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‘Pretty disgusted honestly’: exploring fans’ affective responses on Facebook to the modified rules of Australian Football League Women’s (AFLW)

Abstract

In this article we argue that the ‘turn to affect’ can provide a generative framework for working through key sticking points for women in sport. Through an analysis of the rule changes and subsequent social media comments in the lead up to the inaugural Australian Football League Women’s (AFLW) competition, we demonstrate the power of emotions for intensifying and resisting discussion about women’s participation in male-dominated sport, as they accumulate through fan encounters on social media. Through a focus on the expression of emotions such as disappointment and contempt, we interrogate the collective workings of digital affects for constituting gendered knowledge production and subjectivity in sport contexts. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of feminist thinking for sport research and practice.

Keywords: qualitative research; affect; social media; Australian rules football; Australian Football League Women’s; sportswomen; feminism; professionalisation; gender

1. Introduction

In February 2017, the Australian Football league (AFL) launched its inaugural women's competition, the Australian Football League Women's (AFLW). The introduction of the AFLW signified an important shift in the Australian sporting landscape, creating a semi-professional pathway for women's participation in this national sport and prompting wider cultural conversations, particularly on social media, about the socio-cultural impact of the competition for challenging stereotypes of women in sport (Sherwood et.al, 2019). The Australian Football League (AFL) is one of Australia's most popular forms of sport entertainment (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), with increasing female participation at grassroots and elite levels (AFL News, 2016a). This article focuses on a vital, but seemingly innocuous part of the sport's development throughout 2016/17 -- amendments to the rules of play for women. It examines those rules, and fan responses to them on the social media platform Facebook, as a key entry point to consider how managerial decisions about sport shape public/fan expressions of feeling about sportswomen and women's sport.

At the core of this article is our centering of affect as key conceptual tool for understanding the growing popularity, and also the backlash against, women's professional contact sport, and how this understanding might help inform practice perspectives in management or organizational contexts. This approach builds on earlier poststructural feminist work in sport management (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008; Hoeber, 2007; Sibson, 2010; van Amsterdam, Claringbould, Knoppers, 2017) by drawing on new materialist debates that question the way discourse has been privileged at the expense of bodies and senses, and ontologies that displace the human subject as central. The primary aim of this article is to investigate the ways governing principles (in this case, rules of play) and affective responses are entangled in the growth of professional women's

sport. Within sport organizations, responsibility for gender equity has often been assigned to women themselves, despite ongoing institutional and cultural marginalization (Shaw and Frisby, 2006). Shaw and Frisby (2006) note that ‘this perspective is limited because it risks putting blame on women for their historically produced circumstances that have resulted in fewer and less powerful positions for women’ (p. 487). Rather than blame women for their marginalization, we argue that feminist theorisations of affect can provide generative insights into the relations of power that continue to position women’s sport as ‘less’. This is not to turn away from discourse analysis and other perspectives, but offers an extension of these approaches as a way of considering those visceral, felt, intensities that exceed textual signification (Stewart, 2007) and the role of affect in shaping knowledge production and subjectivity in sport contexts.

We undertake a feminist affective analysis of the rules and the AFLW’s public Facebook page to investigate the cultural politics of expressions of public feeling about official rules of play. Facebook continues to be the biggest social network worldwide, with over 2.7 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2020). Sport marketing research has found that authenticity and engagement are key to attracting and maintaining a Facebook fan base (Pronschinske, Groa and Walker (2012), yet authenticity is a slippery concept. Facebook affords sport fans the opportunity to comment on and react to league and team communications. Concurrently, sport organisations can use Facebook to engage with fans through posts, but also through dialogue in comments. In this article we are interested in affective responses sport fans express to posts on social media and the ways Facebook therefore enables an intensity of feeling and emotion. These online exchanges, between a sport organisation (in this case the AFLW) and fans, and between fans themselves demonstrate how affective forces function to simultaneously normalise, contest and reinforce gender norms in sport.

Online exchanges allude to not only the socio-cultural constructions of gender that sport organisations must respond to when addressing diversity and inclusion in sport, but to the public circulation of feelings and emotions as they relate (or attach) to sportswomen's bodies as their capabilities, limits and potential are discussed in interactive, networked forums such as Facebook. In affective terms, the public feelings about gender issues in sport that are expressed online (as they cohere around the topic of rule changes), provide an opportunity to map 'connections, routes and disjunctures' for 'where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things' may eventuate (Stewart, 2007, p. 3). This project is therefore guided by the research question, how is women's sport constituted through the materialities of digital technology, words, rules, and affects within social media?

By engaging with the 'turn to affect' as a strategy for supporting the sustainability of women's professional sport competitions, this article contributes to a growing literature concerning affect in sport studies (see Pavlidis and Fullagar, 2016; Roy, 2014), and offers a productive framework for understanding some of the key challenges for research about the professionalization of women's sport. By foregrounding affect in our study of social media responses to AFLW rules of play, this article offers an exploration of gendered workings of power in sport and the ways power moves through sport management structures, communities of supporters and the bodies of women athletes in interconnected ways. It is through an analysis of the amended rules and the online reactions to them that we highlight the importance of attending to affect and emotion for what it can reveal about how multiple fields of power circulate through texts and feelings -- what Ahmed (2004b) calls 'affective economies' -- to generate resistance and demands for change to the gendering of sports participation.

2. Sport, feminism and the turn to affect –mediated and material encounters

Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), affect is understood as, ‘an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act’ (p. xvi). In engaging with the turn to affect we conceptualise affect as a *relational force* connecting feeling -- as it is practiced by corporeal bodies -- to social, political and cultural bodies of thought, organisation and action (Ahmed, 2004b; Ringrose & Renold, 2014; Stewart, 2007; Wetherell, 2013). That is, while affect may manifest as the expression of emotions by individuals, it is at the level of public feeling that we contemplate the force of affect to give rise to connections, attachments and sentiments across the social worlds of the AFL (virtual/material; organisational/informal, economic/cultural, on-field/off-field). Within this framing, feminist engagements with affect draw attention to the entanglements of bodies, states of feeling and discourses of meaning-making about gender. In the context of women’s sport, capacities for social action and feeling are entangled with an investment of hope for gender progress in ways that produce unanticipated bodily affects (anger, excitement, disappointment) that influence support for and even participation in AFLW, as well as influencing management decisions and fan reactions.

Writing about roller derby – a predominantly women’s sport – Pavlidis and Fullagar (2014) observe that ‘affect is relational and produced through cultural contexts that shape, and are shaped by, the performance of identity and power differences’ (p. 33). Their analysis of affect in this sport setting highlight the material dimensions of affective intensities, noting that the sport itself is created through ‘repeated actions that move and shape women’s identities in different ways’ (Pavlidis and Fullagar, 2014, p. 33). This emphasis on repeated actions is reflected in Margaret Wetherell’s concept of ‘affective practice’ (2013). Rather than see a radical

cut between affect and meaning, Wetherell (2013) encourages affect researchers to find ways of thinking about relationality, ‘embodiment, entanglement, the middle ranges of agency, patterns that organise but cannot necessarily be articulated’ (p. 359). Similarly, Ahmed (2004) offers a rethinking of the relation between ‘bodily sensation, emotion and judgement’ (p. 5). These three poles (as opposed to the common polarised position of affect vs emotion, or affect vs cognition) are key to our understanding and therefore deployment of affect in this article.

In this context, the rules of sport are a force which influences the ways bodies can move on the field, yet they are also sometimes a site of discussion and frustration among fans. By combining a range of perspectives on affect (drawing from different genealogies that emphasise relationality, practice and the political dimensions of affect and emotion) (Stephens, 2015) we create a multi-layered framework through which to map the connections and disjunctures between managerial decision-making about the structure of women’s football matches, online emotions expressed about AFLW game rules by fans, and the materialities of women’s bodies playing Australian rules football. Attending to affect opens up fields of possibility to reimagine the capacities of gendered bodies -- individual and collective -- rather than adhering to notions of the body as autonomous, independent and self-sufficient. This is an important theoretical shift and one that can support gender equity in sport organisations. As Ahmed (2004) writes, “emotions” have been a “sticking point” ...relegated to the margins’ (p. 4), and yet what is relegated to the margins is often ‘right at the centre of thought itself’ (Ahmed, 2004, p. 4).

While sport management has begun to engage with the turn to affect (Hawzen, McLeod, Holden & Newman, 2018), connections between affect, digital encounters and gendered relations of power in sport warrant further reflection and analysis. Nor has sustained consideration been given to the ways in which relations of affect and meaning-making about gender in sport are

always and already mediated, as occurs in digital and new media spaces (Hillis, Paasonen, Petit, 2015; Parikka, 2012; Reichert & Richterich, 2015). With people's experiences of sport being transformed by interactive digital technologies (Hutchins & Rowe, 2013), our research invites theoretical engagement with the trajectories of thought emerging from online encounters (the virtual) and their capacity to generate physical practices and sensations about/through the gendered body (the material/actual).

This article takes a unique focus on online mediated practices as affective relations, which have important implications for sport managers, marketers, sponsors and administrators who develop strategy, often 'on the run'. Social media is a site of affective flows whereby fans and others, as prosumers of media content, can participate in the co-creation of knowledge and meaning about sport (Hutchins and Rowe, 2013). The interactive, participatory and information-sharing features of social media allow users to contest rules of sport in ways that have not occurred before. Digital technologies enable the publicness of women's voices (and those voices supporting women) to be 'heard' in a form akin to social activism (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, 2019). Historically, traditional media outlets such as newspapers and television have covered very little women's sport (for example, Lumby, Caple and Greenwood, 2009). Although this is slowly changing, there continues to be an emphasis on men's sport in these outlets (Cooky, Messner and Musto, 2015). However, social media and other online spaces can provide a platform for the promotion and discussion of women's sport (for example Heinecken, 2015; Olive, 2015; Sherwood et.al., 2019; Vann, 2014), with reverberations out into the material world. The view that the 'digital and the material are not separate but entangled elements of the same processes, activities and intentionalities' (Pink, Ardèvol and Lanzeni, 2016, p. 1) informs our

affective exploration of the feelings about (and emotional responses to) gender difference as they are publically shared online encounters.

3. Background: The rise and rise of women's AFL

While supporting the AFL is widely accepted as a legitimate pastime for women (Toffoletti, 2017), the playing of Australian rules football has traditionally 'encouraged women to stray into territory beyond what is socially acceptable' (Lenkic' and Hess, 2016, p. 7) and women's teams and competitions have formed and floundered through the decades (Sanders, 2015). Having challenged social and structural barriers throughout the past three decades, women now have an 'almost complete' pathway to playing Australian rules, with opportunities to play from the age of five until seniors and semi-professional elite levels. The current sticking point of being 'semi-professional' (AFL News, 2016c) is a caveat placed on the AFLW by the league's organisational body, the AFL, thus constituting a structural barrier in the ongoing development of elite women's football.

At grassroots level, the last five years has seen numbers of women and girls playing Australian rules football double, with women's participation reaching 25 per cent of the total number of Australians playing Australian rules football (AFL News, 2016c), with this number continuing to rise each year. AFL CEO Gillon McLachlan refers to this growth in women's participation as 'a revolution' (AFL News, 2016c). The launch of the national women's league in 2017 marks the first elite, semi-professional pathway for women's Australian rules participation and is reflective of both the quantity and quality of women players across Australia. Despite being framed as a positive and revolutionary development, it is the construction and representation of women's football as 'different' to the men's game that is of interest to our

paper, for what it might reveal about how current practice-based approaches to sport management conceptualise women's participation in sport, and how this informs subsequent decision making.

The rules of Australian rules football are set out in the Laws of the Game (see AFL Rules, 2017) and adaptations to the laws of the game are made in different playing contexts, for example for juniors, with slight variations applied to the women's game (see *Victorian Women's Football League, Rules and Regulations*, 2016). As noted by the AFL Rules (2017), the laws are revised and updated annually to 'keep concurrent with evolutions in the game itself and public perceptions of the game...the impact of drugs on sport, as well as improved understanding of the long-term consequences of certain injuries' (AFL Rules, 2017). In preparation for the AFLW the AFL consulted independent research and made amendments to the rules of the women's game in order to 'ensure this is a great game to play and exciting to watch' (AFL News, 2016b). While the AFL refer to player approval and consultation (AFL News, 2016b), questions remain around how this took place, with rule changes announced after players had been drafted to clubs. This is an example of the ways in which sports management has been applied to and done to the women's game. Key rule adaptations and additions (Table 1) are provided in the method section, highlighting similarities and differences between the AFL men's, the VFL women's, and the AFLW at the time of data collection.

4. Method

The data collection and analysis process is guided by our theoretical approach to explore affect as a way of engaging with and 'reading' texts as they *moved* us to know AFLW in different ways

(Booth, 2008). This approach enables us to consider how gender and power circulates through relations of feeling as expressed during the mediated practice of posting and replying. This approach to analysis has been called *reading for affect* (Berg et al, 2019). In reading for affect we note the relationality of affect. Affects, ‘involve (re)actions or relations of “towardness” or “awayness” in relation to such objects’ (Ahmed, 2004, p. 8), the object in this case being the AFLW. These relations of away or towards align subjects in various ways; love/hate, hard/soft, apathy/excitement can be read in relation to one another. Berg et al (2019) note that reading for affect focuses ‘on the use of an emotion-bound vocabulary in order to map the relational affective dynamics in which bodies are enmeshed’ (p. 6). By vocabulary, we also include grammar and punctuation – exclamation points, emoticons, and so forth.

Our analysis focuses in on two key areas. First, the official rules amendments announced by the AFL and available on their website, and second, the official AFL Women’s page on Facebook and specific posts related to the rules. Data were collected over five months (October 2016 -- March 2017). The AFLW Facebook page is a public site with more than 170,000 followers and is one of the primary communication methods of the AFL for the women’s competition. This timeframe allowed us to monitor content about the draft, preseason, and administrative processes of the AFLW in the lead up to the first season. On the 19th of October (3 days after the draft of players) the AFL announced the rule set to be used in the 2017 inaugural women’s competition. The key rule changes (Table 1) were posted to the AFL website and shared via the official AFL Women’s Facebook page. In total there were 134 comments to this particular post. Another key flashpoint that we consider in this article occurred on the 19th January, 2017, where a new rule making the chest area sacrosanct was announced (AFL News, 2017). This post had several comments, but was then removed from Facebook. On the 22nd

March 2017 another rule change was posted in the lead up to the grand final relating to time on, this one garnering 52 comments, 23 shares and over 350 reactions. These rules and collections of posts constitutes our dataset, with each relevant thread we identified equating to one unit of analysis. Data were recorded via screenshots.

[table 1 about here]

This article is part of a larger virtual ethnography focused on women and sport where we continue to pay close attention to a number of ‘communities’/pages around each of our case studies (AFL being one case study). For transparency, the first author used her own Facebook account, including her full name and clear indication that she is a ‘feminist sociologist’. At the heart of ethnography is ‘tracing or *following*’ (Møller and Robards, 2019, para 9) and for this particular article, the virtual ethnography involved ‘liking’ particular posts and regularly checking in on accounts to keep updated on issues and patterns (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2019, p. 39) related specifically to the launch of the AFLW. Through this process of liking and following, we were opened up ‘directly to the sharing of others’ (Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 130) working with the Facebook algorithm (Butcher, 2015) to ensure we were seeing relevant content. Postill and Pink note that these are ‘entangled’ processes, vital for the types of in-depth data we hoped to engage with.

Although the AFLW Facebook page is ‘public’, we have been careful to ensure that the identities of those who commented on relevant posts remained anonymous. To do so we considered what internet scholars have called ‘the distance principal’, which states that, ‘an increase in experiential or conceptual proximity between researchers and participants prompts

the former to identify more closely with the latter. They are then more prone to perceive the latter as ‘humans’ and to better consider the ethical implications and liability which that implies. (Markham and Buchanan, 2017, p. 106). To test the distance principal, we reverse searched the comments on both google and Facebook (Tiidenberg, 2018) noting that it was not possible to identify specific persons. We have also used generic identifiers in the findings and analysis section below, including M (for man) or W (for woman) – which we garnered from profile picture and name – and a number to indicate order of comments on a first (1 means first, and so forth). In understanding gender in sociological terms as a culturally contingent and changeable construct, rather than a ‘fixed’ or essential biological quality, we do not question the legitimacy of how individuals choose to present their gender online.

Consistent with a feminist poststructural approach (for example, Ringrose & Renold, 2014), we explore what these public exchanges on the AFLW Facebook page regarding the rules might contribute to how gender difference in sport is produced, contested and grappled over. Our research is not a positivist exercise as it does not claim or aim to represent all football fans or social media users.

Issues such as pay and conditions and player uniforms have also generated considerable public debate about gender differences between men and women players and how they should be managed. Similar concerns around how to ‘accommodate’ women in sport are also evident in media reporting of other Australian sporting codes that have relatively recently launched women’s leagues, such as Cricket Australia and the A-League (soccer). While we are limited in our ability to address all these issues here, we note these developments in order to draw attention to the wider context in which our case study is situated. In the section below we focus on how women’s bodies in AFLW are put into motion by online discussions about the rules of the game

and what affects this generates in relation to other bodies. In doing so we offer, as Pavlidis and Fullagar (2013) suggest, ‘another way of thinking through the movement of gendered subjectivity as it is imagined, felt and reinvented through virtual sport spaces’ (p. 679).

5. Findings and Analysis

Analysing the rules and the responses to the changes demonstrate the undeniable entanglements between the embodiment and affect of sport, gender, and sport policy and practices. In other words, rules of play, much like other forms of governance, shape subjectivities (who it is possible to be). These subjectivities have nuanced and unexpected managerial implications for AFLW in terms of how the sport is promoted, the kinds of players that are recruited, the experience for fans, the experience for the women playing, and the representation of gender and sport in the Australian public sphere more broadly. This section is presented in two parts, discussions of rules concerning (i) a shorter and smaller game (ii) pain, injury and women’s ‘vulnerable’ bodies.

5.1 Disappointing. A shorter and smaller game

According to Simon Lethlean, AFL general manager of game and development, ‘the women’s game will be enhanced by reducing the number of players on the field, as well as the size of the football’ (AFL News, 2016b). These and other rule changes are justified by the AFL as necessary to achieve their overarching goal for the women’s competition ‘to ensure this is a great game to play and exciting to watch’ (AFL News, 2016b). At least a third of the responses on Facebook expressed support and understanding of the rule changes, however this is only some of the story. Responses to this rule change on Facebook ranged from anger, to acceptance, but the most common affective response was disappointment. Although developing a sport product

that is marketable and exciting to watch in the saturated sport landscape is considered key to the long-term sustainability of AFLW, the new rules position the women's game as 'less' in decreeing women use a smaller ball and play for a shorter time period than the men (and previous women's competitions, including local matches). As one poster commented:

I'm very supportive of the AFL-W, but find some of these rules very disappointing. Give the girls a chance to show they can play AFL, not a modified version of the game. This just perpetuates the negativity some people are showing towards the progression of women's sport

For this commenter, these new rules undermine the hard work and dedication of women in the preceding years and fail to incorporate the relationality of gender, and instead positions (in this instance) femininity as fixed and capable of certain things (and not others). It is further telling that 'girls' have had a chance 'to show they can play AFL' in the state leagues and in exhibitions matches and, whether based on this or because of this, the AFLW have amended the rules accordingly. There are two conflicting affects at play shaping this poster's response – positivity (support) for the game, and disappointment at the way the game is being shaped by administrators.

Disappointment is a let-down. To be disappointed, one has to first have an expectation, a hope of a desire fulfilled. The establishment of the semi-professional AFLW competition has gone some way to fulfilling women's desires for inclusion and participation in this previously male dominated sport, with Willson et al (2018) arguing that the very presence of the AFLW has enabled a narrative of hope for women and sport. Focusing at the micro-level on fans' social media comments, we can see that hope is tangled with disappointment as they try to make sense

of rule changes that undermine the work women have previously done. Ahmed's work on happiness (2010) and even love (2004a) thinks through the ways 'positive' affects can be used as a tool of compliance, particularly for women. Yet social media makes some space for women to speak back, however tentatively.

Take for example another commenter who also expressed both hope and disappointment.

W8. I'm happy there is an AFL just disappointed the game I've played for 21 year has to be changed for an audience that largely didn't know it existed prior to this year.

These mixed feelings highlight the tensions and unanticipated flows of affect in circulation through social media as fans come to terms with the (historical) shift from community clubs to a (semi)professional league. Affects work in surprising and non-linear ways, particularly in sport contexts. Pavlidis and Fullagar (2014) write, 'love, pride, joy and belonging – all understood as "good" affects most of the time – can lead to unexpected and sometimes disappointing outcomes, while shame, anger, aggression and even hatred can be productive of transformative, valuable changes for individual subjectivity and collective bodies, specifically in sport and physical cultures' (p. 3). In the online spaces of the AFLW, sensations of loss for what was (a more emancipatory version of the game prior to the establishment for the AFLW and modified rules) and mourning for what might have been possible, contrast with the thrill, excitement and sense of possibility promoted by the AFL with the launch of the AFLW.

Some comments also expressed disgust along with disappointment. These comments were less tentative and were not couched in expressions of gratitude or thanks. Given the established history of women playing with the previous rules, the reasons given for the changes,

-- that the new rules would support 'a great game to play [that is] ... exciting to watch,' (AFL News, 2016b) did not answer the questions many women had:

W4. Pretty disgusted honestly. The shortened quarters is vaguely tolerable with time on given the heat, but the smaller ball and 16 a side? Get effed

W5. when the AFL think women who have been playing men's rules their whole life are incapable of doing it at a professional level [eye roll emoticons]

W6. 15 minutes? We play 20 minute quarters in the U15 girls now...why go backwards?

W7. Why?

Sedgwick and Frank (1995) distinguish disgust as different from other affects because it constructs a 'boundary line or barrier' (p. 22). This boundary line, between acceptable and unacceptable rule changes speaks to challenges of implementing a professional contact sport for women in a sport that was previously only played (and mostly managed) professionally by men. The intensities of feeling around the development of the AFLW rules have affective resonances – bringing into being connections between women. These mediated encounters congeal around a shared intensity of feeling (passion) for AFLW, which manifests here as deep disappointment and sentiments of loss.

Disappointment, as recurring sentiment, conveys a shared sensibility among many followers, and demonstrates how emotions can connect and separate. The excitement and pride attached to the launch of AFLW was tempered by rule changes that positioned the women's game as 'less than'. Social media provided a space through which to articulate some of these affects, enabling fans to orientate themselves towards some (and away from others). These

attachments, emerging from the sharing of negative sentiments brought about by rules changes, may have unintended consequences for the success of the sport, and for women's experiences of inclusion and equality -- both contributing towards the long term sustainability of the AFLW.

In sport, as in life, rules and policies govern what is possible to do, and in turn, who it is possible to be. In some ways the new rules for AFLW make assumptions as to what a woman athlete can do, and who she is -- that is, weaker and slower than men. This is a dangerous assumption to make, and one that has been disputed in feminist biological (Fine, 2017) and sociological research (Zinn, Hondagneu-Sotelo, Messner and Denissen, 2015) over the past half century. Poststructural feminisms and posthumanist insights have helped us understand the virtually unlimited possibilities of bodies -- we don't know in advance what a body can do (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). This is evidenced via comparison between sports of the past and sport today. Examples abound with world records beaten year after year, technical advances in clothing, footwear, equipment, and, *rule changes*, all impact the speed, intensity, and outcomes of sport (Redhead, 2007).

The rule adaptations [table 1] established for AFLW might further be interpreted as imposing limitations not on what women can do, but what women *should* do. Given that women have been playing Australian rules in longer matches, with a larger ball and 18 players on each team, the imposition of the rule adaptations may speak to the creation of a women's version of the game that serves to reinforce and reproduce gender hierarchies whereby men's AFL is portrayed as 'the real' game while the AFLW is represented as the inferior 'other'. Thinking through the affective responses to and of the new rules allows us to acknowledge the central role of sensation and emotion in producing knowledge and subjectivity. Discourses shape 'who counts' in different sports (Chase, 2006) and Australian rules football has been produced and

reproduced as the domain of men, differentiated only by gender when women are playing (Woodward, 2009). The production of the footballing body then is, by default, a male football body.

The athletes drafted to play in the AFLW competition are going into this very new, very public arena under complex conditions. Already positioned as ‘less’ through adaptations to the existing rules they have previously played under, these women’s bodies are framed as different (hence inferior) to men’s, which are held up as the gold standard. This produces (and reinforces) inequalities in sport that, despite inclusion initiatives, continue to marginalise women in sport. In this way the success of the AFLW was subject to limits prior to the season starting. These entanglements, between rules of play, women’s embodiment of sport, and public perceptions of women’s sport as ‘less’ are held together through affective arrangements that configure sport as a site of hope and development. Yet this hope and optimism can quickly shift.

Facebook comments provide insights into the tensions and problems of implementing a rule set for women markedly different, not only from the men’s game, but from what the women had been previously playing. The thread below emphasizes the contempt (and subsequent tactics of shaming) that some posters expressed. In some ways the rule changes – positioning the women as ‘less’ – gave these posters the impetus to comment and express their anger at changing gender relations.

M1. Women constantly want equal rights so why the hell should they get it easier? Make them play the same game as the men do.

W1. Typical grouping of ‘all women’ into one giant category because it’s easier to refer to us as a single entity who demand things from you. So because a bunch

of people made a decision about rules of a game that impacts you in no way, its automatically...

M1. I think it may be her time of the month

M2. you gon get equal left n rights

W2. F1 Great words. I'm sick of the twats on here

M1. You're a twat

M2. Sick of women out of da kitchen!!

W3. Sick of misogynistic comments that contribute to men thinking abusing women is okay

The intensities brought forth in online engagements between fans provide the AFL with insight into the socio-political forces at play beyond (and potentially within) their organisational body that are triggered by their rule changes. There were several threads where users who present as men expressed similar sentiments, viewing the rule changes as making things easier for women, as an injustice that they were angry about, stating comments such as, 'I thought u wanted equality??' Simultaneously, some were denigrating and humiliating women for questioning the rule changes:

W9. We used to play 25 min Qtrs with full size ball usually on muddy grounds!

M9. Want a medal?

M10. Peppa pig loves muddy puddles

Despite an official discourse of empowerment for women surrounding the launch of the AFLW, social media spaces produce and circulate complex affects that can include or exclude.

In observing the hostility of men towards women contesting the AFLW rules of play online, our findings point to how affect may also circulate as a force that resists (pushes back against) unfolding collective feelings of disappointment expressed by women. Enabled by existing power relations that privilege men's sporting authority, online feelings of contempt towards women suggest that networked encounters can generate counter-intensities that 'reiterate normative assumptions that negate or ignore different embodied practices of living and thinking' (Fullagar, 2017, p. 2; see also Mendes, et al., 2019), thereby sustaining dominant gender paradigms in sport and wider culture. Online encounters that ridicule and belittle women can be characterised as both instances of sexism and emergent forms of sensation in virtual spaces, whereby feelings about women's participation in sport (women as an anomaly, a joke, less than, requiring accommodations/modification) drive and intensify online exchanges of hate, but also enable women and other fans of AFLW to come together in their support for gender equity. When thinking relationally about the responses generated by online discussions of the rules, it becomes possible to understand affect as a force that traverses multiple dimensions. Fan experience is one dimension, as is player experience, and public perceptions of the sport as well as representations of gender and power. In this sense, policies and rules govern not only 'how things are done', but also 'who it is possible to be' -- gendered power relations operate within, and resist limits imposed (Piggin, Jackson and Lewis, 2009). Our study extends insights into the workings of affective-discursive processes (Wetherell, 2013) by shedding light on the ways in which the online circulation and amplification of beliefs about women's sport as 'other' or 'less than' (rendered as feelings of patriarchal superiority) reverberates with women's material

experiences of discrimination. As Wetherell (2013) notes, ‘to attend to affect is to stress the limits of reason and the limits of the immediately knowable and communicable’ (p. 351). This is particularly pertinent in sport contexts where women are challenging enduring and persistent ideas about female fragility –changes to the sport landscape now will have largely unknown affects in the future. The following analysis section focuses in on this enduring discourse around vulnerability as it surfaced through affective exchanges online in response to yet further rule changes.

5.2 Vulnerability: Pain, injury and women’s bodies

From November 13th 2016 onwards, the AFLW Facebook account began responding to user posts. Most of these responses were to women who asked, ‘why change the rules when women have been playing longer games with more players for years?’ (W5). The AFL Women’s response was generic: ‘Hi, as the girls are playing in what is considered the hottest time of the year we want to make sure the players are not becoming dehydrated or overheated’. These comments on Facebook are the first time *safety* is emphasised as the reasoning behind the rule changes.

Pain and injury have often been tied up in notions of masculinity in sport (Pringle & Markula, 2005), while ideas about female vulnerability and fragility beyond sport persist (Gonick, 2006). In more general terms, to be ‘soft’ or fragile is to be at risk of injury or influence by others (Ahmed, 2004a). In sport, being soft ‘is to be too emotional, too feminine’ (Pavlidis and Fullagar, 2014, 130). Writing in the context of racism and nationalism, Ahmed (2004a) notes that, ‘Emotions become attributes of collectives, which get constructed as “being” through

“feeling”. Such attributes are of course gendered: the soft national body is a feminised body, which is “penetrated” or “invaded” by others’ (p. 2).

These emotional attributes have implications for women’s and men’s sport (and for gendered subjectivities). For men’s sport, the long-term impact of concussions are a real threat to contact sports such as rugby and AFL (as with the NFL in the USA) (Orr, 2014). For women, the threat of perceptions of vulnerability and fragility lie in a self-perpetuating cycle, where sport managers, committed to advancing women’s sport, make prior assumptions and apply out-dated models of femininity to innovative steps towards women’s greater acceptance in all spheres of public life. Through an emphasis on *safety* in the women’s game, the AFLW’s have already limited the potential for the game to be high risk, high excitement for players and fans alike.

This focus on safety, and therefore the vulnerability of women, was not only reiterated via the social media comments, but also in the ‘exclusive’ announcement on the 19th January 2017, that the chest area will be sacrosanct in the AFLW’s competition (AFL News, 2017). On the same day as the article outlining this rule change was published by the AFL it was also posted by the AFLW to their Facebook page. As with the first rule change announcement, this one was also met with disappointment and questioning, this time only by women. Responses from women -- many of whom appear to play or have played Australian rules football at some level -- demonstrate the complexity of promoting a ‘new’ sport for women at the sport/media nexus, traditionally a masculine domain.

W1. This will make it extremely difficult from an execution point of view. We have played the same rules as men for years. Men don’t get sanctioned for tackles where the

shoulder connects with the nuts. This rule requires further explanation. If it is in the context of striking, then maybe

W2. Wow, could they demean the women's game even more. This would increase the likelihood of injuries more, by encouraging them to tackle lower, after girls have spent years perfecting their current skills!

W3. This is pissweak. Its (sic) not in VWFL or any other female competition- don't meddle with the rules please AFL!

W4. Why is it that we play the game the way it should be played and now the men get near it and want to change the game. Disappointed immensely

W5. I don't understand. Most tackles are around the chest area because you try to lock the arms in as well. How will this rule work?

W6. Indeed, I have no idea how it can work either

W7. I agree 100%. Definitely a decision a male has made with absolutely not understanding of a female's body or the women's game!

W8. Just bizarre. Who would have come up with such an odd concept?

Feelings of disappointment and being demeaned (as indicated by participant W7's insistence that the rules show a limited understanding of women's bodies) are related to wider cultural perceptions of women as 'soft' or vulnerable. Yet AFL is a contact sport. Like other contact sports, pain and injury are intimately connected with the game itself, and those that play actively choose to engage in the high levels of physicality and the thrill of exertion. The desire for the physicality of the game and the thrill and roughness that comes with contact sport has been found

to be a source of attraction for girls to play Australian rules (Elliott, Bevan and Litchfield, 2019). However, as Gill notes in her analysis of women rugby players, ‘women who behave in a violent or physically aggressive manner are among the most stigmatized groups in society’ (2007, p. 416). Protecting women’s chests through rule modifications does not mitigate injuries, though perhaps the rules have reduced the pain of a knock to the chest for some footballers. Pain, to some extents, is not always something to be avoided. For some sportswomen, pain is central to their experiences of empowerment (Pavlidis and Fullagar, 2015).

Writing about the cultural politics of emotions Ahmed writes, ‘pain involves the violation or transgression of the border between inside and outside, and it is through this transgression that I feel the border in the first place’ (2004a, p. 27). In the context of roller derby, Pavlidis and Fullagar (2014) include data from interview transcripts that speaks to this issue. For example, the following quote from ‘Beth’:

It’s interesting, cause there is a difference between the pain that you experience as a victim and the pain that you experience as voluntarily being involved in a sport where there is rules and guidelines. You know, I’ve been punched in the face in boxing doing sparring, and kind of loved it – *it hurts, and took a step back and went, ‘I’m alive, I’m fine, I can punch back.’* (p. 78, emphasis added)

The chest is, of course, the site of women’s breasts, so it is safe to assume that the aim of the new rule is to ensure that women’s *breasts* remain sacrosanct. Using the term sacrosanct -- most often used in the context of human rights discourse (Chopra and Weiss, 1992; Short, 2000) -- women’s breasts are protected, though the question is for whose benefit? Our focus on affect builds on feminist research showing that official rules and social norms contribute to the construction of pain in sport and the shaping of gendered identities (for example, Pavlidis and Fullagar, 2015). The digital accumulation of collective expressions of disbelief, confusion and

anger at the modified rules foreground the political implications of attempts to minimise female athletes' experiences of pain. Emotions such as pain are ascribed value in relation to sporting bodies and performances. Affects direct sport organisations to pay attention to women's embodied experiences of playing sport holistically, which includes recognising women's feelings about their bodies when making rule decisions in ways that do not assume a universal female (biological) norm but can account for the diversity between women's bodies, their varying functions and capacities. Further to this, while the AFL cite research as supporting the justification for some of the rule adaptations, there is no acknowledgment or reflection of research as motivation for declaring the chest sacrosanct.

Knocks to the chest -- accidental and purposeful -- happen often in the AFL and women have played under these conditions for many years. By making the chest (breast) sacrosanct the play of the game will be altered considerably. In a number of ways the aggression and toughness of the game is being sidelined, in favor of a shorter, 'lighter' version. The intensities of feeling circulating on the AFLW Facebook page in response to rules protecting sportswomen's chests can be understood as a collective experiencing of sensations of disappointment and incredulity at rules that frame pain as undesirable/something to be minimised for women footballers. After Ahmed writing about fragile relationships, predictions by others about the tenability of a relation between sport and women exert pressure to 'make things work to show that they can work' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 169). This pressure and the imperative to 'make things work' have unknown affects. There are unintended consequences of these rule changes, and the game itself has certainly been altered. Interestingly, the day after the AFLW posted the rule change regarding the chest area on Facebook, the post and all related comments had been deleted. No reason was given to women's questions of 'why' the change. This failure to engage in dialogue or take

women's affective responses seriously may also hinder the success of the sport in the coming years and demonstrates a 'top down' approach, where those with managerial power and voice (in the AFL largely men) make decisions for and about women, positioning 'women's safety' as motivation for decisions for and about women.

6. Possible futures: discussion and conclusion

Inspired by the intensity of public feeling generated by the establishment of the AFLW, this article drew on the rule amendments and fans responses to these to examine affective engagements. In asking the question 'how is women's sport constituted through the materialities of digital technology, words, rules, and affects within social media?' we have focused in on the feelings of disappointment, disgust, contempt and curiosity and how these affects manifest in and through online sensations, attachments and intensities (Hillis, Paasonen & Petit, 2015), moving bodies in particular ways, towards some objects and away from others. In discussions about the rules on the AFLW public Facebook page, we observed relational encounters (solidarity in expressions of disappointment, anger, confusion and criticism), and adversarial responses to comments or questions (a register of mocking, contempt, dismissal, undermining), and very limited engagement from the league in engaging in dialogue and understanding of fans' concerns.

Our findings highlight the affective connections forged between women through their questioning of the rules, and indicate the potential of affect to act as a mobilizing force for social change to sports' gender status quo. It is through networked public expressions of disappointment that fans' intensity of feeling (passion for their sport) may move the AFL to think differently about the impacts of its decisions, which extend to how women's athletic bodies

are perceived (as less capable) and women's sport is valued (as less important) within wider culture. For women, who have historically been positioned as vulnerable, fragile and weaker than men, the AFLW is an opportunity to challenge these assumptions, rather than reinforce them. As Pavlidis and Fullagar (2014) note, 'what women's bodies can do, including the affects they feel, has often been underestimated' (p. 166). An approach that privileges sensitivity and affects *opens up* the possibilities for AFLW. This may mean that that sexist comments on Facebook posts are not tolerated, demonstrating to the women and girls engaged in the sport that AFLW is a space where normative assumptions about women's capacities are challenged and where the expression of passion for gender equality is embraced. It might also open up the possibilities for men to perform different kinds of masculinities through AFL management in ways that reposition how the women's game is valued. This could be around social media strategies, gender leadership training, and more.

In understanding the collective sentiment expressed by women on the AFLW Facebook page (disappointment, anger, disbelief) as an affective force, online exchanges harbour potential to 'move' bodies of thought, such as binary notions of gender that position women as physically inferior to men. Rather than view the relatively uncensored nature of social media interaction – in that anyone can post and comment – as a problem 'outside' their influence, sport organisations need to take a more responsive, open stance. As Reichert and Richterich (2015, p.6) write, 'Although we may not be aware of certain media materialities, (digital) technologies and their constituting elements exert agency, affect industries and individuals'. Affects expressed online are not separate to the (business of) sport, rather, they co-create sport, together with the rules of play, the players themselves, fans, and more. Social media provides a site of intensification

where sport organisations (in this instance the AFL) may contemplate and engage in dialogue and learn the limits to their thinking about gender and other issues.

The analysis and discussion above demonstrates the relational nature of affect, whereby the feelings ‘practised’ and circulated through networked exchanges ‘shapes the materialization of collective bodies’ (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 121; Hillis, Paasonen, Petit, 2015; Wetherell, 2013), in this case, the AFLW. The organisational response from the AFL, typified by formulaic answers, ignored the relationality of affects in circulation on social media, marginalising what may have been passionate and loyal fans. From a managerial perspective, this is no way to promote and grow a ‘new’ sport in an already saturated field. Research that engages with these complex and contested intersections of sport, gender and power must continue.

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