

A League of Her Own: The Correlation Between
Women's Involvement in Sports Journalism and NFL Viewership
at the University of North Carolina Wilmington

By

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Abstract

This study examines how women's representation in sports journalism impacts NFL viewership among female college students. Through surveys, focus groups, and thematic analysis, this study found that representation plays a minor role in viewership retention among the targeted group. On the other hand, it felt empowering to some participants. In addition, reporter engagement, outside influence, and understanding the content drew them to the NFL, while stereotypes, assumptions, and NFL history deterred students. These findings supported existing literature about women's representation and its impact on viewership but also refuted some points, including the idea that people think male reporters are more exciting and that men believe women should have larger roles in sports reporting.

Introduction

For decades, the lack of women in the sports industry—particularly in sports journalism—has been an important topic (Braumüller & Schulbring, 2025). With women's sports on the rise, more women are interested in sports journalism (Cummings, 2021). However, the desire to report does not correlate with their participation (Price, 2015; Schmidt, 2018). One of the pioneers for women in sports writing is Margaret Goss, who covered sports in the New York Herald Tribune in the mid-1920s and “challenged institutional practices and cultural norms that had steered female journalists away from sports” (Kaszuba, 2006).

The 1970s was a big decade for women in sports. In June 1972, Congress enacted Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 and President Richard Nixon signed it into law. This law prohibited sex discrimination in educational programs or activities that received federal funding (Women's Sports Foundation, 2019). In 1974, Phyllis George made history as the first female sports reporter. She co-hosted *The NFL Today* on CBS from 1974 to 1978 and from 1980 to 1984.

Since then, women's presence in sports reporting has increased, but they remain underrepresented. A 2022 study found that only 15 percent of sports reporters are women (Tomasik & Gottfried, 2023). Female viewership is also limited, but it's increased at the same time. For example, Super Bowl LVIII had 123.7 million viewers (Nielsen, 2024), with 58.8 million of those viewers being women (Sports Business Journal, 2024). This is an increase compared to Super Bowl LVII, which had 115 million viewers (Nielsen, 2023); the number of female viewers in 2023 was 9 percent less than in 2024 (Sports Business Journal, 2024).

This study aims to determine if women's representation in sports journalism affects NFL viewership among women college students. It also aims to see what draws them to and away from the National Football League (NFL).

Literature Review

Social Identity Theory

This study aims to find out whether women college students watching clips of other women reporting during NFL games affects their desire to learn more about and/or watch football. This study closely relates to social identity theory (SIT). First mentioned in the 1970s, this theory, according to Harwood (2020), suggests that people naturally want to separate themselves from others based on group memberships and their ability to sacrifice rewards to maintain relative superiority over outsiders.

In other words, people define themselves based on the people they surround themselves with and naturally distance themselves from those who don't align with them (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The people are divided into groups, which Tajfel & Turner (1979) define as multiple individuals who cluster themselves into the same social category, share some emotional involvement in a common definition of themselves, and achieve some social consensus about the group's perception and their participation in it.

These are called in-groups and out-groups. In-groups are the groups of people we identify with, and out-groups are those we differentiate from. In-groups and out-groups are determined through social categorization, social identification, and social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Identifying with an in-group gives people a sense of belonging, purpose, self-worth, and identity (McLeod, 2023). In turn, being part of an out-group makes people feel like outsiders, which is why humans try not to associate with them.

This results in in-group favoritism and discrimination against the out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The existing literature draws back to three main themes: underrepresentation, bias, and male-dominated culture. For the purposes of this study, participants will all be part of the same in-group: women college students. As discussed further in the Methods section, participants will be put into one of four focus groups; their answers to a preliminary survey will determine their second in-group. This in-group will be students with less NFL knowledge or students with more NFL knowledge.

To visualize this theory regarding football, Sanderson (2013) analyzed SIT in action through Facebook and University of Cincinnati football fans. After a successful regular season in 2009 for the Bearcats, a rumor surfaced about head coach Brian Kelly; he allegedly said he planned to continue coaching in Cincinnati—the in-group in this story—but revealed his new position as head coach at Notre Dame—the out-group—some days later.

To the fans, this was a social identity threat, which is when an integral part of the in-group is challenged or threatened. A threat like this “presents fans with uncertainty about the future success of the football program” (Sanderson, 2013). One way fans showed their frustration was by turning to a Facebook group called “Get Out of Our City Brian Kelly.” Essentially, fans turned on Kelly once he was no longer associated with the in-group, and this Facebook group is a prime example of this. Those who are part of an in-group feel that a positive or familiar aspect of their group is threatened (Bagci et al., 2023); in this case, it was removed entirely.

Women in sports journalism

Women in sports journalism aren't completely unheard of, but it's not very common. For example, Lapchick et al. (2021) found that the number of female sports reporters increased from 11.5 percent in 2018 to 14.4 percent in 2021. Hardin & Shain (2005) said the lack of women is because they don't try to break through the industry's boundaries. Most of the women they surveyed believed that feeling inferior is normal and expected for women in their field (Hardin & Shain, 2005). Additionally, women are deterred from studying and striving for a career as a sports journalist because male sports tend to dominate the industry (Price, 2015). This can be discouraging to some women sports journalists and can make them feel powerless, possibly filling them with the idea that they can't change an established system committed to uplifting only men's sports (Hardin & Shain, 2005).

In turn, men feel more ready to enter the workforce after studying sports journalism (Schmidt, 2013). The lack of preparedness women feel compared to men can be a direct link to the inferiority they feel throughout their careers. Women also prefer to watch or play sports rather than report on them. Due to this, female sports reporters aren't in a lot of campus newsrooms (Schmidt, 2013), which limits the amount of representation and potential inspiration for future in-group members: potential female sports journalists or fans.

Although female representation in sports journalism is heavily studied in the United States, it's also studied internationally. Boczek et al. (2023) found that German readers were interested in reading soccer articles regardless of the author's gender and male authors are not favored in sports reporting. However, there was a larger interest for articles about men's soccer over women's soccer, which is consistent with the idea that

sports reporting is a “hegemonically masculine domain that produces coverage *by* men, *for* men, and *about* men” (Bruce, 2012). This data exposes similar trends between the US and Germany, including the underrepresentation of female sports journalists. However, female reporters tend to report more on women’s soccer than men’s soccer. This didn’t lead to a significant increase in the ratio of women reporting on all sports, including soccer, over the tested period though (Boczek et al., 2023). In relation to SIT, this shows that women are recognized in the in-group, but don’t have as big an impact as their male counterparts.

Since student writers are the future of journalism, it’s important to see what they prioritize in their writing. Campus sports and athletics were the second-most important subjects to report on behind campus news (Schmidt, 2013). Schmidt (2018) also found that almost 37 percent of male journalists believed that women should have bigger roles in sports reporting and 56.4 percent believed women’s sports should receive more media attention. Furthermore, they also believed that current levels of women’s sports coverage were appropriate and adequate (Schmidt, 2018). Existing literature, however, suggests that this data is inconsistent with what’s on television and in the papers, which sheds less light on women’s sports, female sports reporters, and their mark on the in-group.

There are positive and negative aspects to being a woman in sports journalism. Some positives include the opportunity to “be more like men than different from them” and the ability to get more genuine responses from male athletes and coaches during interviews (Hardin et al., 2008). One negative found in a study was being seen as either too manly or too feminine to gain rapport with sources (Hardin & Shain, 2006). Femininity is perceived as a persistent negative and is especially seen through harassment

from peers, which makes their work harder (Taylor et al., 2024). Harassment tactics include sexual misconduct and verbal attacks. Some women also felt a work/family balance was virtually impossible as a sports journalist (Hardin et al., 2008). The mix of being too docile (feminine) and too strong or dominant (masculine) puts a strain on women sport journalists that wouldn't be in place if they weren't objectified and analyzed too closely by others around them.

Radmann et al. (2024) found that female journalists in Sweden have earned more respect over time, but they still feel inferior to their male colleagues. Female sports journalists are also receiving more threats because of their work, but their male colleagues have also received more threats, so this isn't a gender-exclusive issue. Additionally, Price (2015) found that one way to improve gender diversity in sports journalism in the United Kingdom is by seeing more coverage for sports like swimming and cycling, which aren't male-dominated in the UK. Together, these studies don't necessarily show the tolerance for women in the industry, but they do show that there's a desire to be rid of favoritism to level the playing field in a way.

As mentioned earlier, Title IX made a big impact on women and their involvement in sports and sports media. While the bill's focus isn't sports, it's opened many metaphorical doors for women and girls in the field (Whiteside & Roessner, 2018). According to Billie Jean King's website, women's participation has increased in high school and collegiate sports by 1,057 percent and 614 percent, respectively, since Title IX was first passed. At the college and professional level, coaching opportunities have increased for women as well. (Billie Jean King, 2017). Title IX hasn't completely fixed the gender inequality in sports and sports journalism, but it's certainly trending toward

being more inclusive in all aspects of the industry.

Biases in Sports Journalism

Mastro et al. (2012) analyzed the influence gender and race have on perceptions of a sports journalist's expertise, character, contribution, and likeability. These perceptions were measured through many sports. When it came to football, male reporters were favored more in each category over their female counterparts. Additionally, there was exclusively a gender bias among the football reporters for the most part; female sports broadcasters were deemed significantly less credible and less exciting than male sports broadcasters (Mastro et al., 2012). Furthermore, they found that White male reporters gave more valuable contributions than Black male reporters. While this demonstrates that gender plays a part in determining viewers' perceptions of reporters, it's not the only factor.

When it comes to the NFL, female representation is a different beast. One factor that influences representation and peoples' attitudes about it, like other sports (Mastro et al., 2012), is credibility. Historically, football is seen as a man's sport, and reporting on it was a man's job. This bias could stem from the idea that some male reporters played the sport before venturing into the play-calling realm (Luisi et al., 2021). However, gender didn't make a significant difference between people's perceptions of female or male reporters (Brisbane et al., 2023). In contrast, Bell et al. (2024) explored viewers' perceptions of the credibility of NFL announcers. They found that there are big differences in credibility perceptions of female sports announcers, especially among women football fans. These studies bring forward what others look for in football announcers and reservations they have towards them.

However, existing literature goes back and forth about the way women are perceived in sports media. For example, those who frequently watch sports—regardless of gender—were more likely to perceive women broadcasters as less credible than male broadcasters, but this didn't apply to those who frequently watch football (Luisi et al., 2021), as they found no correlation between perceived credibility of female sportscasters and the amount of football participants watched. Bell et al. (2024) found that viewers believed the male reporter they saw was more exciting than the female reporter. This was interesting because the women reporter was a seasoned and employed sportscaster while the male was a graduate student with no reporting experience.

From these findings, people prepare themselves to see male sportscasters when they tune into an NFL game, which is consistent with women not breaking the industry's boundaries (Hardin & Shain, 2005) and women appearing to have less interest in sports reporting (Schmidt, 2013). Together, they solidify the “football as a man's sport” narrative and force those who don't fit that narrative into the out-group. Even if female reporters have the same amount of or more experience than male reporters, the women are still deemed less credible than a man doing the same job (Luisi et al., 2021).

Gender Inequality in the NFL

One part of the football world that became a concern over time is the mistreatment of women in the industry. These women, according to the North American Society for Sport Management, are managers, athletes, coaches, journalists and educators (Hindman, 2021). Sexual misconduct is a common form of mistreatment. For example, the Washington Post investigated the Washington Football Team (formerly the Redskins, now the Commanders) and learned of the culture promoted there for many years; in fact,

15 women came forward saying they were sexually harassed during their employment with the team. The harassment included snide remarks and inappropriate or unwanted touching (Eli, 2016; Hobson & Clarke, 2020). The objectification of women in sports media also counts as mistreatment, with women seen as sexual distractions or objects “for the gratification of male viewers...with women seen as passive images and men as active viewers” (Brisbane et al., 2023).

To combat this division, the NFL has tried appealing to a broader audience over time: women and families. These attempts include the “Together, We Make Football” campaign, “NFL For Her” merchandise, and the “Heads Up Football” initiative; these are part of the league’s “discursive alignment with American-ness, community, and charitable identity,” meaning they promote traditional values, like fostering a woman’s nurturing instincts and building community from being a homemaker. Per Johnson (2016), no fan (or prospective fan) is intentionally turned away by these appeals. Rather, the NFL hopes that female fans can join the in-group of football fans while also staying in the in-group of home and family makers.

On the other hand, Johnson also mentions the “Fear of Missing Out on Football” or the #FOMOF campaign, which is a collaboration between the NFL and Verizon to promote their on-the-go viewing features. Some of these commercials go against the conventional female image with one woman watching a New Orleans Saints game at a baby shower and another watching a game while stuck in traffic with her future in-laws (Johnson, 2016).

Based on what previous studies have found, this study aims to answer three research questions:

RQ1: How will female representation in NFL broadcasts impact female viewership at UNCW?

RQ2: What is the catalyst for female college students' interest in the National Football League (NFL)?

RQ3: What deters female college students from watching the NFL?

Methodology

Recruitment

Participants were recruited from classes and student organizations at the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) (n = 19). These participants expressed their interest both in-person, via email, and via text message. All participants were women undergraduate students at the university between 18 and 22 years old.

Preliminary Survey

Interested students received an email containing a link to the preliminary survey. The survey was created and administered on Qualtrics. Questions pertained to their prior knowledge of the NFL and their current stance on football as a sport. Participants answered six questions. The first two questions were Likert-scale questions, which helped gauge whether they were football fans and if they knew the basic rules of football. The next question asked how often participants tuned into NFL games during a regular season. This was a multiple-choice question. The next three questions were open-ended and these were where participants could share what they knew about the NFL, such as players, teams, and reporters.

Focus Groups

Once they completed the survey, participants were put into one of four focus groups. Three groups had five participants and one group had four. Groups were formed based on participant availability, which they provided in the survey. Focus groups took place from February 13th to March 17th in the UNCW library. The average session length was 35 minutes. Each group watched four clips of NFL pregame reports and updates. Two clips featured male reporters and two clips featured female reporters.

The first clip showed Tracy Wolfson, a reporter with *CBS Sports*, explaining how the weather would affect the 2026 AFC Championship on January 25, 2026. The next clip showed Evan Washburn, another reporter with *CBS Sports*, touching more on the weather from the same game after its first drive.

The third clip had Maria Taylor with *NBC Sports* highlighting Aaron Rodgers and his ability to bring two cities together before the Week 8 game against the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Green Bay Packers on October 26, 2025. The final clip featured Chris Collinsworth for *NFL on FOX*. It was taken from a longer panel of pregame reports around the league on September 12, 2004. Collinsworth spoke with Terry Bradshaw and James Brown about the new roster for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers ahead of their first game of the season.

Participants then answered 14 questions about the clips they saw. These questions covered topics such as what they found interesting or unappealing, their perceptions of the reporters, and the possibility of their interest in football and the NFL increasing with more of a female presence around the league.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed via thematic analysis, which is completed in six steps: transcription, familiarization, and quote selection; keyword selection, coding, theme development, conceptualization, and conceptual model development (Naeem et al., 2023). Focus group sessions were recorded and later transcribed on Zoom and then kept in a flash drive. Important information, such as quotes and other notes that “bring the data to life” (Naeem et al., 2023) was pulled from each recording and written down. Keywords were gathered in the first focus group recording (i.e., “assumes,” “energy,” “interesting”) and coded by research question. These keywords and codes were applied to the other three groups as well. Codes were grouped into themes first by focus group, then combined into one document. Once everything was brought together, the most influential points were pulled out to create overall themes for each research question. For this study, the data was analyzed and connected to social identity theory while also addressing the consistent themes among focus groups.

Results

Preliminary Survey

Participants were asked how they felt about the statement “I am a football fan.” Four participants strongly disagreed, five somewhat disagreed, four were neutral, four somewhat agreed, and two strongly agreed with the statement. 1 participant strongly disagreed, three somewhat disagreed, none were neutral, 13 somewhat agreed, and two strongly agreed with the statement that they understood the basic rules of football. These responses show their predispositions toward football and prove that some participants already feel like they’re part of the in-group or not without participating in the focus

group.

Two participants said they tune in to NFL games every week, one tunes in a couple times a month, 10 tune in a couple times each season, and six never tune in. 18 participants could name teams, 15 could name players, and five could name sports reporters. Of the five who named sports reporters, three of them exclusively named NFL reporters, one named football and basketball reporters, and one named Formula One reporters. These responses show how often participants engage with the NFL and how much experience they have with NFL broadcasts. They also provide preliminary insights into how they may respond to the clips they watch, including what they look for in a report and what they understand about the content.

Focus Groups

RQ1 asked how female representation in the NFL would impact female viewership at UNCW. Two themes that emerged from this question were empowerment and gender as a minor factor in viewership impact. The biggest takeaway was that it either doesn't impact viewership or it won't. Participant #18 says this is because the reporters are "secondary content" during a football game. In other words, the person reporting on the game is trivial information compared to the game itself.

Participant #12 said "if I were already watching it, it would make me more interested," meaning she wouldn't necessarily seek out football games to see female reporters, but she'd be more intrigued to watch a game if it were already playing somewhere. Other participants said that although it wouldn't be the selling point, it would play some part in their retention. Participant #11 said female reporters aren't "the number one thing to be like 'Oh my God, that's so cool!'" This implies that some women think

there are more exciting aspects to a football game besides the reporters, but it's certainly a first step in finding those other exciting aspects. Some participants said gender doesn't matter no matter what they're shown. Participant #13 said she's "just not into football." Participant #9 was blunter, saying more female representation "would be great...but I'm not watching football."

Another theme that emerged was empowerment. Empowerment refers to the desire to learn more about a subject due to certain influences; in this case, that influence is female sports reporters. Participant #3 said she appreciated "seeing women on the field who aren't waving pom-poms." Participant #4 believed seeing women in the NFL in this capacity would make it feel more accessible, meaning their presence proves to others that women can break that fourth wall and take part in the conversations, whether that be professionally or with friends. "I have a right to be in this room, with these men, watching this game because there's a woman on that screen, so I can be in this room, and I can talk about it...I can enjoy it," she said.

RQ2 asked what drew female UNCW students to the NFL. The three themes that emerged were reporter engagement, understanding the content, and outside influence. Engagement refers to what participant #2 calls the "interactive elements" of the reporting, or the way the reporters carry themselves during a broadcast. These interactive elements include camera movement, effort, and passion.

Camera movement was especially relevant during Tracy Wolfson's report. They liked how she moved the camera to show the conditions players faced during the game. Participant #14 said "she wanted everyone to see what was actually happening rather than just saying it and hoping that people understand." Similarly, participant #5 said "it

seemed like she was actually there” because she put herself there by moving the camera to show the current situation. This is an example of showing, not telling the audience what they need to know. Participant #17 liked the way the camera followed Maria Taylor throughout the clip.

Effort correlates with how the reporters go about keeping an audience engaged. Participant #7 pointed out how “the women have given examples, the men just stood there.” Providing examples is how the women prove they deserve to be part of the conversation. It’s also an example of what participant #1 said was “breaking down the stigma of the idea that sports are just sort of a guy’s thing.” Participant #8 said with this effort, the women were “trying to keep your attention.” Finally, passion goes hand in hand with what participant #4 called reporters “who act like they want to be there.” Participant #2 shared that she liked the female reporters because they spoke in “more engaging tones.” When the reporters show that they want to do their job, the viewers think the game and the sport are worth tuning in for.

Understanding the content refers to knowing what the reporters are talking about. Participant #19 pointed out the difference in understanding the content versus being engaged with it; she said she understood what the reporters were saying, but she didn’t fully understand what was happening. Participant #3 said she liked “hearing somebody hyperactively break it down for me.” Participants #8, #13, and #14 liked how the women, specifically Tracy Wolfson, spoke in “beginner-friendly terms” and in a way that was “a little more digestible.” “They were able to express more through the way that they were talking,” Participant #14 said. This wasn’t specific to women; participants #1 and #17 found Chris Collinsworth approachable and understanding as well. Understanding what’s

being said makes viewers feel more connected to what they're watching and ultimately leads to the content piquing more people's interest.

Many factors are considered "outside influence," including peers. Participant #10 said her family likes the Baltimore Ravens and her mother's favorite reporter is Erin Andrews. Participant #14 grew up watching football, but learned to "appreciate what my parents appreciated" about the sport once she started watching it on her own time. She also stressed the importance of having people around who are willing to help others learn. Participant #11 shared how she's more interested in certain teams because her family or friends are interested in them. Participants #16 and #17 shared that they don't go out of their way to watch football unless it's the Super Bowl or the game includes a team they or their families like. Other people's excitement about certain teams and willingness to educate makes novices feel more welcomed into the NFL fandom.

RQ3 asked what deterred female UNCW students from pursuing the NFL. The three themes that emerged were stereotypes, assumptions, and NFL history. Stereotypes refer to the image people have in their minds about what a topic should look like, while assumptions are what people expect to see or experience based on these stereotypes. Football is historically a male-dominated sport; this study saw that stereotype in action throughout each focus group. For example, participant #4 said that the male reporters "didn't act like they had anything to prove," meaning that since football is usually considered a man's sport, male reporters don't need to do as much as female reporters because they naturally have a spot in the room. Relating to this comment, participant #9 assumed the men thought "they themselves is what you should've been watching." Participant #12 said the male reporters were "stale" and "monotoned," which adds to

them acting like they have nothing to prove.

Because of this stereotype, male reporters assume they can pivot the conversation from the main point of the report or just talk to the studio rather than the audience. For example, participant #6 pointed out comments Terry Bradshaw made about Chris Collinsworth's appearance; she said it "feels like I'm intruding." Participants #11 and #14 also thought these comments were distracting. Participant #7 got "the me show vibes" from Collinsworth as well. These stereotypes and assumptions suggest that the men in the industry can change the narrative or give less to a broadcast, which comes off as snarky or pretentious and eventually leads to viewers losing interest in what they have to say.

The societal pressure women feel to understand football when they watch with their male peers also came up. Participant #15 said "If I say I watch [the] NFL, I have to know everything." Participant #7 discussed how women innately feel like they shouldn't or can't be interested in football, and if they do show interest, they get judged. She said women showing genuine interest is seen as "more of an attention-seeking thing rather than just being fans." Participant #9 shared that her male friends mocked her whenever she tried joining their conversations about football. These remarks make outsiders feel even more detached from the content, which leads to people avoiding it completely.

Finally, the negative history surrounding the league was something that came up as a reason for not supporting the NFL, which includes watching NFL games, buying merchandise, and following teams and players on social media. This study found that the deterrent was players and staff treating women poorly and committing other crimes without facing repercussions. Participant #18 said that the standard of having "people

who are not beating their wives, not abusing their kids, and not doing things” as the face of the league should be kept; she also mentioned O.J. Simpson, Michael Vick, and Aaron Hernandez as times where they’ve slipped up.

Participant #10 said she found it hard to support those “that you know are actively doing harmful things towards women,” and brought up how a kicker for the Ravens acted inappropriately towards massage therapists for 15 years and it only came out recently that he had been doing this. Watching these men face little to no consequences for doing bad things makes viewers think the NFL only prioritizes protecting its players and teams rather than the well-being of *all* its employees.

Discussion & Conclusion

The research questions and themes can be connected back to social identity theory. The first question explores how women try to enter the in-group; for the purposes of this study, the in-group is football fans. The second question investigates why women want to join the in-group or, if they’re in it already, why they stay in the in-group. Finally, the third question asks why women feel like they’re in the out-group, which is people who aren’t football fans or people who feel unwelcome while trying to join the in-group.

All participants seemed to agree that the gender of the reporter wouldn’t impact their interest or desire to join the in-group and start watching the NFL in the future, which is consistent with Brisbane et al. (2023). Furthermore, some participants found Chris Collinsworth more approachable or understanding while also enjoying the female reporters’ segments; this contrasts with the idea that viewers find male reporters more exciting (Luisi et al., 2021). Instead, this implies that the way reporters deliver the

information is more important than the reporter's gender.

Unlike Brisbane et al.'s (2023) findings, this study didn't find that the beauty or attractiveness of the reporter impacted viewers' perceptions of the reporter's credibility or knowledge. For example, one participant who strongly disagreed with the survey question about being a football fan said seeing female reporters would have a negligible impact on her interest in the NFL. "The game and the commentators more colors my enjoyment," she said. This difference could be because this study only had women as participants, while 67 percent of Brisbane et al.'s (2023) participants were men.

As stated in the Results section, one participant who strongly agreed with the football fan survey question and can be considered part of the in-group said the reporters are "secondary content" compared to the game itself. She also shared that she doesn't "differentiate between the men and women. It's 'do I appreciate the commentary?'" This remark supports the idea that male reporters aren't favored by the targeted group in sports journalism, but also that female reporters aren't looked down upon either (Boczek et al., 2022). Similarly, some participants suggested mixed-gender reporting groups or reporting duos, which is consistent with the favoritism these groups receive among viewers. However, there was no significant connection between fan identification and biases about the reporters (Bell et al., 2024).

Women start looking to join another in-group: overall sports fans. Once they see that football isn't just a guy's sport, they'll hopefully feel that sense of belonging brought on from being part of the in-group, which gives people "the comforting sense that they're not alone in their experiences or perspectives" (McLeod, 2023).

On the topic of not differentiating between a reporter's gender, a participant who

somewhat agreed with the football fan question said the only time she'd notice gender is when women are being ignored or treated poorly by their male counterparts. This is an example of women feeling like they're part of the out-group and supports the belief that the inferiority women feel in the industry is normal and expected (Hardin & Shain, 2005). This also supports the idea of women expecting poor treatment when working for a sports team (Hobson & Clarke, 2020). This specifically would lower their self-esteem, diminishing their sense of self-worth (McLeod, 2023). Another participant who also somewhat agreed with the football fan question said she also wouldn't notice gender "unless it's something obviously negative."

An interesting finding comes from why women feel like they're forced into the out-group. Falling under the overall theme of negative energy, some participants said the jargon was confusing. For example, Chris Collinsworth often discussed free agents during his report; free agents are players who aren't signed with a team or won't be signed with a team at the end of a season and they can go wherever they want. A participant who was neutral towards the football fan question thought this was a chemistry term. Since she didn't understand what they were talking about, she was forced into the out-group and she stopped listening because she lost interest; she said she "zoned out every time a man was talking."

Stereotypes and assumptions were the main reasons why participants were deterred from watching the NFL, as they force women into the out-group before they have the chance to be part of the in-group. A participant who somewhat disagreed with the football fan question believed her male friends mocked her when she'd chime in during a conversation because football is "a sphere that they're not used to seeing women

in,” which is inconsistent with Schmidt’s (2018) finding that some men believe women should have bigger roles in sports reporting.

The NFL’s damaged history was a less common but very important reason participants wouldn’t want to watch or support the league. One participant who was neutral about the football fan question brought this up after mentioning how people within these organizations can do bad things but face no consequences for their actions. This suggests that professional sports organizations and those in charge of them put money and reputation before current and future victims of those they’re protecting (Sailofsky, 2024). Supporting a team that lets these actions slide would be challenging one’s sense of identity, which helps define who you are based on attributes, values, or goals (McLeod, 2023). If inclusion and acceptance are one’s values, supporting an organization that overlooks situations where those values are jeopardized is a clear example of contradiction for the sake of fitting in.

Practical implications from this study include authentic and timely responses to PR scandals—such as misconduct allegations and judgements of character—to prioritize integrity throughout the league. Increasing interactive elements, such as drawing on the screen wherever possible, would give people a sense of purpose by helping new viewers understand the group’s shared goals and missions (McLeod, 2023). Interactive elements enforce the showing, not telling idea that a handful of this study’s participants enjoyed. Other implications include staying focused on the topic at hand for increased engagement (which includes not commenting on the reporter’s figure halfway through a segment like participants saw with Chris Collinsworth), creating opportunities to learn more about football and the world around it (having qualified women run these opportunities

promotes healthy inclusion), and simply welcoming women into a male-dominated space like football and sports reporting while not forcing it for the sake of inclusion to show that the diversity is welcomed.

Two limitations for this study include age and location. The focus of this study was traditional female undergraduate students at UNCW, which doesn't consider non-traditional female undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty across the campus. This brings forward questions about biases that others may have toward female sports reporters and how their opinions impact their viewership. Next, UNCW does not have a football team, so most students don't have the experience of watching a game every week, whether that be college or professional. In addition, the local team in the Wilmington area is the Carolina Panthers, who made the NFL playoffs during the 2025-26 season after not appearing in the postseason since 2017. Their limited success over the years can lead to limited viewership; for example, a *Thursday Night Football* matchup against the Panthers and the Atlanta Falcons in 2022 had 6.8 million viewers, which was the season-low for viewership that season for TNF (Lewis, 2022).

Another limitation is the focus groups; participants' answers could have been influenced by the other participants' responses. Some participants may recognize certain reporters or favor certain teams, which could impact their perceptions of the media and ultimately rub off on the other participants in the focus group. To avoid this in the future, the study can be replicated and completed via surveys. A final limitation is the reporter clips. It was difficult to find archived footage of reports from past NFL games. Making these games and reports hard to find can imply that the only way to watch and/or get involved with the NFL is to watch the games live, which can be discouraging to new

viewers. Future studies should utilize NFL+ Premium—which allows subscribers to access NFL games from the past 16 years—or other services that offer full reports from games after the live broadcast ends.

This study showed that exposure to representation in sports journalism *could* help influence football viewership among women, but as seen through the existing literature and these results, it's not the deciding factor or what viewers actively look for when watching NFL games. To really feel like part of the in-group, the participants need to feel welcomed into it through understanding what's being said, not getting objectified and/or brought down by the men around them, and seeing reporters who want others to have fun watching the game and the people bringing it to them.

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