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'In any women's sport …, it's hard work because it's a male dominated society' – exploring forms of gendered media labour in relation to elite women's cricket in England

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ABSTRACT

Recently, many women's sports have grown enormously whether in terms of media attention, funding and participation levels. However, these positive developments often obscure the additional work elite female athletes are required to undertake promote 'their' sport. In this paper, we introduce the concept of gendered media labour to theorise this work focusing on two key elements. The first concerns what we label as 'promotional labour'. This is the work that female athletes do to both promote their own achievements and that of the sport in general. The second draws on Chahardovali and McLeod's research on 'inspirational labour' and notes how female athletes are often encouraged to be role models so as to inspire young girls and women's involvement in sport. Drawing on research with elite female cricketers in England, we evidence the importance of these two forms of labour and the physical and emotional commitments that they entail.

Introduction

Women's sport has made considerable strides in recent years, with increasing participation rates, media coverage, and financial investment. Despite these advancements, female athletes continue to navigate a sporting landscape shaped by historical and structural inequalities. As well as dramatic inequities in levels of renumeration, female athletes also often have to endure worse facilities, coaching and treatment as well as equipment and training regimes that are primarily designed for men (cf Bowes, Lomax, and Piasecki 2021). In addition, unlike their male counterparts' sportswomen are frequently expected to engage in additional work to both inspire future generations, whilst also promoting themselves and the sport in general. To theorise these processes, we introduce the concept of gendered media labour in relation to the domain of sport. Gendered media labour is based on two forms of distinct yet interconnected work that has been discussed in relation to a range of different sports, including UFC (McClearen 2021), football (Allison, Culvin, and Pope 2024) and athletics (Pocock and Skey 2024).

In the first case, we introduce the concept of 'promotional labour' which draws directly on recent work (McClearen 2021; Thompson-Radford and Skey, 2025) that discusses the uncompensated work undertaken by sportswomen to enhance the overall visibility of 'their' sport. As women's sport has been historically under-represented by the mainstream media, social media are seen to offer an important means for highlighting the key attributes of particular matches, competitions and players (reference to author removed). However, as McClearen (2021) argues, these activities also give female athletes an added workload whilst serving the interests of sports organisations as much as, if not more than, the athletes themselves. As a result, such activities have the potential to distract from athlete careers in what can be a precarious professional environment. Finally, and just as importantly, where female athletes are successful in raising their visibility online, they become increasingly vulnerable to unwanted advances and others forms of online misogyny (Thompson-Radford and Skey, 2025).

Second, we draw, in particular, on Chahardovali and McLeod (2023) writing around inspirational labour. This is a form of work that is both time-intensive and undercompensated and may involve everything from player appearances to coaching clinics and other inspirational activities. While, however, the authors briefly note that social media is a site where inspirational labour may take place, it is not the main focus of their study. In contrast, we examine the various online activities that elite female athletes are often expected to participate in. These activities not only impose further unpaid obligations but necessitate the careful curation of an online presence designed to foster engagement and motivate others. In short, they represent an added burden that elite sportswomen are asked to take on to inspire the next generation of supporters and participants in 'their' sport.

Women's sport, (digital) media and the visibility bind

When it comes to mainstream media representations, there is a large body of research that has demonstrated the extent to which women's sport has been (and continues to be) marginalised and stigmatised (Cooky et al. 2021).

Given these ongoing challenges, as well as persistent struggles to secure funding from commercial and governmental sources, social media has been discussed as a means of both raising the profile of women's sport and allowing female athletes to build a more effective public profile and attract sponsorship opportunities (Thompson 2024).

Beyond these commercial opportunities, other work has argued that social media 'provide[s] opportunities [for female athletes] to reframe their lives, challenge stereotypes, and play potentially empowering roles' (Kavasoğlu, Eratlı Şirin, and Uğurlu 2024, 364, Cooky and Antunovic 2020; Ahmad and Thorpe 2020).

Many of these examples are part of a growing body of work that has used the concept of visibility to make sense of the activities of female athletes, whether elite (McClearen 2021), semi-professional (Taylor et al. 2022) or amateur (Ahmad and Thorpe 2020).

These discussions generally point to both the benefits and challenges of being or becoming visible, a tension that has been captured in relation to the concept of the visibility bind (Thompson-Radford and Skey 2025). On the one hand, visibility is viewed as a key objective for women's sport and female athletes when it comes to generating more engagement and investment. On the other, heightened visibility can also lead to unwanted attention in largely unregulated digital spaces (Thompson-Radford and Skey 2025). Another aspect of this

'bind' that has been noted are two forms of work that female athletes are expected to under-take in addition to their training and match-day commitments. The first involves struggles to become visible in a fiercely competitive sports-media environment. The second is the work they are often asked to carry out, once a degree of visibility has been achieved, in order to inspire the next generation of participants. It is these varied forms of work that we label under the umbrella term of gendered media labour. This will be theorised in the next section of this paper, using two key concepts; promotional and inspirational labour.

Promotional labour

As we noted earlier, women's sport has been historically marginalised by the media and, therefore, women in elite sport have often been encouraged to actively engage in what scholars term the 'labour of visibility' (Abidin 2016). This concept was developed in relation to influencer culture and is defined as 'the work individuals do when they self-posture and curate their self-presentations so as to be noticeable and positively prominent among prospective employers, clients, the press, or followers and fans, among other audi-ences' (Abidin 2016, 90). There are a small number of scholars who have applied this idea to a sports context, highlighting the work that athletes do in promoting both themselves and their sport.

For instance, McClearen's (2021) study of female mixed martial arts professionals in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) points to the work that individual fighters are expected to undertake in order to promote their activities. These ongoing acts of self-promotion not only 'requires intellectual and social skills but also demands a degree of emotional resilience' (McClearen 2021, 05) as fighters are required to engage with, and respond to, online audiences. McClearen (2021) argues this work is hidden and undercom-pensated within the athletes" job role. And this is of course tied to the fact in the most part women in sport don't earn as much as their male counterparts. Furthermore, this work serves the institution of the UFC just as much if not more so than the athletes themselves.

Elsewhere, Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) and Rahikainen and Toffoletti (2022) examined these forms of work focusing on female athletes in a range of sports and how they used social media to engage followers and attract interest from (potential) sponsors.

These forms of what we call 'promotional labour' have been crucial in raising the profile of women's sports but often remain underpinned by the activities of individual athletes. Our case is slightly different as it deals with a team sport, cricket. However, as we will see individual players articulate the need to undertake promotional work on behalf of 'their' sport and this is largely seen as a 'normal' activity, even for elite athletes performing at the pinnacle of the sport.

Alongside these promotional activities, female athletes are also often tasked with inspir-ing the next generation to engage with sport, whether as active participants or (media) audiences. This is the subject of the next section.

Inspirational labour

Inspirational labour refers to the work that female athletes are often expected to undertake in order to promote their activities and encourage wider participation in 'their' sport, whether that be players, in-person fans or media audiences. It is a concept put forward by

Chahardovali and McLeod (2023) who define it as part of a 'taken-for-granted ideology that one of the most important social benefits of women's professional and elite sport is their ability to inspire girls and young women to participate and compete in sport' (Chahardovali and McLeod 2023, 1).

The concept links to wider debates about the importance of sporting role models, which are also highly gendered. For instance, Dunn's study of the 2015 World Cup showed that female athletes, were represented as accessible role models or 'girls next door'. Indeed, their 'accessibility' and 'normalness' was contrasted to the way in which male footballers are generally presented as untouchable and distant heroes. Dunn writes, female athletes 'are not icons to be admired and worshipped in the same way as male athletes; they may be exceptionally skilled, but they are normal, everyday people who put their families first, and their professionalism is glossed over as this fails to fit in to the narrative of plucky, amateurish underdogs, competing for pride" (2016, 84). Interestingly, more recent research has indicated the extent to which female fans also expect players to act as role models for girls, seeing 'inspiring the next generation' as a player responsibility and noting with pleasure how often players interacted with their youngest fans (Allison, Culvin, and Pope 2024; Leslie-Walker and Mulvenna 2022).

In addition to these expectations, it is also worth noting that the role modelling activities of female athletes are generally seen to be future orientated. In other words, motivating girls to play the sport is understood as a much-needed effort towards greater gender equality in subsequent generations, placing this work under the umbrella of social change but omitting current players from material rewards in the present (Allison 2023). For instance, Chahardovali and McLeod (2023) examine the concept in the context of athletes' appearances at youth camps, where they are primarily expected to develop participation among future generations. This work, the authors argue, is both underpaid and disproportionately assigned to women, reinforcing gendered assumptions that female athletes should function as nurturers and carers, responsibilities less frequently imposed on their male counterparts. In short, women who perform inspirational labor are shouldering the burden of investing in the long-term future of emerging sports markets, whereas sponsors, media companies, teams, and leagues have been able to prioritise shorter-term investments.

Finally, while Chahardovali and McLeod (2023) do briefly acknowledge the role of social media in facilitating inspirational labour, they do not explore particular practices or the wider implications of carrying out additional forms of online work. This study advances their framework by applying the concept to female athletes' engagement on social media, where they perceive a duty to inspire women and girls. This effort necessitates considerable time, and emotional investment yet remains inadequately compensated and its impact is difficult to measure. Having outlined the theoretical framework that underpins this study, we first provide some brief context for those not familiar with the sport of cricket. Subsequently, we turn to issues around data collection and analysis.

Women's cricket

Women's cricket has grown enormously since its early origins dating back to at least 1745 (Nicholson 2019). It is now a global game overseen by the International Cricket Council who currently have 78 of its 110 member countries playing women's Twenty20 cricket. Velija (2015) details how women's cricket has been shaped by historical and gendered power

relations positioning women's cricket as an 'outsider' within a male-dominated sport, limiting its visibility and autonomy. However, in recent times, major tournaments have boosted the visibility and popularity of women's cricket (Thompson 2024). This is demonstrated by increased audience engagement with over 192 million global viewing hours recorded at the 2023 World Cup – a 46% increase on the successful 2020 edition (ICC, 2023).

Not only is women's cricket growing in popularity, its top teams are becoming increasingly professional. In England, professional contracts were introduced in 2014 at the international level and domestically from 2020 (see Fletcher, Velija, and Nicholson 2024). On the pitch, England are one of the most successful teams in the global game highlighted by their World Cup victories in 1973, 1993, 2009, and 2017. Despite this success, like many women's sport teams, their mainstream visibility has historically been overshadowed by the prioritisation of men's sport.

Method

It is often difficult to access elite athletes and get them to participate in research-based projects. For the purposes of this project the lead author managed to leverage contacts from her previous work in professional cricket, although the process of securing interviews took around twelve months. Two sets of participants were selected for the project, current players who could reflect on contemporary issues impacting on women's sport and former players who would be in a better place to discuss historical changes. In the first case, after intensive negotiations with the media manage of the England women's cricket team, eight current players were identified, and seven agreed to participate. These included both established players as well as those who had recently been selected in the national squad. It should be noted that while all players in the squad have a guaranteed 'central' contract with the English Cricket Board, these contracts are reviewed on a regular basis. This set of participants were white and aged 18-30, a demographic typical of women's cricket in England (Nicholson 2017). In the second case, eight former players who had competed for England in the one of the previous four decades were interviewed. As some of these players are currently working in the sport/media industry, we agreed not to reveal any further details about their backgrounds. Former Players are referred to in text as Former Player One, Two and so forth, whilst current players are referenced as Player A, B, etc.

The interviews which lasted between 40 and 60 min were carried out online due to COVID-19 restrictions. The interviews focused on athletes' experiences with mainstream media and social media and while a pre-established interview schedule was utilised, participants were encouraged to discuss any related issues they thought might be relevant. To this end, some referenced specific social media posts, which further enriched the discussion.

Ethical considerations were addressed in accordance with Loughborough University's ethics policy, which centred on informed consent and stated that participants were free to withdraw if they felt uncomfortable at any time. This was particularly important as the interview schedule addressed questions around online abuse and harassment.

In terms of data analysis, a two-stage thematic analysis was conducted (Braun and Clarke 2019). This first identified broader patterns in the interview transcripts which were cross-referenced with insights from existing research on the topic (McClearen 2021; Toffoletti and Thorpe 2018). Initial open codes were first developed around the two key concepts of promotional and inspirational labour. Through a subsequent process of axial coding

(Thornberg and Charmaz 2014), these initial themes were re-analysed and divided into further sub-categories which centred on; athlete's expectations, institutional support, team dynamics, fan relations.

In the following section, we explore the relevance of the concept of gendered media labour by examining the inspirational and promotional work undertaken by athletes playing for the England women's cricket team, both now and in the past. This temporal dimension is important as it shows that while conditions within sporting contexts have undoubtedly improved for female athletes, there is still a long way to go before they achieve parity with their male counterparts.

Promotional work in the mass media era

In this section, we'd like to briefly highlight the experiences of those who played prior to the development, and popularisation, of social media. In the pre-digital era, barriers to accessing and producing media content were high and the number of people able to 'create, control and distribute quality, popular sports content' was very small (Hutchins and Rowe 2009, 354). Therefore, players who wanted to highlight or promote their activities had to persistently fight for whatever media coverage they could get. Indeed, for those playing in the 1980s-2000s, to gain recognition for their sporting achievements, it was the norm for the players themselves to have to contact local news outlets, normally print or radio.

> Everybody had to do it locally… I had quite a few because [we] … bombarded a few papers with stuff that I was doing. – (Former Player One)

As Player One notes, they had to be persistent, and players had to take news to the media rather than the media approaching the players. This labour, often unseen by those external to the game, was in addition to the 'normal' training demands of the sport and both roles were unpaid. However, this burden was also understood as part of the process of professionalisation and key to raising the profile of the sport (see McClearen 2021).

In short, then, promotional work has been a feature of women's cricket in England for decades and while digital technologies have offered news ways for various groups to engage with sport, there is still an important gendered dimension to the ways in which female athletes are expected to utilise social media, notably when compared with their male contemporaries. This is the subject we turn to in the next section.

Raising the profile of the team and the sport

A central theme in the interviews with both former and contemporary players was their role in promoting women's cricket given the lack of mainstream media representations. In contrast to many individual athletes, these activities are not seen to be part of a personal brand-building exercise but are articulated in terms of the visibility of the team and the sport as a whole.

The following examples with contemporary players are illustrative:

> I use it to promote our game, so that's how I use Twitter… probably less so than I used to because the media are kinda doing a little bit more of that for us now whereas five years ago you had to let everyone know when you were next playing a game (Player B)

> I would use it [social media] more as a way of promoting the team I'm playing for and women's cricket (Player D)

> I think one of them is to like raise not my profile but the team's profile. So, I like to use it for when we're competing and stuff (Player F)

The first quote is noteworthy as it flags some of the changes that women's cricket has undergone in a relatively short space of time. Whereas five years ago Player B would have used her social media presence to promote 'our sport' and let people know when they were playing, today the mainstream media is seen to have taken on some of this role.

However, the next two quotes illustrate the collaborative nature of the promotional labour involved. Players are not solely focused on promoting their own success but are equally invested in recognising and celebrating the achievements of their teammates. This shared responsibility highlights the collective nature of women's cricket, where each player's success is tied to the visibility of the group. Again, it is worth noting that this stand's in contrast to much existing research on individual female athletes, which tends to point to the ways in which social media is utilised to attract sponsors and, thereby, boost commercial opportunities (reference to author removed). In contrast, the central contracts provided by the English Cricket Board (ECB) provide for some degree of security in what is otherwise a precarious sporting landscape for many female athletes.

Between personal expression and institutional control

However, the motivations for undertaking these types of promotional activities varied among the players we spoke to, some viewing it as a duty to the collective, while others recognised it as a responsibility they had to their employer, the ECB. Indeed, another crucial element of the promotional labour in women's cricket involves the athletes' participation in institutional messaging. As athletes, they are expected to use their social media profiles not only to promote themselves and the sport but also to share official messages from the cricket authorities, such as ticket sales, event announcements, and other initiatives.

> We get asked to … like to post anything…they're quite formal, not formal, but more about an initiative and things – Player C

> [We were] told to post something. They sent us pictures and yeah, they just said caption something – Player E

It's worth noting that both comments not only highlight the rather ad-hoc nature of the demands placed on players by their employer but also the way in which the players themselves view such demands. While the professionalisation of women's sport has undoubtedly increased over the past two decades, these quotes indicate that much promotional labour continues to be undertaken by players but also that this work is both unstructured (post anything) and largely unsupervised (caption something).

The requirement to promote official initiatives and messages reflects a wider trend in professional sports where athletes' personal brands are increasingly tied to the interests of the sport's governing bodies. In women's cricket, this relationship is reinforced through the central contracts that are given to the players. These contracts require players to engage in promotional activities that serve the organisation's goals, even when the athletes themselves may not have direct financial stakes in the promotion. What is also sometimes also overlooked in all of these discussions is the time and effort that is involved in actually creating

content which places an added burden on elite athletes who already have a range of demands on their time.

Capturing and creating content

While 'posting something' might not seem to involve much in the way of effort, the literature on both influencers in general (Abidin 2016) and elite athletes, in particular, (Thompson-Radford and Skey 2025) has demonstrated that creating, and curating, an online profile requires significant time, thought and effort. Indeed, female athletes face an additional challenge: not only must they navigate structural inequalities within sport, but they are also responsible for countering their marginalisation through self-promotion. This labour is compounded by disparities in resources between men's and women's teams, even within the same national governing body. At the time of interviewing players in 2020, the England's women's cricket team lacked a full-time professional staff member dedicated to capturing photos and videos for social media. Unlike their male counterparts, players had limited formal support in content creation. Hodge and Walker (2015) similarly found that female athletes often lack structured assistance in managing their digital presence.

To this end, the media manager role functioned primarily as a gatekeeper between players and mainstream media rather than as someone responsible for producing social media content.

> [England Cricket staff] encourage you to post what you want …they just give more the guidelines of things to avoid. If something is more personal or something that is fine, but someone could take it the wrong way – Player B

> If it's something I am a bit worried about, I'll always talk to the media manager … about it and just check that I've done the right thing or said the right thing with the right tone … I say look, am I allowed to say this? – Player D

Consequently, players viewed content creation as their responsibility, despite its potential to distract from their primary role as athletes. The challenge of capturing performance-related content was particularly evident. Without dedicated personnel to record training and match footage, players had to take on this work themselves, using their phones during training sessions.

> I know when the football girls go away, they get five or 10 photographs or videos of themselves from each training session. For us we wouldn't get anything like that – Player E

> If we've played, you know, you can post about the game, you can post about the upcoming fixture or what we're doing in training and there's more interest in that. – Player G

As well as the discrepancies between different sports (football or soccer attracts far greater levels of sponsorship and funding), the two quotes also highlight the challenges of generating *appropriate* content. In other words, beyond content related to training and competition knowing what to post both in terms of engaging (potential) supporters and ensuring it meets guidelines poses a real challenge to these athletes.

This section highlighted the forms of promotional labour that female athletes are often expected to undertake as well as the normalisation of such a view among athletes themselves. In addition, it has outlined the additional burden that this work places on elite athletes who already have a range of training, playing and other commitments. In the next section, we turn

to another form of labour that female athletes, in particular, are often expected to undertake, the work of inspiring and engaging the next generation of fans and participants.

Inspirational labour

The second form of work that we want to discuss in relation to this paper draws on Chahardovali and McLeod (2023) concept of inspirational labour, which – as we noted earlier – was primarily discussed in relation to in-person activities. In this paper, we want to shift focus slightly to first emphasis the extent to which inspirational labour can also be applied to online activities as well. We also draw a distinction between more active and passive forms of inspirational labour with the latter being associated with an online presence. As part of these discussions, we first present arguments that talk about the link between visibility and inspiration in more general terms. We then look at examples which pinpoint the importance of social media in developing, and sustaining, a player's visibility. Through both these discussions, we highlight the degree to which female athletes have internalised the idea that they *should* undertake these forms of work, notwithstanding the commitment it involves and/or the challenges it may generate. In the latter case, the players' must manage a desire to be visible so they can inspire young, female fans with an understanding that growing visibility may also attract unwanted attention.

It is first worth noting that the majority of the players we spoke to talked about the responsibility they had to inspire women and girls to engage with cricket. Moreover, they articulated a very strong link between visibility and inspiration.

> You can't be what you can't see, so visibility in all senses of young girls being able to see females playing cricket at recreational level to international level. Understanding that they can be that as well … (Player A)

This statement echoes a growing debate around the importance of visibility for women's sport in general (Women's Sport Trust 2023). This visibility is often viewed as both a means of empowerment and as a strategy to challenge the exclusion of women from professional sports. The concept that 'you can't be what you can't see' has become a popular mantra not just in women's cricket but in broader feminist activism, emphasising the importance of representations in showing young girls that they too can (aspire to) be professional athletes and make a living from sport.

Player D offers a similar view but also notes the importance of making herself, and the sport, seem both accessible and relatable

> I think seeing other girls play it is a way of seeing someone you can relate to. You can go speak to them about it and then that will make them feel more comfortable to then get into the game and it might be more inspiring to them than watching male cricketers.

Therefore, female athlete's visibility is not only about displaying professional excellence but also presenting themselves so that young girls can relate to them on a personal level. This sense of relatability, where female athletes become accessible figures rather than distant, unattainable role models, is seen to be crucial for inspiring young girls to engage with the sport. This perspective also stands in contrast to former players operating before the advent

of social media who rarely talked directly about inspiring others to play the game though it was implicit in some of the promotional activities they participated in. In this way, social media has become essential in allowing players to bypass media gatekeepers and engage followers of the sport directly.

It is worth noting, here, the gendered aspect of these discussions, as such viewpoints are rarely articulated by male professional athletes or, indeed, by those who manage male sports. Indeed, there is a significant difference between the role modelling that is expected of female athletes (they should be successful and accessible) compared to men who are generally only asked to be 'well behaved', at least in public. Interestingly, this distinction was also noted by the team's media manager:

> You know Joe Root [Former captain of the England men's team] never really has to say in a press conference 'yes, I'm absolutely delighted that there's so many people coming tomorrow, a full house is great, it means we can inspire the next generation

Ironically enough given this comment, we should also note the influence of the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) which focuses on transforming the women's game by linking greater visibility in order to inspire future generations (ECB 2019). This institutional framing of visibility raises important questions about the control athlete's have when it comes to social media output. In other words, the ECB's strategic vision directly encourages athletes to frame their visibility in terms of inspiration for young girls and women.

The tension between empowerment and control is further illustrated by the athletes' approach to content creation on social media. Unlike in previous studies (Pocock and Skey 2024), where individual athletes are seen to actively craft content with an educational or inspirational focus, the athletes in this study did not employ specific strategies, instead, they emphasised that inspiration comes from their mere presence on social media.

> I think one of the biggest motivators for me and I know a lot of the squad as well of inspirating, we talk a lot about inspiring girls and women to play cricket and so I think when you see that happening on a day-to-day basis and actually like seeing these messages and the girls who love playing cricket and want to be like you. – Player D

> There's a chance for young girls to see like what I'm doing and they might be inspired to do that or young, even young boys as well, like or about my age might have never picked up a bat before, might just think are she seems nice, I quite like her content and then watch the game and then realise they want to pick up a bat as well. Player G

For Player D, inspiration is not about actively creating inspirational content but rather about the subtle influence that comes from simply being visible in the space. This type of passive inspiration contrasts with the more active inspirational labour seen in other contexts, where athletes are expected to create and share content that aims to educate or inspire (Pocock and Skey 2024). The mere act of being seen, in this case, is sufficient to challenge existing norms and inspire both girls and boys.

Similarly, Player A emphasises the broader impact of visibility, stating,

> It's essential for young people to see that it's a career for women, not just girls, but boys too, like oh yeah, girls play cricket as well and it's a really good career.

These comments underline the importance of visibility not just for inspiring girls but for challenging the traditional gendered boundaries of sport. In this context, female athletes'

achievements are not just for women and girls to admire, they serve to normalise the idea of women excelling in sports for a wider audience.

In short, the place of inspirational labour in women's cricket, particularly when it comes to social media visibility, is complex. While visibility offers the potential to empower women and girls by normalising their participation in sport, it also raises questions about the influence of institutional agendas on the construction of athletes' public identities. Nevertheless, the stories shared by the athletes in this study highlight the transformative potential of social media visibility, showing how being seen in action may disrupt traditional gendered narratives and inspire future generations of cricketers. However, even these more passive activities in the sporting realm demand effort, both in terms of setting up and then maintaining a social media presence. Female athletes are, however, also often required to be more active in the way they engage with followers online, which is the subject of the next section.

Fan interactions and relational labour

The athletes we spoke are, like many in the industry, tasked with additional responsibilities beyond playing the sport. They serve as both advocates for cricket and key facilitators of relationship marketing (Abeza, O'Reilly, and Reid 2013), meaning they are expected to develop athlete-fan relationships (Frederick et al. 2012). Baym (2015) refers to this process as relational labour, which places emphasis on the emotional work of fostering connections rather than merely maintaining a social media presence. In previous times, former players discussed how interactions with fans were limited to (often poorly attended) match days. In this way, social media has made players more accessible and with that comes increased expectations. Indeed, one key aspect of this relational labour is how young girls, and aspiring cricketers contact players for advice and support.

> It's nice that like if I've done coaching or something, it's quite a nice way for some young players to message me on there. – Player A

> We talk a lot about inspiring girls and women to play cricket and so I think when you see that happening on a day-to-day basis and actually like seeing these [online] messages and the girls who love playing cricket and want to be like you, it's really weird. But it's really nice in the same way. – Player C

> It's a bit weird to get used to because I used to just get comments from my mates or my family. – Player B

> I'm aware that young girls might look and see what I'm doing is quite cool and I want to inspire girls to play cricket. But the idea of me being a role model seems a bit weird still to me. – Player D

The increasing visibility and accessibility of athletes have reinforced their role model status, adding to the expectation that they must maintain an online presence that is both inspiring and interactive. Athletes must dedicate time and energy to responding appropriately to fan messages while also maintaining professional boundaries (Thompson-Radford and Skey 2025).

The blurred boundaries between public and private life further complicate this interaction. Visibility on social media comes with an expectation that athletes should share aspects

of their personal lives with fans. However, several players reported feeling uncomfortable with this level of exposure, highlighting a tension between accessibility and privacy. Despite being widely regarded as role models, some athletes expressed discomfort with the pressure to inspire others through their social media activity.

Additionally, female athletes often lack formal training on how to navigate these roles. This lack of preparation exacerbates the emotional burden of managing fan interactions. Furthermore, the expectation that female athletes must inspire young girls aligns with traditional gendered narratives that frame women as selfless caregivers. Unlike male athletes, who often engage with fans for commercial gain, female athletes' labour is framed as a collective effort to grow the sport rather than for individual benefit.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current emphasis on visibility in women's sport often obscures the double burden placed on female athletes, who must simultaneously perform promotional and inspirational labour. This expectation is not only laboursome but rooted in structural inequalities that demand individual effort rather than wider institutional and societal responsibility.

While visibility is assumed to normalise and inspire women and girls in cricket, it also functions as a form of control, normalising unpaid emotional and promotional labour as part of a female athlete's role. This perpetuates the notion that their primary value lies in inspiring others, rather than in their athletic excellence.

To challenge these dynamics, we must shift the focus from visibility as an end in itself to a means of achieving deeper structural equity. This requires action from sporting institutions, governments, and social media platforms to redistribute power and resources, and to rethink the cultural frameworks that define success and legitimacy in sport. Inspiration should be a natural by-product of women's sporting achievement not its foundational purpose. Female athletes deserve to be celebrated as record-breakers, competitors, and professionals in their own right, not just as symbols of progress. Addressing these issues demands not only greater representation, but a fundamental reimagining of the systems that continue to marginalise women in sport. However, if inspiration is something that players want to achieve through their social media visibility, there must be education, dedicated support and branding strategies put in place.

Finally, it is important to note the dramatic shift and increase in investment since this study. The England women's cricket team now has a full-time digital content producer embedded within the team capturing and curating content. Therefore, following up on the impact of such advancements would be welcomed in future studies.

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