

## **“Is It So Bothersome That a Woman Has a Senior Position?”: False Empowerment in the Representation of Women in Sports TV Series**

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The paradigm shift in televised/streamed sports-themed series is examined from an intersectional and feminist studies perspective using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitatively, the study investigates 208 characters across 15 U.S. and European series broadcast in Spain on leading audiovisual platforms and television channels between 2018 and 2023. Female characters remain invisible, objectified, and in secondary positions, and are underrepresented as players, coaches, and managers. The analysis of recurring traits confirms false empowerment, substantiated by the persistence of traditional stereotypes and the emergence of new chauvinistic traits. Qualitatively, focus groups revealed antagonistic views between male and female viewers on fundamental gender issues. The analysis of production and male reception confirms the hypothesis on the representation of women in sports fiction, which appears to remain rooted in gender stereotypes while rejecting feminist demands. By contrast, the analysis of female reception does not align with the hypothesis, consistent with the approaches of gender studies.

*Keywords: television, series, gender, feminism, sports fiction*

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### **An Alleged Paradigm Shift: Sports Feminism**

In 2018 and 2019, various broadcast productions suggested a paradigm shift in media representations of gender and sport (Garin, 2024; Tous-Rovirosa et al., 2023). The pioneering TV series *Homeground* (Sæther & Stenberg, 2018–2019) and *The Hockey Girls* (Masllorens et al., 2019–2020) showcased women protagonists as first-division players and coaches in areas traditionally reserved for men. This shift was accompanied by institutional campaigns in several countries (e.g., the United Kingdom and Spain) to enhance the popularity of women's sport practice there (i.e., "You're Missing Out," in Catalonia, Spain, and "This Girl Can," in the United Kingdom) and in the United States. This prompted researchers to examine the alleged paradigm shift as a potential banner of gender equality. Despite some progress, significant gender gaps remain, including unequal pay (Fédération Internationale de Football Association [FIFA], 2019), underrepresentation in leadership (Fédération Internationale des Associations de Footballeurs Professionnels [FIFPro], 2020), and early dropout among girls (UN Women, 2024). Research on sport representation has traditionally focused on gender differences (Birrell, 2000; Caudwell, 2011; Hargreaves, 2004; Thorpe et al., 2017).

This paradigm shift is the origin of our research into the representation of female characters in sports-themed fiction, as previously undertaken by, for example, Heineken (2015), Hill (2020), and Walton-Fisette et al. (2017). A fundamental assumption underlying this shift is greater equality between men and women in sports, breaking the link between sport and masculinity (Bruce, 2016, p. 372; Miller, 2001), so that equality in sport is generally equivalent to gender equality. Oates (2017) and Ryan (2023) reject this premise, arguing that inherent gender inequality makes sport a visible structure of patriarchy and a space of natural inequality. According to Oates (2017), sport remains a hierarchical fiefdom of male solidarity (p. 27), equated with male power, with women and racial minorities perceived as a threat to White male hegemony (Darda & Davis, 2023). Incursions by female and racialized characters pose threats that ultimately reinforce the homosociality inherent to White male sport (Greven, 2009, p. 165; Oates, 2017, p. 38), a dynamic that runs counter to the principles of intersectionality. Sport is considered a realm where sex-based discrimination survives and is tolerated (Erikainen, 2019, p. 3). Messner warns of the dangers of gender essentialism, which is softer but affects female access to leadership positions (FIFPro, 2020) and is also "harmful for boys and men, since it reproduces hegemonic masculinity" (Messner, 2009, p. 174).

In alignment with second-wave feminist theoretical considerations, contemporary researchers such as Cobb (2020), corroborating Messner (2002), emphasize that structures of inequality persist through women's invisibility, objectification, and relegation both to secondary positions in social and professional spheres and to "minor" sports, coinciding with a broader heteropatriarchal sphere (p. 89). New features of fourth-wave feminism include the emergence of the #MeToo theme and the conflicts arising from the threat to White male hegemony from ethnic and gender minorities (Cobb, 2020; Darda & Davis, 2023; Oates, 2017). As a postfeminist legacy, femininity creates a dilemma for female athletes between preserving their appearance and conforming to prevailing beauty standards (Bruce, 2016; Ryan, 2023; Thorpe et al., 2017).

### ***False Empowerment in Sports Fiction***

Feminist research into women's representation in fiction highlights increased female protagonism (Lagerwey et al., 2016), but also a representation of women as problematic, in crisis (Hill, 2020), as antiheroines (Buonanno, 2017), or difficult (Pinedo, 2021). Female empowerment is the process by which women gain autonomy and fully engage in society (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). In sports series, this should be reflected in female leads who succeed athletically and exert agency within their environments (Garrido & Zaptsi, 2021). Paradoxically, fictional representations of sport seem to reinforce male hegemony (Albrecht, 2016; Greven, 2013; Oates, 2017), while television, as the most public of venues, presents a male subjectivity in crisis (Johnson, 2021, p. 48). Performative feminism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; McRobbie, 2009) and false empowerment are characterized by a superficial representation of female power. Women are depicted as assertive and capable, but their narratives rarely challenge hegemonic structures. This representation functions within a neoliberal postfeminist framework that celebrates individualism, choice, and resilience while disregarding "systemic inequalities" (Gill, 2007, p. 149) and is defined as sensationalist postfeminism (Gill, 2008; Rottenberg, 2014).

The potential of these narratives is further limited by their lack of intersectional depth. Without a systematic lens that includes Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC); lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, plus (LGBTQI+); and functionally diverse identities, both character representation and the critical value of media analysis are restricted. As scholars and activists increasingly argue, gender must be understood in relation to race, class, sexuality, and ability (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1989). Ignoring intersectionality leads to a homogenized portrayal of female empowerment, thereby reinforcing existing exclusions. As noted by Banet-Weiser et al. (2020), feminism without intersectionality risks upholding the very hierarchies it seeks to dismantle. Media gender studies have stressed that representations shape public perceptions of women and empowerment by creating "frames of meaning" (Oates, 2017, p. 20). Butler (1990) argues that gender is performative, with media playing a key role in constructing gender identity (p. 46). In sports television series, this implies that portrayals of women can either reinforce or subvert traditional gender norms. Sports series produce layered yet coherent narratives "about gender, race, and contemporary capitalism" (Darda & Davis, 2023; Oates, 2017, p. 20).

Performative, false empowerment is linked to three problems Messner (2002) identified in sports (p. 89): (1) The idea that a woman's worth is tied to both her appearance and her competence reinforces and perpetuates harmful stereotypes. (2) In terms of invisibility and supposedly female sports, feminine narratives are subordinated to masculine ones (Friedman, 2020). A cornerstone of false empowerment is narrative dependency, or plots focused on secondary female characters serving as a counterpoint to male hegemony (Oates, 2017). (3) The impact on young female viewers' self-image and aspirations is the perception that female role models do not truly challenge gender norms (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 27). Regarding links with postfeminism (Gill, 2007), neoliberal feminism, and popular feminism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020), and because of the links with physical appearance and care for the body, women's secondary role in sports and their aestheticization may relegate the female to a neoliberal sphere, which frames empowerment as a personal choice tied to self-discipline, consumer practices, and

bodily maintenance and aligns with existing gender hierarchies rather than dismantling them (Rottenberg, 2014).

### ***Definition of the Gap This Study Aims to Address***

Although female visibility in sports television series has recently improved (Hill, 2015), critical analysis remains necessary, as one-dimensional portrayals still predominate. Characters often conform to tropes like the "strong female athlete," depicted as fearless yet emotionally detached, rather than as fully developed agents with multidimensional identities. Research shows that even with increased coverage, sportswomen are typically portrayed through a narrow lens, with limited diversity (Pavlidis et al., 2019). An intersectional perspective reveals that athletes who are not White and heterosexual are either underrepresented or negatively framed (Dorer & Marschik, 2020). This aligns with the concept of symbolic annihilation, whereby underrepresented groups are excluded or trivialized, reinforcing patriarchal and ethnocentric narratives (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Even in fictional sports series, diverse female leads remain rare (Doukhan et al., 2024), revealing a persistent lack of intersectionality. The contribution of this research lies in its detailed analysis of the characteristics attributed to female protagonists in sports series to assess if these representations indicate an evolution. We seek to identify whether women are presented in a more complex and multidimensional, intersectional way or if they remain limited to roles that reinforce a superficial notion of leadership.

### ***On the Novelty of the Study and Its Expected Contribution***

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining false empowerment, intersectionality, and gender representation in sports-themed over-the-top (OTT) fiction series over five years. It also offers a novel contribution through its integration of quantitative character analysis with focus group insights. Although the representation of sports heroines in the media and film (Lieberman, 2015) has been documented in general terms, the evolution of their leading roles in sports fiction remains unexplored in depth. This study firmly situates itself within emerging discourses on intersectional media criticism and feminist media production, focusing on sports fiction in OTT productions, studied to a limited extent in academia, and crucial given the transformative role streaming services play in gender representation, content creation, and audience engagement (Lotz, 2017). Streaming platforms' unique affordances (algorithm-driven recommendations and global reach) create new dynamics in storytelling and reception, yet little is known about their impact on gender portrayals, especially in sports narratives (Smith & Choueiti, 2019). Using the conceptual framework of Banet-Weiser (2018), Darda and Davis (2023), Messner (2002), and Oates (2017), the following objectives and hypotheses were formulated.

### ***Objectives and Hypothesis***

#### ***General Objective***

To assess the survival or demise of the paradigm shift in sports-themed fiction series.

*Specific Objectives*

This study seeks to critically examine the representation of women in contemporary sports series, particularly focusing on issues of invisibility, objectification, and the relegation of female characters to secondary or supporting roles (O1). Drawing on feminist media theory, intersectionality, and cultural studies, the research investigates whether the portrayals of female characters offer genuine forms of empowerment or merely simulate progressiveness through superficial or tokenistic gestures or false empowerment (O2). The analysis evaluates the extent to which these characters are framed as weak, problematic, or emotionally unstable, in contrast to their often idealized male counterparts (O3). In addition, the study explores gender-based differences in audience reception, interrogating how male and female viewers respond to gender dynamics within sports narratives (O4). Through this multifaceted approach, the research aims to contribute to broader discussions on gender performativity, symbolic violence, and media power structures in serialized sports storytelling.

*Hypotheses*

The representation of women in sports television series remains rooted in gender stereotypes, often under the guise of symbolic or superficial empowerment (H1). Despite increased feminist advocacy and a purported paradigm shift toward gender inclusion, the agency of female characters appears to have diminished, as evidenced by ongoing objectification and marginalization—an argument supported through quantitative analysis of character roles (h1a). Female characters are frequently relegated to secondary or subordinate positions or are depicted as problematic, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies within sports narratives (h1b). This degradation of gender representation is evident in the diminished significance of lead female characters (H2). The quantitative data are expected to reveal that although women may be presented as more assertive, or even bossier, than their male counterparts, men still dominate positions of action and power, especially in sports management roles (h2a). The emergence of the quasi-warrior female archetype in sports fiction remains underdeveloped, indicating an incomplete evolution of gender narratives in the genre (h2b). From the perspective of audience reception, the study hypothesizes that men and women exhibit polarized views on themes including feminism and sexism. This is explored through qualitative methodologies, with the expectation that these divergences in interpretation reflect deep-seated gendered discourses and cultural attitudes toward gender equity in media representations (H3).

**Methodology and Sample**

This study employed a mixed methods design, using content analysis to identify the representation of primary gender issues in television series. Additionally, it incorporated two focus groups to compare the reception of selected issues among all-male and all-female groups. Clear, coherent, and relevant items and variables help ensure high construct validity, essential for credible and reliable findings.

### Content Analysis

Our research involved a quantitative analysis of 208 characters from 15 sports-themed series. The sample selected for analysis consists of productions released in Spain between 2018 and 2023 (see Table 1). This time frame was chosen because pioneering series focusing on a paradigm shift began to emerge in 2018. The study was limited to a five-year period for methodological consistency (h1a). A preliminary list included 42 TV series. Fifteen were selected based on the following criteria: broadcast in Spain, adult target audience, European or American origin, and relevance to major audiovisual platforms and sports-related content. Sampling was based only on these criteria, with no additional bias.

**Table 1. List of Sports TV Series Analyzed.**

| Title   | Executive Producer,<br>Years           | Platform/TV | Season | Format          | Sport                 |
|---|--|-------------|--------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Homeground</i><br>[Heimebane]                            | Sæther and<br>Stenberg (2018–<br>2019) | NRK-1       | 2      | Series          | Football <sup>a</sup> |
| <i>The Hockey Girls</i><br>[Les de l'hoquei]                | Masllorens et al.<br>(2019–2020)       | TVC/Netflix | 2      | Series          | Hockey                |
| <i>The English Game</i>                                     | Fellowes (2020)                        | Netflix     | 1      | Mini-<br>series | Soccer <sup>a</sup>   |
| <i>Ted Lasso</i>  | Lawrence                               | AppleTV     | 3      | Series          | Soccer <sup>a</sup>   |
| <i>The Queen's<br/>Gambit</i>                               | Frank (2020)                           | Netflix     | 1      | Mini-<br>series | Chess                 |
| <i>Spinning Out</i>   | Stratton (2020)                        | Netflix     | 1      | Series          | Figure skating        |
| <i>Heels</i>  | O'Malley (2021–<br>2023)               | Starz       | 2      | Series          | Wrestling             |
| <i>The Crew</i>   | Lowell (2021)                          | Netflix     | 1      | Series          | Car racing            |
| <i>Swagger</i>  | Bythewood (2021–<br>2023)              | AppleTV     | 2      | Series          | Basketball            |
| <i>Riding in Darkness</i><br>[Nattryttarna]                 | Nyberg (2022)                          | ZDF         | 1      | Series          | Horse riding          |
| <i>Winning Time: The<br/>Rise of the Lakers<br/>Dynasty</i> | McKay (2022–2023)                      | HBO         | 2      | Series          | Basketball            |
| <i>All American:<br/>Homecoming</i>                         | Okoro Carroll<br>(2022–2024)           | HBO         | 3      | Series          | Tennis                |
| <i>A League of Their<br/>Own</i>                            | Graham and<br>Jacobson (2022)          | Prime       | 1      | Series          | Baseball              |
| <i>Fifteen-Love</i>   | Elkington (2023)                       | Prime       | 1      | Series          | Tennis                |
| <i>The Crossover</i>  | Alexander (2023)                       | Disney      | 1      | Series          | Basketball            |

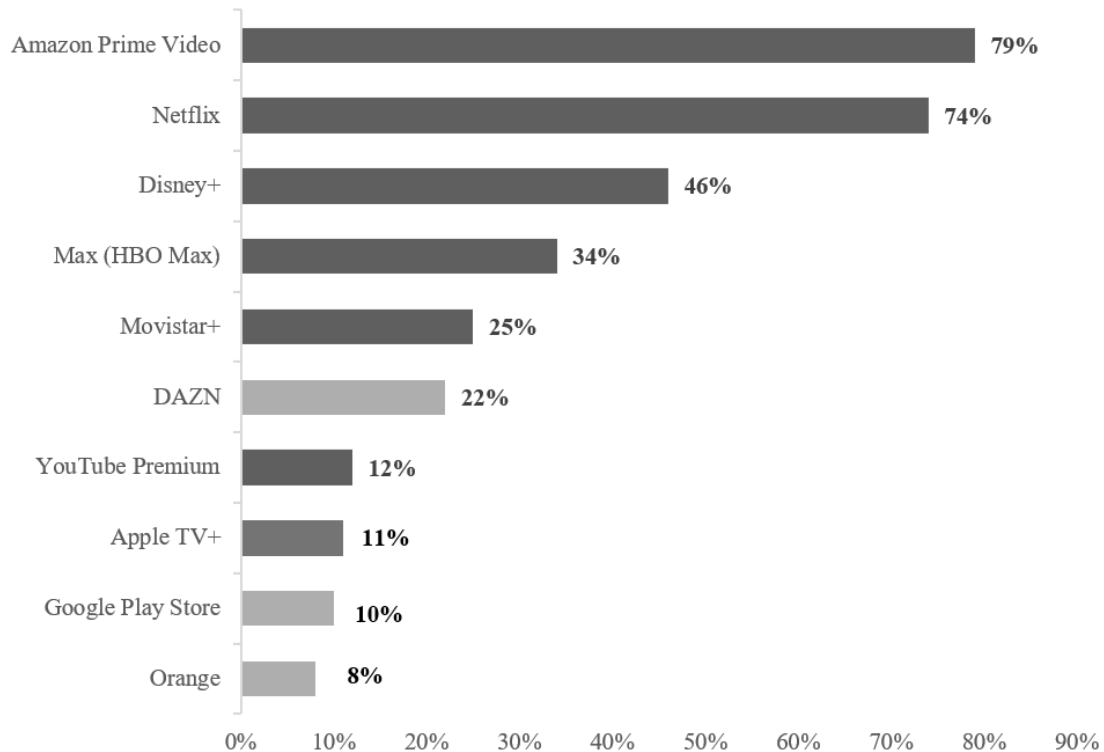
Source. Compiled by authors.

<sup>a</sup>We group these TV series under the category of "soccer" or "football" to maintain consistency and clarity. In Norway (as in *Homeground*, Sæther & Stenberg, 2018–2019), the sport is referred to as "football," but

in *Ted Lasso* (Lawrence, 2020–present) and *The English Game* (Fellowes, 2020), the term “soccer” is more appropriate.

### **Audiences**

OTT platforms have limited penetration in Spain (see Figure 1), with 6 million subscribers to pay TV, the lowest-ranked European country in subscriptions (Stoll, 2025). Netflix is the second most used subscription video on demand (SVOD) in Spain after Amazon Prime Video (Statista, 2024). According to Google Trends (2024), in Spain, increases in interest coincide with release dates, as with *Ted Lasso* (Lawrence, 2020–present) and *The English Game* (Fellowes, 2020). Excluding *All American: Homecoming* (Okoro Carroll, 2022–2024), some correlation can be observed between the most popular series in the United States and those in Spain (Digital-i, 2025).



**Figure 1. Ten most popular video-on-demand services in Spain.**

Note. Light gray represents services out of the scope of this study. Source. Statista (2024).

In the United States, *Ted Lasso* (Lawrence, 2020–present) and *The Queen's Gambit* (Frank, 2020) have contributed to increasing subscriptions to their platforms (Morfoot, 2021; Zandt, 2022). *The Queen's Gambit* was among Nielsen's Top 10 for three weeks, with over 3.8 billion total minutes watched. *All American: Homecoming* (Okoro Carroll, 2022–2024) and *Ted Lasso* have also been on Nielsen's lists

(Morfoot, 2021). *The Queen's Gambit* leads in international reach (90.8 million), tripling the reach of the next series, *The Crew* (Lowell, 2021; 21.6 million). In terms of streams, *All American* stands out with 1,041.7 million, followed by *The Queen's Gambit* (985.2 million). Both internationally and within Spain, audience rankings continue to be led by *The Queen's Gambit*, as Table 2 shows.

**Table 2. Audiences of Sports TV Series.**

| Title                           | Executive Producer, Years     | Reach | Streams | Average streams |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------|---------|-----------------|
| <i>The Queen's Gambit</i>       | Frank (2020)                  | 90.8  | 985.2   | 140.7           |
| <i>The Crew</i>                 | Lowell (2021)                 | 21.6  | 170.0   | 17.0            |
| <i>Spinning Out</i>             | Stratton (2020)               | 19.2  | 259.8   | 26.0            |
| <i>All American: Homecoming</i> | Okoro Carroll (2022–2024)     | 18.8  | 1,014.7 | 8.5             |
| <i>A League of Their Own</i>    | Graham and Jacobson (2022)    | 7.9   | 47.5    | 5.9             |
| <i>The Hockey Girls</i>         | Masllorens et al. (2019–2020) | 3.0   | 23.1    | 0.9             |
| <i>Heels</i>                    | O'Malley (2021–2023)          | 2.0   | 23.3    | 1.5             |
| <i>The Crossover</i>            | Alexander (2023)              | 1.5   | 7.5     | 0.9             |
| <i>Fifteen-Love</i>             | Elkington (2023)              | 0.3   | 2.4     | 0.4             |
| <i>Ted Lasso</i>                | Lawrence (2020–present)       | 0.2   | 4.9     | 0.1             |

*Note.* In millions, viewing time frame from release to May 31, 2025, in United Kingdom, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Nordics, Poland, Netherlands, United States, Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, Japan, South Korea, Australia. *Source.* Digital-i (2025).

The analysis included an average of 13.8 characters per series (208/15) and was performed to saturation of complete character descriptions according to the preestablished variables and for seasons as necessary. A dual-analysis sheet was used to describe the production characteristics of the television series and characters to address the objectives (O1, O2, O3) and hypotheses (H1, h1a, h1b, H2, h2a, h2b). For the characters, the analysis was based on a codebook comprising 46 multiple dependent variables, organized in the following categories: identification, description, geographical details, family situation, work and leisure, external characteristics, health, sexuality, gender issues, character traits, and linkage to sport.

The analysis sheet design was based on previous studies of the fictional representation of women and took into account the literature on fictional sports representations (Gietzen et al., 2017; Glynn, 2018; Hill, 2015). Data on other gender identities—transgender, nonbinary, queer, fluid, intersexual—were not included in the analysis because of their marginal numerical presence across the sample. Acknowledging that this exclusion is not neutral and could reinforce the male/female binarism, the scope of the research was expanded (Tous-Rovirosa et al., 2025). The additional variables of health problems and addictions were also taken into account to explore women in crisis in the sports sphere. Recurring traits (see Table 3) are considered key in studies of fictional representations of women and were deemed appropriate for our analysis, especially those related to (false) empowerment or its absence.



**Table 3. Recurring Traits.**

|                       | References  |
|-----------------------|---|
| <b>New traits</b>     |   |
| bossy                 | Negra (2009 <sup>a</sup> ), Nicolson (1996), and Oates (2017) |
| alpha and beta        | Albrecht (2016), Greven (2013), and Zimdars (2018)            |
| aspirational, wannabe | Hill (2020)   |
| in crisis, difficult  | Hill (2020) and Pinedo (2021)                                 |
| chav                  | Tyler (2013)  |
| <b>Old traits</b>     |   |
| quasi-warrior         | Hohenstein (2019) and Johnson (2021)                          |
| femme fatale          |   |
| tomboy                |   |
| womanizer             |   |

Source. Compiled by authors.

<sup>a</sup> Negra (2009) refers more to "authority," an archetype of the female professional (pp. 94, 97).

The traditional characteristics of sports fiction, in which heroes and heroines do not exhibit weaknesses (thus, portraying their vulnerabilities could be considered not merely realistic, but "pejorative"), clash with the contemporary trend toward representing more complex characters, including difficult traits and crisis situations (cf. Pinedo, 2021). The quasi-warrior and the "bossy" figures were fundamental features for analyzing the representation of female leadership in the series. Bossiness reflects the female superior, considered a threat by colleagues or employees, who often triggers antipathy by acting as a counterpoint to White male hegemony (Nicolson, 1996; Oates, 2017). For the quasi-warrior category, originally conceptualized to represent male characters (Johnson, 2021), we examined whether this concept could be used for female characters, as with the "female quest heroine" (Hohenstein, 2019, p. 14). To complete the quasi-warrior figure, we included variables on eudemonic and hedonic narrative goals (Baldwin & Bente, 2021).

### **Inter-coder Reliability**

The analysis was conducted by seven coders, all members of the same group. For the pretest using the codebook, approximately 10% of the sample was analyzed. Once the pretest analysis was complete, Krippendorff's alpha was applied, and any variables with a disparity in criteria were reviewed in terms of codebook and coder training. The minimum score for inter-coder agreement was established as 0.6. In the codebook, various aspects (i.e., gender, physical appearance, sexual orientation, main goal, and sport values) were detailed to clarify potential doubts for the coders about the dependent variables analyzed. The analysis was performed using Excel spreadsheets, and the PSPP program was used for subsequent coding. Descriptive statistics (bivariate analysis) were used to examine the results.

### **Focus Group**

Focus groups, a well-known technique for analyzing the reception of television studies (e.g., Flayelle et al., 2017; Korobkova et al., 2024), are used to gather qualitative data and insights. Two focus groups

analyzing the reception of televised/streamed sports-themed series in Spain, and addressing O4 and H3, were conducted in offices in Barcelona (see Table 4). The first session, comprising eight female participants, was held on July 17, 2024, and the second, with eight male participants, on July 18, 2024. Establishing all-male and all-female groups was relevant to the gender perspective of the analysis. The participants were aged 25–45 years old, were middle-class residents of Barcelona or its metropolitan area, and had experience of watching sports television series (more than 80%). Half had an undergraduate university education or higher, and 30% were born outside Catalonia, Spain (24.56% of Barcelona residents are foreigners; Idescat, 2024). The sessions lasted 60 minutes, and video clip viewing lasted under 10 minutes. The participants were recruited by a company that established a participation agreement with them, specifying ethical aspects, informed consent for the use of images recorded during the session (including video and audio for the study), confidentiality, anonymity, and data protection, in accordance with Spanish Law 1/1982 of May 5 on the right to honor personal and family privacy and one's own image. The participants were assured there were no right or wrong answers and that the goal was to encourage everyone to participate and speak freely. The UAB Code of Good Research Practice and the Ethical Code were followed at all times.

**Table 4. Focus Group Participants.**

| Participant | Sex    | Age | Place of residence           | Country of origin  | Level of education (ISCED, Unesco) |
|-------------|--------|-----|------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1           | Female | 25  | Sant Martí, Barcelona        | Catalonia          | Bachelor's                         |
| 2           | Female | 28  | Clot, Barcelona              | Catalonia          | Bachelor's                         |
| 3           | Female | 40  | Horta Guinardó, Barcelona    | Dominican Republic | Bachelor's                         |
| 4           | Female | 40  | Camp d'en Grassot, Barcelona | Brazil             | Bachelor's                         |
| 5           | Female | 30  | Sant Martí, Barcelona        | Catalonia          | Bachelor's                         |
| 6           | Female | 30  | Sagrada Família, Barcelona   | Catalonia          | Upper secondary education          |
| 7           | Female | 38  | La Salut, Barcelona          | Ecuador            | Lower secondary education          |
| 8           | Female | 25  | Eixample, Barcelona          | Bolivia            | Vocational training                |
| 1           | Male   | 43  | Trinitat Nova, Barcelona     | El Salvador        | Bachelor's                         |
| 2           | Male   | 43  | Nou Barris, Barcelona        | Mexico             | Doctorate                          |
| 3           | Male   | 38  | Nou Barris, Barcelona        | Catalonia          | Vocational training                |
| 4           | Male   | 41  | Sants, Barcelona             | Catalonia          | Upper secondary education          |
| 5           | Male   | 25  | Gracia, Barcelona            | Catalonia          | Bachelor's                         |
| 6           | Male   | 39  | Sant Antoni, Barcelona       | Catalonia          | Lower secondary education          |
| 7           | Male   | 40  | Santa Coloma de Gramenet     | Catalonia          | Bachelor's                         |
| 8           | Male   | 28  | Badalona                     | Catalonia          | Lower secondary education          |

*Source.* Compiled by authors.

After viewing the clips, two types of questions were presented to the participants: (a) emotional reaction questions (Korobkova et al., 2024) and (b) opinion and informational questions, based on the semistructured interview model (Corbetta, 2007). The latter were used to analyze the audience's reception of the issues raised, particularly about gender dimensions. The 10 categories that proved most productive

in the quantitative analysis and were deemed most potentially useful for O4/H3 were selected (see Table 5).

**Table 5. Sports Television Series Clips Focus Group.**

| Categories                                   | TV series  | Season and episode  | Character                                   | Timing |
|--|--|---------------------|---|--------|
| 1. TV/streamed sports series viewing         | Not applicable   |                     |   |        |
| 2. Representation of women                   | <i>Queen's Gambit</i>                                      | 1.1                 | Beth  | 2.08"  |
| 2a. Addiction, weak female lead              | (Frank, 2020)  |                     |   |        |
| 2b. Psychological problems, weak female lead | <i>Spinning Out</i><br>(Stratton, 2020)                    | 1.9                 | Kat   | 1.16"  |
| 3. Feminism                                  | <i>The Hockey Girls</i><br>(Masllorens et al., 2019–2020), | 1.1                 | Emma  | 48"    |
|  | <i>Heels</i> (O'Malley, 2021–2023)                         | 1.8                 | Crystal                                     | 1'     |
| 4. Feminist advocacy                         | <i>The Hockey Girls</i>                                    | 1.1                 | Emma  | 48"    |
| 5. Representation of men                     | <i>The English Game</i><br>(Fellowes, 2020)                | Promotional trailer | Arthur Kinnaird<br>Fergus Sutter            | 2.12"  |
| 6. New masculinities                         | <i>Ted Lasso</i><br>(Lawrence, 2020–present)               | 3.8                 | Ted, Roy, Trent, Coach Beard (Diamond Dogs) | 1.50"  |
| 7. Bossy-woman trait                         | <i>Ted Lasso</i>   | 3.9                 | Rebecca                                     | 20"    |
| 8. Female quasi-warrior trait                | <i>Heels</i>   | 1.8                 | Crystal                                     | 1'     |
| 9. Psychological abuse                       | <i>Riding in Darkness</i><br>(Nyberg, 2022)                | 1.2                 | Tommy                                       | 4'     |
| 10 Sport values, life models                 | <i>The English Game</i>                                    | Promotional trailer | Arthur Kinnaird<br>Fergus Sutter            | 2.12"  |
|  | <i>The Hockey Girls</i>                                    | 1.1                 | Emma  | 48"    |

Source. Compiled by authors.

The scripts, which were identical for the two groups, were adapted for conducting the focus groups. The ATLAS.ti program (v.24) was used to qualitatively analyze the focus group results according to codes and content clusters. The process involved viewing the recorded videos of the sessions, conducting open coding, and creating codes that were grouped into categories and subcategories according to the literature and the 10 categories established. Eight excerpts were selected, in which the 10 qualitative analytical categories appeared. See Table 5 for the specification of the content clusters.

### *Procedure*

Focus groups are usually used in conjunction with quantitative methods (Cyr, 2019, pp. 18, 25), and the focus groups were conducted after the quantitative analysis. The 10 categories were selected to determine whether the same variables that appeared in the content analysis were correlated with the reception analysis (triangulation). The 46 variables included in the analysis sheet were sufficient, clear, coherent, and relevant (construct validity), as was the corresponding selection of 10 categories of analysis for the focus group, to obtain responses and insights from the participants and compare the results from both techniques.

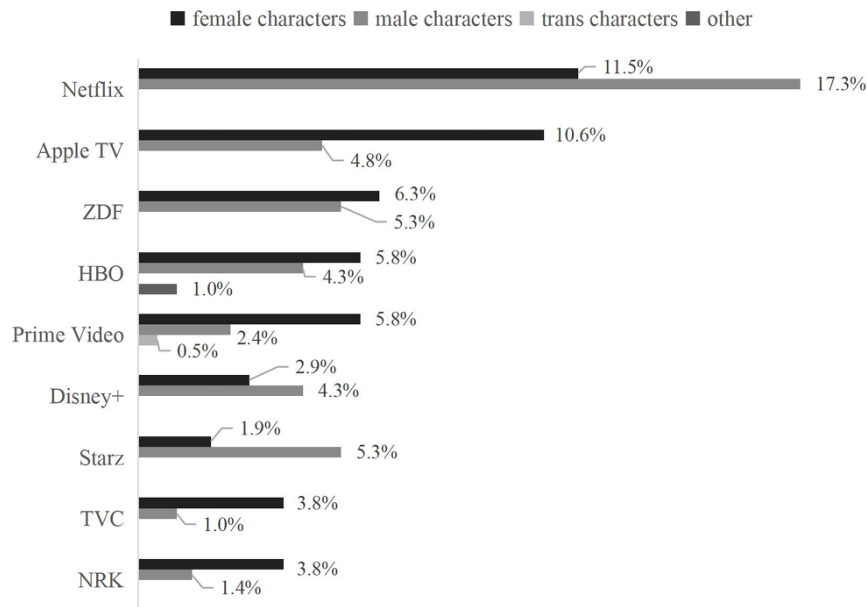
## **Results**

### ***Preliminary Results***

Most of the 15 productions were drama series (87%) and vary considerably in terms of their featured sports: soccer/football (21%), basketball (20%), tennis (13%), chess, figure skating, baseball, wrestling, hockey, car racing, and horse riding. The productions were aimed at adult audiences (67%), young adults (20%), and families (13%).

### ***Gender and Platforms***

Platforms that most frequently represent male characters are AppleTV (men 10.6%, women 4.8%), Starz (men 5.3%, women 1.9%), and Netflix (men 17.3%, women 11.5%), in contrast to Prime (men 2.4%, women 5.8%) and TVC (men 1%, women 3.8%), which more frequently represent female characters. Interestingly, the public TV networks TVC and NRK were pioneers (2018–2019), followed by Prime (2022) (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Gender and platforms.**

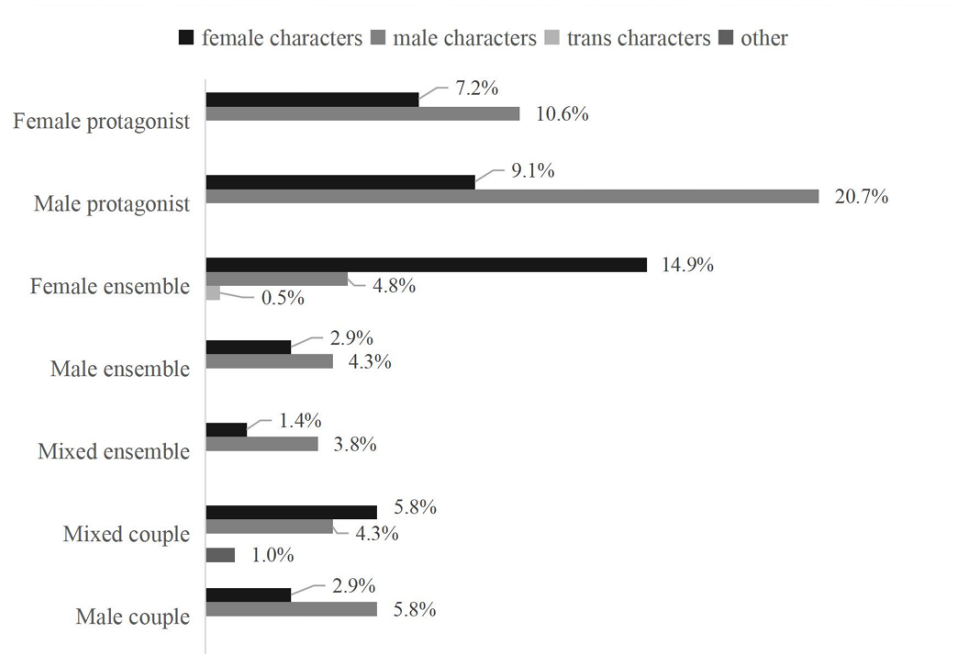
Source. Compiled by authors.

### Main Descriptors

Below, we present the results grouped into the main points of analysis. First are (a) those related to the persistence of the problems identified by Messner (2002) in the representation of women in sports fiction: (1) invisibility, (2) objectification, and (3) secondary positioning. This is followed by (b) health and addictions, (c) character traits (see Table 3), and (d) the focus group results.

#### A1. Descriptor. Invisibility

Leaving aside the three transgender, nonbinary, queer, or fluid characters (1.5% of the sample), male characters outnumbered female ones (54.3% vs. 44.2%). Few series starred only women, but the total number of series starring women (as main leads and ensemble casts) is similar to that of mixed productions (15%/20%), and combined, those exceed the total number of series starring men. Even in series starring women, there are proportionally more male than female characters (see Figure 3). Related to intersectionality, most characters are White (men 35.6%, women 29.8%). The second ethnic group, given the preponderance of U.S. productions, is Black of African descent (men 13.9%, women 9.6%), followed by Latinos (3.4% in total). As for sexual orientation, the characters are eminently heterosexual. Homosexuality is almost equally represented in the genders (men 8.2%, women 7.2%).



**Figure 3. Gender and protagonist types.**

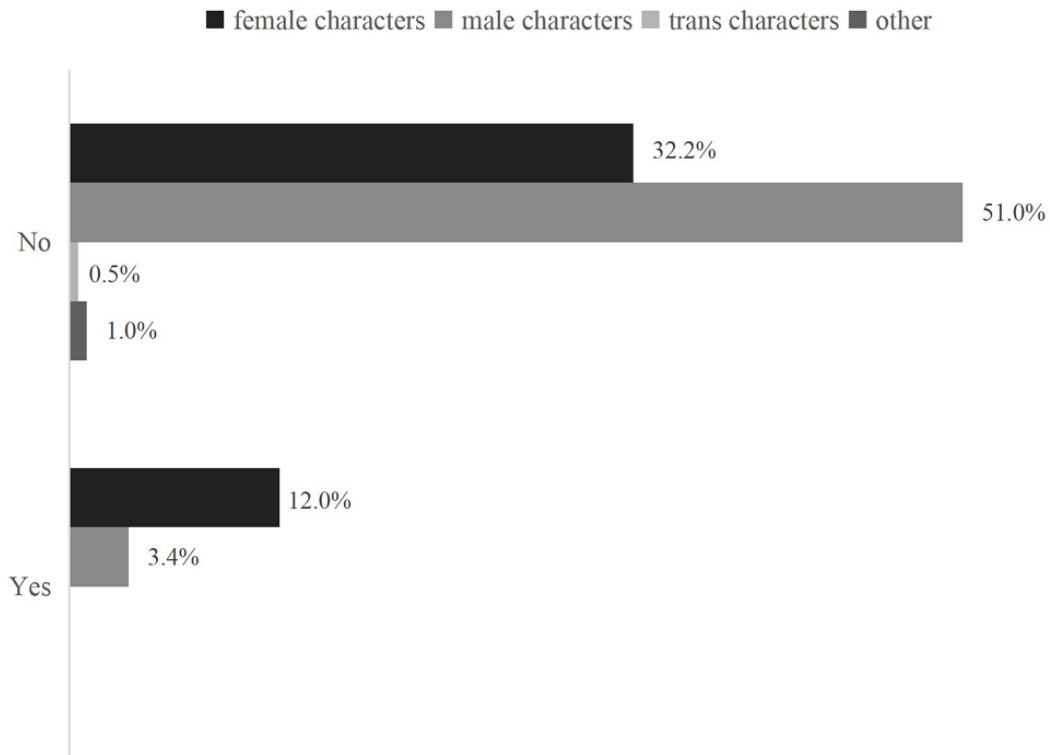
Source. Compiled by authors.

#### *Female Protagonism*

The sample included five series starring women: the pioneers *Homeground* (Sæther & Stenberg, 2018–2019) and *The Hockey Girls* (Masllorens et al., 2019–2020), followed by *Spinning Out* (Stratton, 2020), *The Queen's Gambit* (Frank, 2020), and *A League of Their Own* (Graham & Jacobson, 2022). The latter group features women dealing with problems that undermine their heroism. The only sports series with female protagonists since 2020 is *A League of Their Own*; in the remaining series, the women play mixed or ensemble roles (e.g., *Heels* [O'Malley, 2021–2023], and *The Crew* [Lowell, 2021], as well as *Fifteen-Love* [Elkington, 2023], and *All American: Homecoming* [Okoro Carroll, 2022–2024], both featuring a mixed couple). The series analyzed also included television series featuring male characters, such as *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2023), *The English Game* (Fellowes, 2020), and *Ted Lasso* (Lawrence, 2020–present).

#### *A2. Descriptor. Objectification*

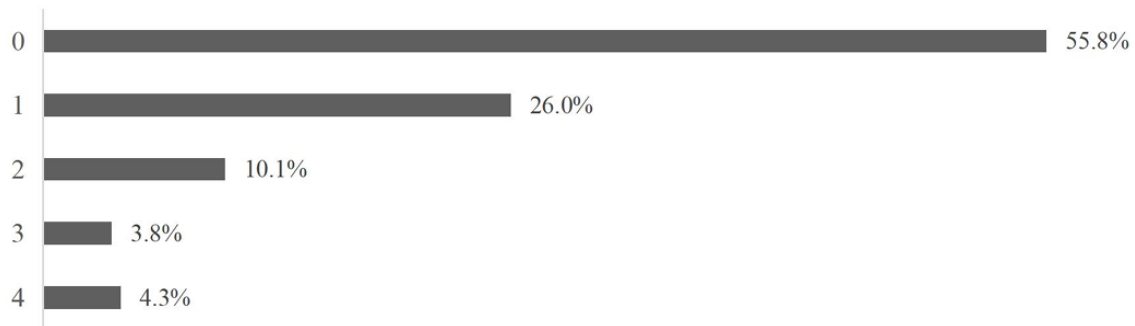
While both genders are predominantly 24–29 years old, women are more frequently in the younger age bracket of 15–17 years (8.9%). In contrast, male characters are secondarily concentrated in the 30–44 age group (13%). Half the proportion of women (7.7%) are married compared with men (14.9%). Almost no female characters (1%) are physically unattractive, compared with 5.3% of male characters. There is a significant absence of objectification of male characters (51%;  $n = 106$ ) compared with female characters (32.2%;  $n = 67$ ; see Figure 4).



**Figure 4. Gender and objectification.**

Source. Compiled by authors.

The frequencies and percentages for each of the variables related to hypersexualization are unnecessary nudity (7.2%,  $N = 15$ ), provocative/suggestive clothing (12.5%,  $N = 26$ ), extremely thin women/muscular men (40.9%,  $N = 85$ ), and body eroticization (12.5%,  $N = 26$ ). Hypersexualization is calculated from the presence/absence of these variables, with zero representing an absence of hypersexualization (55.8%) and four representing maximum hypersexualization (4.3%). The other results are 10.1% (2) and 3.8% (3), so the level of hypersexualization is not high (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5. Level of hypersexualization.**

Source. Compiled by authors.

Calculation of the one-factor ANOVA shows the differences are not statistically significant since the p-value is greater than 0.05 (Sig = 0.552). Gender therefore, does not condition the level of hypersexualization in these cases.

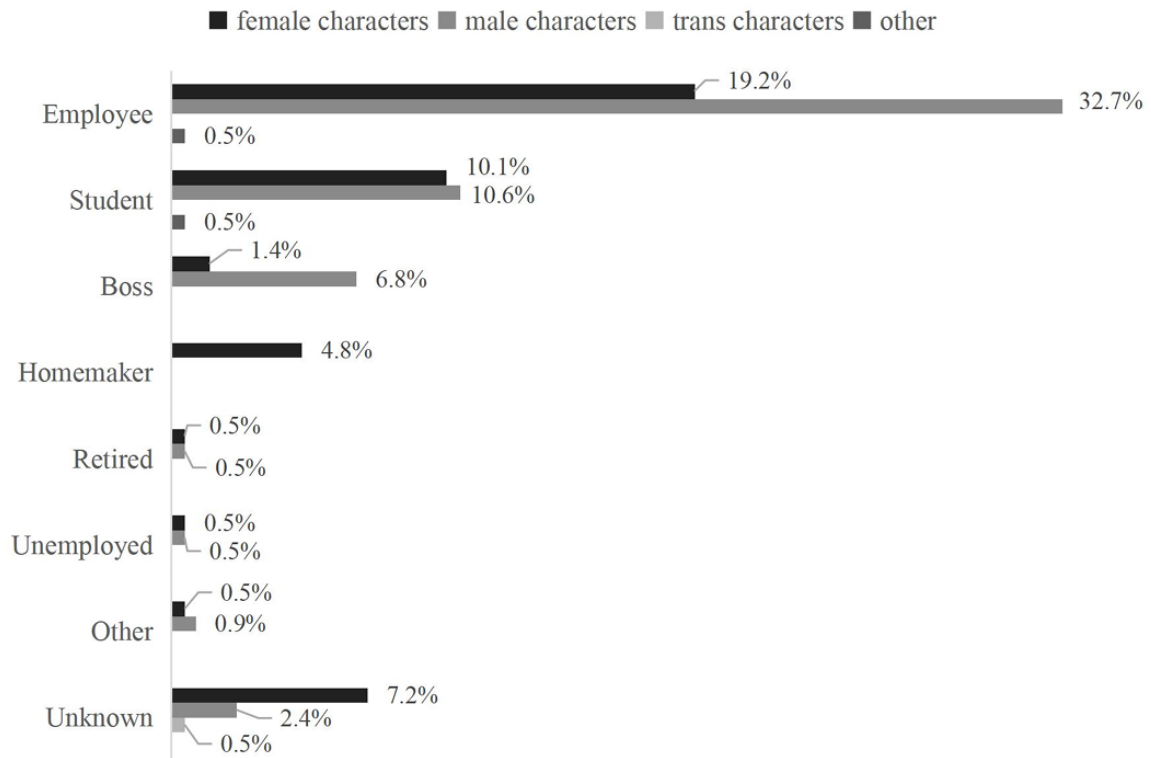
#### *Sexual/Psychological Abuse*

We observed a limited presence of sexual and psychological abuse (3.27%) in the series analyzed. The depiction of sexual abuse may be considered a positive change in fiction (Garrido & Zaptsi, 2021, p. 28). It is the central theme in *Riding in Darkness* (Nyberg, 2022) and *Fifteen-Love* (Elkington, 2023) and a significant aspect of *Swagger* (Bythewood, 2021–2023). *Homeground* (Sæther & Stenberg, 2018–2019) and *Spinning Out* (Stratton, 2020) address this issue. All five series were probably influenced by the #MeToo (2017) and Time's Up (2018) movements.

#### *A3. Descriptor. Secondary Positioning*

Female characters are underrepresented in "sports action." The share of employed female characters is much lower (19.2%) than that of employed male characters (32.7%; see Figure 6).

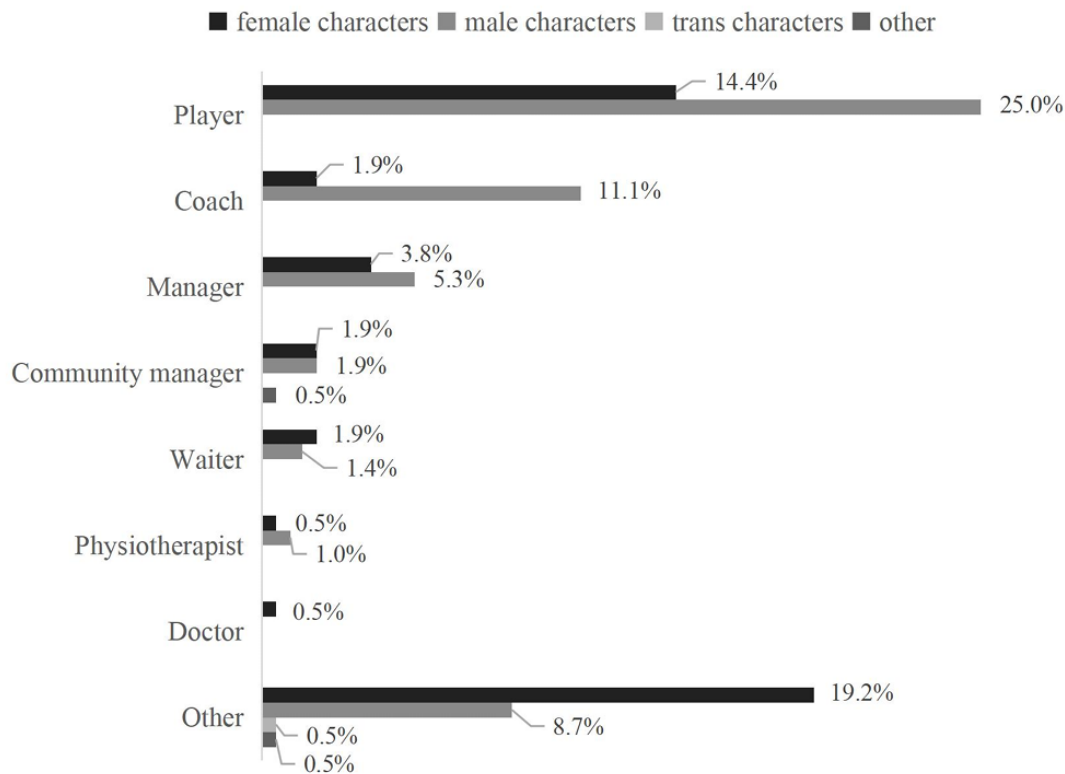




**Figure 6. Gender and occupation.**

Source. Compiled by authors.

In sport-related occupations, there are practically no women coaches (women 1.9%, men 11.1%), and far fewer female characters are players (women 14.4%, men 25%). Management positions are occupied by 3.8% of women, compared with 5.8% of men (see Figure 7).



**Figure 7. Gender and sports occupations.**

Source. Compiled by authors.

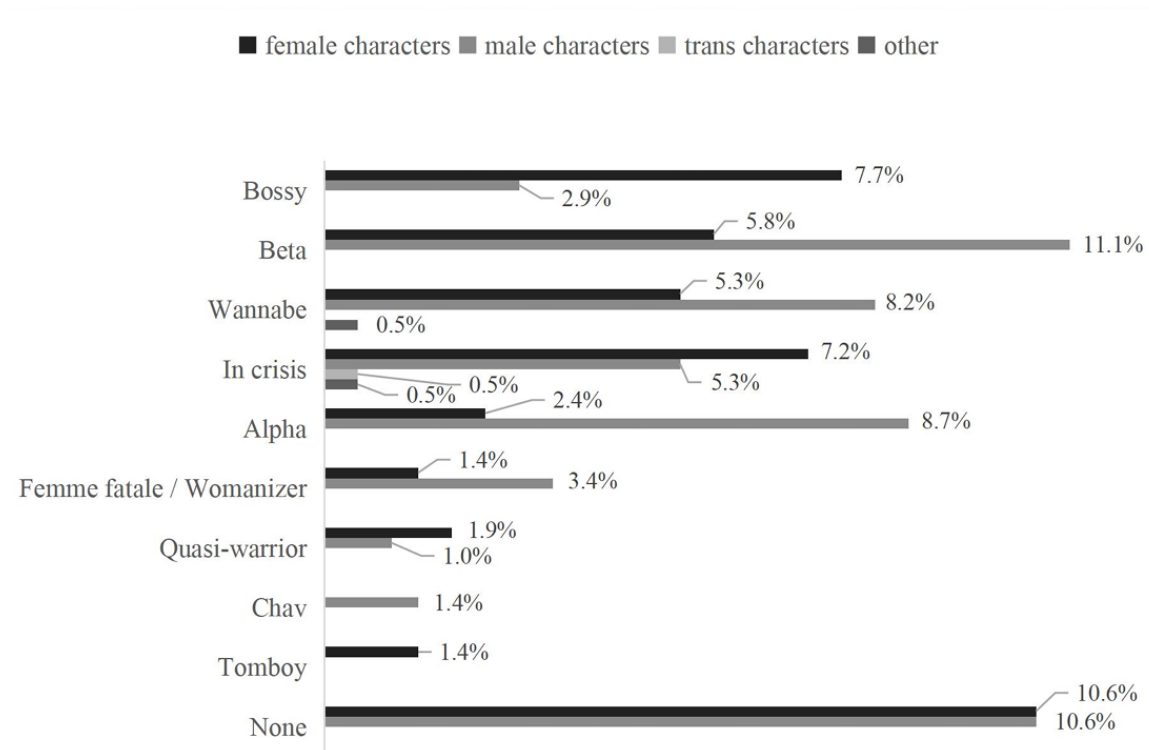
The promotion of men in the professional hierarchy significantly surpasses that of women (27.4% compared with 16.8%). The results are statistically significant for the notable absence of sports motivations among women (13.5%). There is a more favorable stance toward feminism (7.3%) than sexism (2.1%) and greater opposition to sexism (6.2%) than to feminism (1.5%). The portrayal of characters' attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community is more favorable (2.8%) than unfavorable (0.4%).

#### *B. Descriptor. Health and Addictions*

The series that features addiction most prominently is *The Queen's Gambit* (Frank, 2020), with lead female, Beth (Any Taylor-Joy), and her adoptive mother, Alma (Marielle Heller). Psychological disability in women is half (5.3%) that of men (10.1%), largely because of the existence of a normalized and accepted psychotherapy group for *Ted Lasso's* (Lawrence, 2020–present) male soccer team. The *Spinning Out* (Stratton, 2020) lead, Kat (Kaya Scodelario), has psychological issues that weaken her, as does Anna (Iría del Río) in *The Hockey Girls* (Masllorens et al., 2019–2020). There is no problematic representation of female or male characters, although in two of the five series featuring women, the sporting action is closely linked to seriously damaging personal problems that weaken the female leads.

### C. Descriptor. Traits

Interestingly, bossiness in women (7.7%) far exceeds that in men (2.9%), given the unequal distribution of managerial positions in the sample. The alpha and beta representations, in which men predominate over women, are also noteworthy. There is a broad representation of new masculinities, but less of female empowerment. More male characters are aspirational, and more female characters are in crisis (women 7.2% vs. men 5.3%). Only 1.4% of women conform to the tomboy trait, and no men conform to the effeminate trait (see Figure 8).



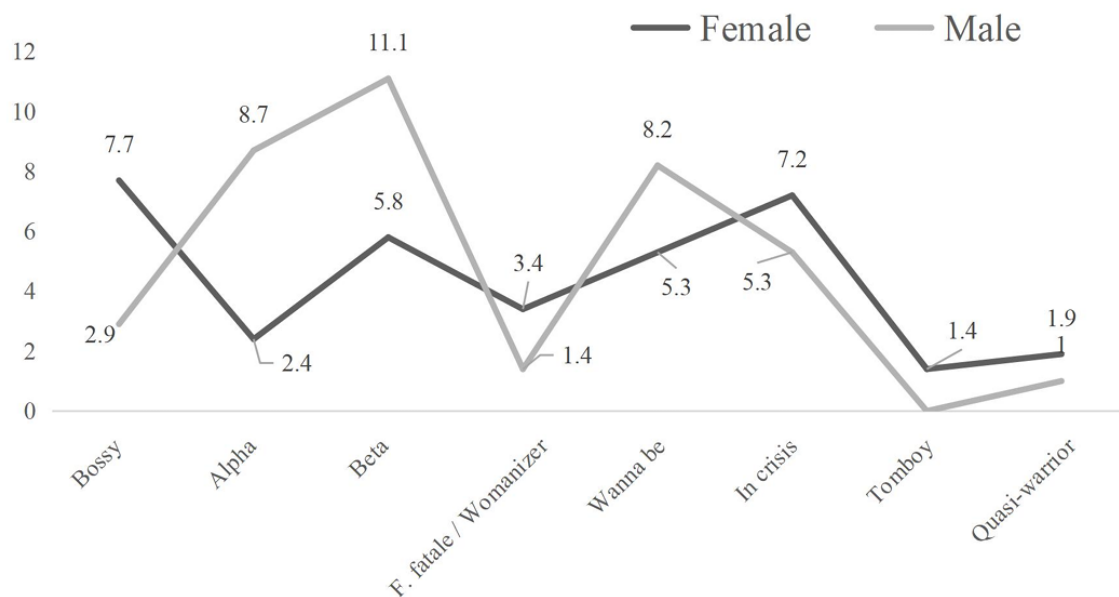
**Figure 8. Gender and traits.**

Source. Compiled by authors.

The in-crisis, problematic, tomboy/effeminate, and quasi-warrior figures are similar for male and female characters. While the quasi-warrior trait is traditional in male leads in sports series and cultural productions, it is quantitatively not very significant in our sample, and broadly gender-equal in distribution. The fact that there are more eudemonic male characters (men 13.9% vs. women 9.6%) and slightly more hedonic female characters (women 16.8% vs. men 15.4%) suggests a slight improvement in the representation of quasi-warrior women (see Figure 9).

The female quasi-warrior characters are Simone (*All American: Homecoming*, Okoro Carroll, 2022–2024), Crystal (*Heels*, O'Malley, 2021–2023), several protagonists of *The Hockey Girls* (Masllorens et al.,

2019–2020; e.g., Emma), and some in *A League of Their Own* (Graham & Jacobson, 2022)—the most intersectional example examined here, though affected by elements of what can be described as “fake feminism.” Protagonism and sports action practice coincide in these female characters, along with combativeness, which supports the link between sports practice and some degree of violence. In *The Queen's Gambit* (Frank, 2020), the female lead, Beth, is portrayed in crisis, while her primary male opponent, Vasily (Marcin Dorocinski), embodies the quasi-warrior trait. In *Homeground* (Sæther & Stenberg, 2018–2019), the female football coach, Helena (Ane Dahl Torp), could be a female quasi-warrior, but the male team's reaction to her quickly labels her as “bossy.” Both Rebecca (Hannah Waddingham) in *Ted Lasso* (Lawrence, 2020–present) and Catherine (Jillian Mueller) in *The Crew* (Lowell, 2021) are initially constructed as paradigmatic bossy women—the authoritarian counterparts to the traditional masculine cohesion of the team—sharing the “cruelty that violates the heroic code of loyalty” (Oates, 2017, p. 36).



**Figure 9. Traits.**

Source. Compiled by authors.

#### Focus Group Results

Important gender differences were observed in the perceptions and expressions of the male and female groups related to the questions posed about the categories and the video clips viewed (see Table 5). The men predominantly provided information—almost didactically—and had more difficulty expressing opinions and feelings. The women also shared information, but freely expressed opinions and emotions. We identified overt differences between the politically correct language used by male participants and their nonverbal reactions to certain scenes in the following cases: (a) the lesbian kiss clip (*The Hockey Girls*; Masllorens et al., 2019–2020), (b) the “bossy woman” scene, and (c) psychological abuse scene. These

topics caused a mismatch in the all-male group between verbal discourse and non-verbal reactions (Cyr, 2019; Krueger & Casey, 2015), coupled with subtexts, and paralinguistic and communicational codes (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013) that revealed discrepancies between verbal and nonverbal responses. Differences and nuances between all-male and all-female responses were considered, avoiding oversimplification of the complexity of the results.

The male participants exhibited recurring nonverbal behaviors—laughter, avoidance of eye contact, body tension, and ironic gestures—when confronted with the abovementioned emotionally or ideologically charged scenes involving gender and power dynamics. These reactions contrasted with their verbally measured and politically correct discourse, revealing a dissonance consistent with Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity. This tension reflects the enactment of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001), whereby internalized gender hierarchies are reproduced through everyday gestures that naturalize male dominance. In gender-segregated focus groups, these performative codes often reinforce hegemonic norms through shared verbal and nonverbal dynamics (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). This was evident in the reception of clip 9, which involved psychological abuse: All the female participants unanimously rejected the behavior as abusive; the male group was divided, with some minimizing the violence. These findings highlight how symbolic violence subtly operates across interpretive frameworks, sustaining normative gender roles despite individual divergence.

The results are presented below, following the order of the categories in Table 5:

1. A greater interest in sports TV series was evident in the male focus group than in the female focus group, with the men deliberately seeking out those series and associating them with their own sports interests. For the women, viewing sports series was accidental, more closely related to personal plots, and not necessarily related to a sport they were involved in. The men rejected personal plots (P3-M, P4-M, P7-M).

2. The women argued that more help from institutions was needed and fictional products to provide models in gender representation (P5-F, P6-F, P4-F). Both groups agreed women were underrepresented in sports series and called for greater female visibility in sports and in general.

3 and 4. All participants accepted feminism. None of the men was overtly in favor of sexism, and some acknowledged disadvantages for women. Feminist advocacy was largely, but not unanimously, rejected by the men. The men showed more interest in racism than in gender issues. The need for feminist advocacy was seen as something negative (P4-M) or tiring (P2-M, P3-M, P5-M, P6-M). The women believed feminist advocacy is still necessary.

5 and 6. For the men, the male leads "still seek epic endings" (P4-M) and "brave and focused fighters" (P8-M). The male and female participants accepted the new masculinities. The women were unhappy that men never adopt female roles in sports series.

7. Regarding the bossy trait, there was consensus among the men that Roy Kent (Brett Goldstein) is reluctant to obey Rebecca because his boss is a woman, though the adjective used by the male participants to characterize her was not "bossy," but "dominant" (P3-M, P2-M) or "formidable" (P1-M). The bossy-woman

figure is "acceptable," but the men criticized the scene because "the reverse would be unacceptable"—a woman forced to obey her male boss (P1-M). The women highlighted the alluring clothing of female leads, which they did not consider appropriate for managerial positions (P6-F, P2-F) and noted that women managers continue to cause discomfort.

8. The men showed interest in the female quasi-warrior figure (P5-M) (which did not arouse much interest among the women), found it much more interesting than the feminist advocacy, and did not criticize hypersexualization. The female participants felt that since quasi-warrior and bossy women "have earned their position" (P3-F), this should not come as a surprise or cause discomfort.

9. The women roundly criticized the clip showing psychological abuse and rejected the frequent hypersexualization in productions involving sexual abuse. Some of the men saw no problem with the scene (P1-M, P3-M, P8-M), while others (P2-M, P4-M, P5-M, P6-M) highlighted its cruelty.

10. The men, for whom watching sports series is closely linked to life models and values, highlighted resilience as a basic value. For them, sports TV series should be spectacular and entertaining, and the sport as action should prevail, regardless of the lead's gender.

### Discussion and Conclusions

This research demonstrates that false empowerment perpetuates superficial stereotypes without challenging preexisting power structures (H1). The representations of women in sports series remain largely invisible, objectified, and secondary. Evidence suggests this is a structural issue, as indicated by the emergence of new chauvinist figures and traits related to the era and theme, the persistence of older ones, and the general lack of intersectional representation. The findings indicate a worsening situation related to female protagonism and gender dynamics, masked by a modern facade. From an intersectional perspective, the characters are overwhelmingly White, heterosexual, and male-dominated, with an absence of transgender representation. There is greater individual male prominence, even in series featuring female leads. Gender equity is only achieved when combining individual and ensemble roles. Female characters are typically younger, more attractive, single, and more objectified than male characters, although gender does not significantly influence the level of hypersexualization.

Narratives in two of the five series with female leads closely tie women's protagonism to personal struggles, weakening their agency. New masculinities (beta males) are more prominent than empowered women (alpha females). However, the male audience's imagination still favors the figure of the female heroic warrior, characterized by epic endings and bravery, accompanied by eudemonia and resilience (H3).

The female lead is deemed unimportant (H2), with the female quasi-warrior figure being relatively insignificant (h2b) and the bossy-woman trait persisting (h2a), which is associated with a deterioration in the paradigm shift (H2) and continues to be rejected by male audiences (H3). The bossy figure is more prevalent in female characters than in male characters, despite the underrepresentation of female managers and their secondary or invisible positions as "sports action figures" (h2a).

We observed a contrast between surface values and the values conveyed, which also validates the hypothesis of false empowerment. Characters' attitudes toward feminism and sexism align with politically correct discourse. This contrasts with other quantitative results and aligns with the widespread assertions in favor of feminism and against sexism by both men and women in the focus groups. The figure of the bossy woman is deemed "acceptable" by men who are careful not to label her as such.

The focus group results confirm antagonistic positions about fundamental gender issues between the male and female participants (H3). The male participants find the female quasi-warrior attractive and reject feminist advocacy, while the female participants show interest in feminist advocacy. From the men's perspective, sports series generate interest in values of resilience and life models. Conversely, women view the female quasi-warrior and bossy-woman traits as normal and advocate for the avoidance of hypersexualization.

In summary, feminist advocacy (h1a) and female prominence (H2) have declined following the "paradigm shift" and are primarily rejected by male audiences (H3). Regarding the validation of the main hypothesis, we observe a positive relationship between the results of the quantitative content analysis and the all-male focus group. This relationship indicates the presence of false empowerment and a rejection of feminist demands in both television production and masculine reception. Conversely, there is a negative relationship between the content analysis results and the all-female focus group, where false empowerment is identified, but feminist demands are embraced.

### Limitations and Further Research

Further research could take into account cultural variation in audience perception and media production, as well as examine the gender composition of production teams and the potentially significant impact of female creators on the shaping of gender narratives. A longitudinal analysis would assess whether portrayals of women in sports series evolve over time, particularly in light of the suggested decline in their narrative prominence and symbolic authority.

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