from the data aids in explaining the lack of overall discourse surrounding South Asian female representation with it being that the issue of South Asian representation ranks low among the concerns of the influential in football. This aligns with the sport and media nexus as sports news is a discourse serving promotional interests of the commercial sports industry. As a result, news that questions the functioning of the sports industry, such as the racial and gendered exclusion of South Asian women, is looked down upon as it is difficult to create a culture of consumption of sport and media when the coverage is self-critical (Nicholson, Kerr and Sherwood, 2015: 113). Media 5 highlights this notion.

> *"So you have a huge number of active resistors. And then you've got a huge number of those*
>
> *who don't see it as their problem. So when you come in and you say, oh, I'm here to do this,*

27

already a lot of ears are closed. Or those that are listening are those usually those who are

underrepresented themselves. The power is held in those who are represented. You must

probably want to talk to white men quite often because they're the decision makers. Are they

the ones who buy into what you say? No, unless it's on their agenda somewhere because it's

being forced out on them, or it's kind of landed in some of their organizational objectives,

then they might have ears for it. But yeah, I think there's a huge issue." (Media 5).

According to Media 5, the people that hold the power to make change on the issue (white men), do not recognize it as a pressing concern whilst the people that do who tend to be underrepresented themselves, do not hold any influential power. The act of their ears being shut is a demonstration of the resisting discursive practice of denial/silencing (Spaaij, Knoppers and Jeanes, 2019: 369) whereby discourse from the marginalized is ignored with the reasoning that there are other more pressing matters in store. Participants also highlighted another resisting discursive practice that silences the South Asian discourse and that being the employment practices within media. Farrington et al., (2012: 42) argues that informal employment strategies within media houses maintains and recycles the whiteness within those areas thus silencing the discourse of minorities as they are not present and identified. Media 1 highlights this by lamenting how despite her social media platform, she gets overlooked in terms of mainstream journalism opportunities thus silencing her when it comes to South Asian discourse. She further highlights the need for role models to lift up one another which is the strategy utilized by the white community according to her. Media 5 supports this reasoning particularly among the Black voice by highlighting the presence of Black female players over South Asians that the Black voice has found their stories prioritized which highlights the importance of role models and suggests that their consistent on-pitch presence is more complimentary towards the commercialized discourse of the sport-media nexus. Interestingly, this strategy was utilized on Coach 4 who is now a part-time blogger for a major sports media outlet. She describes acquiring the role

through no formal application but rather the connection of a South Asian female already operating within the media.

> *"So it wasn't something I applied for, it wasn't something that I had set myself to do. It just came about in such a weird way and in some respects I think that it is quite unhelpful for people who are trying to get into it on purpose and they are like 'What, I've done all of this.'"* (Coach 4).

Despite getting this opportunity, by labelling it "unhelpful" she admits to the flaws of this strategy as it disproportionately promotes individuals into positions of discursive power over others who would want to promote the discourse thus inadvertently enhancing discursive silence. Three out of the five participants in Media do not participate in mainstream journalism and instead chose to grow their social media platforms as a form of emancipatory alternative.

> *"I think the social media aspect of things it's like a it's funny because people say it's always like oh it's just an extension of who you are just post what you like and there's like all these generic answers to that and I was like there is truth to that like you should post what you like and you should post what you enjoy but I think also like it kind of like the more I'm in it the more I'm like oh wow if I didn't have this awareness it would actually I could easily get burnt out from social media too because I think it's actually hitting triggers that you didn't notice as being a south asian woman for example I would think about things like it actually makes you be in survival mode sometimes and like being a like a second gen immigrant like I'm used to seeing my parents in survival mode and stuff like that so it's like a weird balance of like having control and free time but then also like it's triggering your survival mode and stuff like that so for my south asian woman it's like it's everything that you've were taught not to have like instability like it's not reliable you don't know when your next job's going to come from*

but equally you end up getting the most freedom you've ever got in your life and so I think

entering that space of the south asian it's like you're going against a lot of grains and yeah so

it's a very conflicting job." (Media 3)

Participating within social media requires a balance which what Hoose and Rosenbohm (2023: 634-635) argues as akin to self-employment as despite enjoying the freedoms of independence in terms of delivering content there is the constant finding of sources of income. Media 3 highlights this as "survival mode" that is particularly linked to her upbringing and that prioritizes financial security. However, considering Media 3 is the only one who does social media creation full time with Media 1 and 2 balancing their platforms with their full time jobs showcases the limits of social media in generating discourse. Furthermore, whilst taking into account the frustrations of Media 1 in not securing further media opportunities despite her current social media work, the perception still remains that operating within mainstream media outlets is key developing their discourse. Lastly, Media 2 suggests a change in discourse that focuses on uplifting South Asian women in the game rather than emphasizing their struggles.

> *"So like, having people come on a panel, and speaking about their various experiences. But*
>
> *most importantly, their successes, I don't want to focus on their struggle. At the end of the*
>
> *day, we already know that there's struggles. Stop talking about the challenges and the*
>
> *struggles. Start talking about what we've actually succeeded with, and what we've gone to*
>
> *achieve. Because people don't start with their achievement, they go, oh, yeah, racism. Oh,*
>
> *yeah, this. Oh, yeah, that. But what have we actually achieved? Because if you think about it,*
>
> *I can go and say, yeah, I played professional football. But then a lot of the time, like this kind*
>
> *of research, that is going to be focused on the struggles of the Southern Asian player. This is*
>
> *where the media representation is wrong. Because if you go, oh, yes, Media 2 managed to*
>
> *achieve international level playing for England. Did you know that she was Southern Asian?*

Or did you know a Southern Asian reached international level for England? Like, that's so much better than going, oh, yes, Media 2 suffered like racism and like, injury and stuff like that. So it's how media represents it as well. Because when a white person hit first team, or a white person go to international for England, it's normal. But then it's like, oh, yeah, did you know all the challenges that this black girl, this Asian girl face? No, we're not here, we know that there's struggles, we want to know that there is a person up there, like, stop talking about the struggle and start talking about what they've succeeded with." (Media 2).

There is a need to disassociate South Asian women solely with their struggles to adapt within the football as their struggles become their defining feature. By emphasizing more of their successes then the South Asian woman becomes normalized like her white counterpart who whenever they enter the scene is never confronted with discourse surrounding their racial struggle. Lusted (2009) argues that what makes whiteness unique is its ability to exist beyond race and operate as normal whilst the other races assume abnormality. This strategy by Media 2 is suggested to make South Asian women occupy that space which may make South Asian discourse more prioritized. Farrington et al., (2012: 131), however, cautions this dangers of over-hyping players as minority players who appear on the fringes of professionalization experience unfairly high media gaze that creates increased pressure on them to succeed not only on their behalf but for the entire minority group. Ultimately, the player should build their own reputation rather than have it built for them which requires a balancing of promotional discourse which both highlights the achievements over the struggles of individuals, without adding any unnecessary pressure to deliver over and abundantly.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this dissertation utilizes the testimonies of English South Asian women in football to determine how the increasing commodification of women's football creates intersectional experiences upon South Asian women that inhibit both their development within the game and their

abilities to discuss their various barriers. Through a combination of semi-structured interviews, inductive thematic analysis and the theoretical frameworks of cultural industry, critical race theory and intersectionality. The commodification of football has created three unique barriers to entry within the women's game for South Asians, be it playing, coaching or operating in media. First, the player's talents objectifies them as assets within the team which creates isolation that is exacerbated by a combination of the coach's lack of man-management and the act of performativity needed to fit in with the majority white squad. Secondly, the role of the manager now consists of being a technocratic authoritarian due to the need to extract the talent out of the playing squad and provide a return on investment thus de-prioritizing skills in understanding their players as people. The identities of a technocrat and an authoritarian both substantiate norms of white male supremacy under the predominantly white male coaching environment whilst rendering the South Asian female coach invisible through perpetuating norms of their supposed lack of footballing intelligence to be a technocrat and masculinity to be an authoritative leader. Finally, the sports-media nexus renders South Asian discourse irrelevant as it pursues news stories that encourage sports and media consumption which creates discursive practices of silencing particularly through the informal employment habits of media.

In terms of recommendations, it must be noted that the English Footballing Association has initiated a South Asian Football Plan titled "Build, Connect, Support" that aims to increase participation within the next three years (2025-28) (The Football Association, 2024). What this research would suggest is that this plan pays special attention to how coaching is delivered in order to prioritize man-management just as much as tactics in order to make minority female footballers feel more welcomed within the squads and for coaching as a whole to pivot away from an identity that privileges white male hierarchies. Finally, the discourse surrounding this project should emphasize more on the successes of South Asian women in football instead of their failures in order to begin the process of normalization which would establish them more within discourse. However, it should avoid over-hyping the rise of upcoming talents with an interesting case study being the handling of

the rise of Sareet Kaur Binning who became the first ever South Asian to captain the Lionesses at youth team level. Future scholarship should focus on both the Build, Connect, Support project and the surrounding discourse of players like Sareet to later assess the effectiveness of integrating South Asian women into the increasingly commodified English women's football.

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