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# Fighting fit: clothing, equipment and material objects as identity formation in women's boxing

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the intersections of material culture and gendered identity among women in boxing, linking material objects to lived experience. Based on ethnographic field work in two Midlands based boxing gyms in the UK, the study used semi-structured interviews, field observations, and a novel method involving boxers' kit bags. It examines how women athletes navigate, resist, and redefine dominant ideals of Western femininity – privileging heterosexual desirability, whiteness, and toned aesthetics – within the traditionally male-dominated space of the boxing gym. Focusing on two themes: (i) clothing and contested feminine identities and (ii) boxing kit, rituals and belonging, analysis reveals how clothing choices and access to appropriate equipment impact women's resistance, inclusion, and identity in the gym. While some expressions of resistance remain confined to the gym, the study highlights the symbolic and physical exclusion created by male-designed protective gear, calling for more equitable regulation and design in boxing.

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Sports clothing, equipment, and the relationship between athletes and sporting objects are central to understanding gender relations in sport because their use, style and regulation reflects and reinforces societal expectations about masculinity and femininity (Channon et al. 2018). Gender relations in sport and society are complex and dynamic, evolving in relation to changing societal influences operating at the intersections of race, class, sexuality, disability, and age (Collins and Bilge 2016; Connell 2009). Numerous factors such as cultural norms, economic structures, legal systems, and social expectations shape them. Power dynamics within gender relations often reinforce inequalities, but they can equally provide spaces for resistance, redefinition, and transformation (Flood, Dragiewicz, and Pease 2021). How deeply embedded these power dynamics are in everyday practices, institutions, and interactions can further complicate the navigation of gender relations and affect both visibility and recognition of those who lack power dependant on the context. Gender and femininity are not fixed traits but socially constructed identities, shaped by

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cultural norms, power relations, and repeated performances – the routine enactment of gendered behaviours and appearances that come to signify and reinforce identity over time (Butler 2004). This is especially visible in sport, where women athletes continually negotiate and challenge traditional definitions of womanhood through their embodied practices including in relation to their clothing and equipment selection, and representation (Birrell 2000; Hargreaves 2002; Lindner 2012; van Ingen 2016).

Further to the influence of broader societal norms, gender relations within a sporting context can be exacerbated by dynamics of competition, representation, and access (Hargreaves and Anderson 2014). Gender power imbalances reflect complex individual and structural dynamics of inclusion/exclusion (Tomlinson 1998) and are known to manifest in unequal opportunities (Cooky and Messner 2018), media coverage (Duncan 2009), and funding (Piggott, Pike, and Matthews 2018) between men's and women's sports, whilst gender stereotypes can also influence the perception of athletes' abilities (Chalabaev et al. 2013). Varying experiences of inclusion, exclusion, and identity within a sporting context are relevant as sites of research, as an understanding of these complex overlapping mechanisms can help us improve the experiences of athletes experiencing the complex and dynamic character of gender.

Women's sports attire is frequently designed to emphasize aesthetics and femininity, which can lead to objectification, whilst men's sports clothing typically focuses on performance and functionality, reinforcing traditional gender roles (Kane, LaVoi, and Fink 2013; Lal 2015: Vaquero-Cristóbal et al. 2024). The differences in design, regulation, and marketing of sportswear also shape perceptions of athletes, with stricter or more revealing dress codes for women often highlighting gender inequality. Additionally, sports clothing influences both the accessibility and comfort of athletes, further impacting participation and performance across genders.

Although there has been a long-term turn towards the material across the social sciences over the twentieth century (Hicks and Beaudry 2010) – including increased focus on how interactions with material objects and their properties can help us to understand social relations – within the sociology of sport, there remains a paucity of literature examining objects and equipment within material culture. Notable exceptions can be found for material culture within sports history (Borish 2004; Borish and Phillips 2012; Hardy, Loy, and Booth 2009), material culture in relation to gender and sport (Booth and Pavlidis 2023; Crosset 1995; Marfell 2019; Wheat and Dickson 1999), and in the work of Thorpe and Wheaton, who have explored how objects such as clothing and equipment mediate identity, embodiment, and belonging within action sport subcultures (Thorpe 2008; Thorpe and Wheaton 2011; Wheaton 2010). While literature focussing on new materialist perspectives offer valuable insights into the agency of matter and the entanglement of human and nonhuman actors (see Kerr 2014; 2016; Ray 2019; Roy 2013), this paper adopts a material culture approach, focusing on the symbolic and social meanings embedded in objects, practices and embodied displays within the boxing subculture. By focussing on the clothing and equipment worn and used by women in boxing gyms, we can explore the importance of such material items to the identity formation of those who actively participate in what has previously been seen as the masculine space of the boxing gym.

This paper offers a novel contribution to the field of sport and leisure research by linking theoretical insights from material culture to the lived experiences of women

who box. It examines the complexities involved in the construction and reconstruction of gender within the boxing gym, focusing on the cultural meanings ascribed to material items such as clothing and equipment. The study also explores how these items foster a sense of belonging and identity in relation to the sport (Thorpe 2004), while highlighting the gendered politics surrounding what is considered appropriate 'protective' gear. This research is significant in amplifying the voices of women who box and framing the boxing gym as a site of gender expression that often resists dominant Western ideals of femininity. The paper is based on a three-year study involving semi-structured interviews, field observations, and the development of a novel object-based method. In this context, the term 'women' is used to represent the gender identity of the study's participants and is intended as an inclusive term encompassing all individuals who identify as women, regardless of biological sex. This does not suggest the use of woman as a homogenous category, rather the analysis foregrounds the complexity and fluidity of gendered identities as they are formed and reformed by the women who box in this study. The paper explores selected literature on the relationship between clothing, material objects, and gender in sport, and sport, clothing, and gendered identities. The theoretical framing of material culture is outlined. We explain in detail our methods prior to presenting the analysis of clothing and contested feminine identities in the boxing gym, and gendering protective boxing equipment.

## Dressing gender in sports

Historically, women have been subjected to social subordination by men in many spaces, including the workplace, home and sports arenas. There is no scope within this article to detail the extensive and excellent literature exploring the gendered history of sport examined by other scholars (see for example Hargreaves 2002; Vertinsky 1994; Williams 2014). In brief, the biologically ascribed sex of female has historically been enough to indicate their 'less than' status in many social spheres, and any performance of gender that did not match this ascription was considered a challenge to male dominance. This has meant that spaces and activities traditionally considered masculine did not need to accommodate the female body, and therefore clothing and material objects that facilitated the inclusion of women in such spaces have not – and are often still not – fully accounted for.

Designing clothing and equipment that is fit for purpose whilst still considered gender appropriate has been an endeavour of the clothing industry for more than a century. Jungnickel (2023) discusses clothing patents between 1890 and 1940 relating to activewear specifically designed for women. Such attire sought to enable women to partake in physical activities such as climbing, cycling, and riding. Whilst the everyday acceptable attire for women was unsuitable for such activities, designers were keen to ensure feminine standards of dress were maintained whilst enabling a more active lifestyle. Replacing a skirt with trousers was inconceivable in Victorian times as it was seen as a rejection of traditional feminine roles (Jungnickel 2023), and trousers were seen as 'symbolic of the authority men held in society' (McCrone 1988, 221). Although function was becoming increasingly important, the need for clothes that enabled women to 'pass as a lady in polite society while also pursuing a multi-sport lifestyle' Jungnickel (2023, 2.) prioritized feminine fashion over practicality.

In sporting environments there often remains an expectation that women conform to the societal expectations of femininity in what they wear, even if not fit for purpose (Channon et al. 2018; Hargreaves 2002; Krane 2001). Historically, skirts or dresses have been the regulation uniform for many sports such as cricket, hockey, netball, and tennis. Additionally, clothing that reduced period anxiety has only recently been sanctioned, with Wimbledon only allowing females to wear dark shorts under the regulation white uniform for the first time in 2023 (Wimbledon.com 2025). Despite prevailing ideals of femininity, female athletes have in the past shown public resistance to regulation uniforms that they perceived as objectifying, with the sports of beach handball (Hill, Erlandson, and Price 2023) and gymnastics (Neville-Shepard 2024) both having received extensive media coverage as a result (BBC 2021; Radnofsky 2021).

Martial arts are often viewed as having an absence of appropriate clothing and equipment for women's bodies with sports such as karate, judo, and taekwondo requiring women to wear gi (a traditional uniform typically composed of a jacket, trousers, and a belt), cut for a generic male body with broad shoulders and slim hips (Davies and Deckert 2019), and boxing only recently benefiting from equipment specifically designed for the female frame. However, martial arts are not immune to the objectification of the female form. Muay Thai clubs sometimes insist on makeup, low-cut shorts, and sports bras for female competitors to emphasize their femininity (Davies and Deckert 2019). Controversially, the IOC attempted to mandate that female boxers wear skirts during the 2012 Olympics, visually and symbolically separating them from their male counterparts (Schweinbenz 2012; Weaving 2012). This decision came after skirts were introduced to international competitions in September 2010, prompted by a complaint from the president of the Amateur International Boxing Association (AIBA), Wu Ching-kuo, who argued that spectators struggled to distinguish between female and male competitors. Despite some support during the European championship from Romania and Poland, whose coaches claimed that skirts were 'more elegant' and provided 'a more feminine impression', the proposal remained highly contentious, finally being overturned just weeks before the games began (Peck 2012; van Ingen and Kovacs 2012). As Woodward (2014) notes, by including women in sport previously the preserve of men, particularly on a world stage such as the Olympics, not only did women boxers enter discourse, but the 'mystique of masculinity is disrupted' (Woodward 2014, 250). The very act of 'problematising' women's inclusion in masculine sports by insisting that they are somehow visually distinguishable from their male counterparts underscores the need to critically examine the structures and beliefs that govern sports culture, and to advocate for inclusivity and respect for diverse expressions of athleticism.

Boxing also has a history of objectification of women both inside and outside the ring. Foxy boxing and topless boxing which existed in the singles bars of California in the 80's and 90's were for voyeuristic purposes only (Hargreaves 1997). Further evidence of women being reduced to objects based on their physical attributes in boxing is the inclusion of 'Ring Girls', women employed by boxing promoters to parade around the ring between rounds holding large signs indicating which round of the match was next. Their sexualized attire of swimsuits, high heels, and stockings reduced their involvement in the sport to that of mere decoration (Hargreaves 1997).

Women athletes often reported that in addition to partaking in sports and other activities traditionally associated with boys such as climbing trees, they had also 'dressed like

boys' in their younger years (Mennesson 2000). This 'counter-identity' described by Mennesson's research is somewhat challenging when set against more prevalent narratives that present athletes who display such transgressions of gender identity as androgynous or, 'super-feminine' (Hargreaves 2000). There is an acceptance that women can partake in athletic activities and display strength and endurance, but this acceptance is often conditional and contingent on them displaying gender appropriately. Women who create a troubling ambiguity by transgressing such expectations of the 'social doing' of gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) risk being labelled as unfeminine. Florence Griffin Joyner, or 'FloJo' as she was often referred, was revered for her muscular strength and speed, taking two world records at the 1988 Seoul Olympics in the 100 and 200 m sprint. However, her hyper-feminine sense of style was often as talked about as her athletic achievements (Crosset 1995). More recent examples of athletes talked about for their feminine aesthetic appeal almost as much as their skill are Anna Kournikova and Maria Sharapova whom Forbes quoted in 2016 as having made $37 million from prize money but almost $250 million from sponsors (Badenhausen 2016). Some female boxers are also using clothing (or lack of it) to self-objectify and increase their following. Australian bantamweight boxer, Ebanie Bridges, came from a successful amateur boxing career, erupting onto the professional boxing scene in the UK in 2020. She gained huge media attention and social media traction when she attended weigh-in wearing lingerie, promoted her OnlyFans[1] account, and invited her social media followers to vote on their favourite outfits of hers, during her rapid ascent from obscurity to World Champion. Fellow Australian professional boxer Cherneka Johnson went one step further in June 2023, by weighing-in in skimpy pants and only body paint with an OnlyFans logo covering her chest.

The objects and clothing associated with sporting contexts and the cultural significance of such objects become central to the formation of rituals within such spaces. The cultural significance of tangible items that act as tacit symbols of belonging based on how the individual interacts with them, makes the material items of sporting practice a powerful site for analysis of sporting identity (Hicks and Beaudry 2010; Woodward 2007). In Gravestock's (2013) research into ice skating, both the design and sharpness of the blade, and how the boots fit and support, are highlighted as crucial to the execution of precise movements and ensuring the skater's stability and control. The feel and fit of sporting materials can not only influence participants' embodied experience of the sport but can also delineate along lines of gender (Schyfter 2008). Sports such as lacrosse have different equipment for men and women resulting in the men's sport emphasizing physicality, where the women's version is based more on skill, speed and finesse (Schyfter 2008). As the women's stick has a shallower basket, the ball must be kept in the cradle by using centripetal motion. This is in contrast to the deeper baskets of the men's game which do not require such a motion to maintain possession and therefore allow for body and stick checks, bringing a much more physical emphasis to the game (Schyfter 2008). As Entwistle (2000) argues, clothing is central to how the body is situated and read in social space, offering both constraint and creative possibility in the performance of identity. In contemporary sport, such tensions persist as athletes engage in practices that may simultaneously conform to and subvert dominant gender norms (Butler 2004; Lindner 2012).

## Sport, clothing and gender identity

The social construction of gender has historically been such that clothing was central to its expression (Jungnickel 2023). Visible differentiation between the sexes is not always apparent in contemporary society, partly due to the relaxation of historically rigid gender norms in clothing, and sport offers the potential for furthering unconventional gender performance (Butler 2004; Lindner 2012).

Sport is a cultural space where gendered identities and the sense of gendered self are actively constructed through embodied practices (Birrell 2000; Shilling 2003). Women in sport navigate and negotiate dominant masculine norms, using the body as a site of both conformity and challenge in shaping gendered identity and a sense of self (Hargreaves 2002). Identity is constructed through language, cultural practices and social recognition, and is a negotiation between how we see ourselves, how others see us, and the cultural meanings available to us (Hall 1996). It is a dynamic process shaped through performance, material culture, and media representation (Gauntlett 2002). Gender identity is not innate but produced through repeated acts that align with and challenge the social norms embedded in the objects, rituals, and imagery associated with everyday activities (Miller 2005). This process of identity formation is never complete or fixed. It is always in process, shaped by power, ideology, and the intersection of social categories like race, gender, class, and sexuality.

What we wear, or indeed what we don't wear, in concert with how we behave gives others the opportunity to 'read' our identity (Berger 2016). We mimic others who already have membership to a certain group to gain acceptance and often use clothing to emulate the style or identity that represents belonging. In addition to the activities we engage in being ascribed as gendered in many cases, clothing can often direct our focus to the gender of the wearer, typically allowing for immediate determination of whether the individual is a man or a woman (Entwistle 2000). Without material efforts to counter their muscularity, women athletes have often had their sexuality questioned. Nineteenth-century discourse which constructed a link between 'mannishness' in women and lesbianism prevails (Caudwell 1999). The characteristics required to be successful athletes such as strength, assertiveness and competitiveness are associated with masculinity and stand in contrast to the ideals of hegemonic femininity (Krane 2001). This often leaves women athletes with the complexity of living a paradox of muscularity and femininity which is resolved through the active negotiation of femininity and the redefinition of both the acceptable women's body and feminine behaviours (Krane et al. 2004). A sporting identity is often achieved by the use of sports clothing in the same way that a feminine identity is often achieved by the adornment of clothes and accessories stereotypically associated with women and girls such as items that are pink in colour or have sparkles or glitter elements to them. This is not to say that clothing creates a reality – sports clothes do not make you competent at sports and pink and glittery clothes and accessories do not make you a woman – but by association, clothing can help identities to be expressed and indeed constructed (Hendley and Bielby 2012).

## Material culture and sport – a theoretical framing

The ritualistic nature of object production and consumption and deeply entrenched behaviours and norms in relation to these objects can help us to examine the

complexities of gender power dynamics in sport (Entwistle 2000; Miller 2005). As a theoretical framing, material culture focuses on the ways in which both ordinary and specialized objects are embedded with cultural meaning, and how they mediate social relationships, identity formation, and structures of power over time (Tilley et al. 2006; Woodward 2007). Objects do not simply reflect culture; they help constitute it, actively participating in the shaping of norms, values, and embodied identities (Brice 2023). These meanings are not derived solely from practical use, but also from the discourses and representations that surround them, which frame how certain objects are seen as gendered, appropriate, or transgressive within specific cultural and sporting contexts (Woodward 2014). Material culture, specifically focussing here on the relationship between people and the objects they use to express and negotiate identity – particularly clothing and protective equipment – provides the theoretical framing for this paper and informs the analysis.

Material culture allows us to study culture and its temporal dynamics by examining the physical objects, rituals, and spaces and places that people use and how they are changed or maintained over time (Tilley et al. 2006). It allows us to explore tangible objects used, created, or modified by humans either through practical use or symbolic meaning to give insight into social values and cultural beliefs (Tilley et al. 2006). An object can vary in significance based on where and how it is used (Norman 1998) and by whom, with objects often employed in particular settings to make political statements (Fuller 2021). As Miller (2005) argues, objects do not simply reflect culture, they help shape it, acting as extensions of the self and as everyday tools through which identities are enacted. Studying how objects have been adapted in response to changing needs and circumstances can help us to understand the dynamics of culture and how objects can contribute to the expression of individual and group identities including social status, ethnicity, and gender, and can be used to both reinforce and challenge power dynamics (Brice 2023). Entwistle (2000) similarly emphasizes that the dressed body is always situated within specific spatial and cultural contexts, and that material items are central to how social norms are experienced and negotiated at an embodied level. This highlights how material objects are not only embedded in social systems but also actively participate in structuring those systems and the embodied identities formed within them.

## Ethnographic methods in the boxing gym: observing movement and listening to gendered voices

While originally conceived as an ethnography involving extensive participant observation, this project was conducted during the COVID 19 pandemic, and thus the evolving research design had to adapt to the changing context in terms of access to gym spaces and opportunities to meet boxers. A rigorous multi-method data collection approach was devised that used observation and interview techniques plus the development of a novel qualitative research method – the kit bag method – which used immersive sensory encounters to explore the participants' experiences of interacting with their kit and how their kit contributes to identity formation and their sense of belonging in the boxing gym (de Vos et al. 2024). In accordance with the principles of ethnography, data used in this paper were collected from a wide variety of diverse sources (Sands 2002). The data were gathered from two field sites in the Midlands region of England, and in both

competitive and training environments. This included in-person observations collected by the primary researcher who was a participant in one of the settings – a mixed gender club with predominantly recreational boxers – and as observer in the other, another mixed gender competitive club. All boxers at both sites were 'carded' by England Boxing (EB) meaning they had passed a medical which classed athletes as fit to box. This is a requirement of any boxer of an EB affiliated club that wishes to spar, even if they do not plan to ever compete. All boxers observed were partaking in partner work, not just technical bag work which may be more common in a fitness gym environment. Additionally, 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely during COVID 19, along with 8 in-person 'kit bag' encounters (de Vos et al. 2024). Further data from social media and documentary sources were also included as part of a flexible and adaptive approach to including a range of textual, visual, and material sources to reflect the realities of the participants boxing experiences (Sands 2002). Ethical approval was obtained from Brunel University Ref: 19015-LR-Nov/2019- 20920-1 (Phase 1) and Ref: 18161-MHR-Apr/2020- 25444-2 (Phase 2).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom. Interviewees were contacted initially via social media, followed by snowball sampling and, eventually, recruitment through in person interactions once COVID 19 restrictions had been lifted. Participants were aged between 12 and 53 years with a mean age of 32 years (n = 25) – three participants did not disclose their age. Most were active or retired amateur boxers (n = 24) – eight of whom competed at elite level (a senior boxer who has entered the EB National Championships) and four were recreational boxers. Twelve declared some current coaching or development role and three had boxed professionally. Two participants declared involvement in charities that are associated with boxing, two were boxing officials and two were in support roles within the GB talent development programme which selects the most successful senior boxers from England, Scotland and Wales to provide them with an opportunity to be selected for the World Class Performance Programme (WCPP) where they can then become funded athletes as part of the Great Britain Boxing squad with the opportunity to compete at the Olympic Games. All except two participants were women. Interviews used a schedule that began by asking about the participant's involvement with sport generally, then focussed on the participant's experiences of boxing, from their first impression when entering a boxing gym to their thoughts on the differences between men and women within the gym – from how they were treated and spoken to, through to challenges faced both physically and mentally as a result of their training/coaching/competing. Finally, an open-ended question on what wellbeing meant to them, concluding with what they considered to be the biggest challenge facing women's boxing in the future.

This interview data was substantially supplemented by our own novel data collection technique – 'kit bag' encounters – that we developed in response to the COVID 19 restrictions (de Vos *et al.* 2024). This method is a development of traditional object interviews (Holmes 2020; Thorpe et al. 2022; Woodward 2016) with a specific focus on an embodied response to engaging physically with the boxer's kit. This is an inherently material method, in which the participant brings their packed kit bag to the video recorded research encounter, during which they unpack the contents of the bag, describing to the researcher the purposes and meanings associated with each item. Participants were encouraged to discuss the embodied experience of preparing for a training

session by focussing on both the physical feel of their kit, and how it made them feel emotionally as they gradually adorned themselves with their usual training kit, in a training environment. This naturally led to gendered discussion of how suitable (or otherwise) the kit was for the female form, if the clothing and equipment facilitated their inclusion in the boxing community, and how cultural markers associated with the sport and the environment of the boxing gym, enhanced a sense of identity and belonging. This approach centres materiality and is a core driver of our analysis.

After data collection was complete, there was a total of 36 hours 20 mins of audio interviews, 8 hours 55 mins of video interviews, 80 pages of field notes from observations, 2 years of weekly boxing magazines, and other materials such as coaching manuals and snapshots of online social media sources (primarily Instagram and Twitter – now X) to be analysed. Thematic analysis was used for interviews and kit bag encounters, with the kit bag recordings requiring audio and video annotation and analysis, engaging with the frequent references to smells, textures, and the use of space due to their physical and embodied nature. The data collected from interviews and kit-bag encounters was transcribed by the main author and initial thoughts as analytical memos on potential themes were noted down. The transcriptions were then read and re-read several times whilst relistening to the audio and rewatching the videos, both to ensure transcript accuracy and gain more in-depth familiarization with the data (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016). Whilst reading the data analytically for ideas and concepts that help address the research question, a systematic, coherent, and robust set of codes were developed to identify and label the data. Themes were then developed by discussion and using an iterative process of refining and combining codes where appropriate.

The following section explores material culture and lived experience through two key interrelated themes – (i) clothing and contested feminine identities in the boxing gym, and (ii) boxing kit, objects, rituals, and belonging. The importance of what women boxers wear and the kit that they have available to them in the boxing gym, and how this impacts on their status as insiders/outsiders, and associated sense of identity and belongings is drawn out from the data using vignettes. The significance of the availability of appropriate kit for the female form and relevant research into how the a women's body should be protected is also explored to establish how this affects on participants sense of belonging.

## Clothing and contested feminine identities in the boxing gym

Clothing plays a crucial role in how women negotiate gender identity and belonging within the boxing gym, conforming to expectations shaped by hegemonic masculinity (Thorpe 2004), often in contrast with their gender expression outside the gym (Berger 2016). This theme manifest with participants using androgynous or de-sexualized training attire to resist hyperfeminine norms and assert legitimacy as boxers (Berger 2016). Through training kit, women reconfigure spatial dynamics and challenge symbolic exclusion while simultaneously reinforcing new, self-defined forms of femininity rooted in strength and skill (Booth and Pavlidis 2023), highlighting how material practices can foster a sense of belonging in gendered environments.

This is evident in the account from interviewee Madison (49), when talking about her sports bra. She explains how her favoured bra was able to 'hold you in and flatten you in

… and you become quite androgynous. [T]hat's exactly what … makes me feel comfortable, being androgynous. I don't want to come here and be attractive or feminine or whatever. I'm here to box, that's that'. Madison's assertion that being attractive or feminine was incompatible with being a boxer was shared by Rosa (20), who also articulated her dislike of overt displays of traditional Western femininity in the boxing gym exclaiming, 'I have an active problem … with people that show up in the matching two pieces with hair down and straightened and lashes. I'm like 'Get out,' … Why would you come to exercise looking nice? What's the point?' The 'correctness' required to adhere to the body presentation expectations of an athleisurewear devotee of a form-fitting matching two-piece, along with the clean, pert, unblemished body of the wearer (Goodrum 2016) is the antithesis of the boxers' bloodied and bruised, androgininsed body and as such, does not adhere to the culture of femininity that has developed in the boxing space in which these women take part.

In the above examples, respondents demonstrated a clear lack of respect for women who did not adhere to conscious strategic intentions to eradicate signs of traditional femininity, and such gym users were scorned and not taken seriously as athletes. This is consistent with Hoeber and Kerwin's (2013) self-ethnography which suggests that even within sports fandom, some women are marginalized for wearing clothing specifically designed for women, as 'true' sports fans should reject the feminine 'pink it, shrink it, bling it' merchandize in favour of official club colours and that comfort should override fashion. The donning of hyperfeminine attire in the boxing gym was perceived as locking participants into traditional ideas of womanhood and femininity, reflecting the gender norms of society at large (Woube 2023). Participants rather saw the boxing gym being a space where traditional expressions of femininity are challenged and contested.

In contrast to this insistence that displays of femininity did not belong in the boxing gym, when discussing what she would wear to a boxing event that same evening Rosa stated, 'For the home show later … I'm in a bright green dotty jumpsuit … I'm going to have hair curled, lashes, that's going to be me later', emphasizing that she happily conformed to a more socially acceptable version of traditional feminine behaviour and attire when not in the gym. Participants had different ways to perform and express femininity in different contexts and situations reflecting changing notions of femininity in contemporary (Western) culture in the practices of gender expression (Cover 2020). This is in keeping with Bunsell's (2013) findings from her ethnographic research of female body builders. Her participants were found to compartmentalize femininity – resisting traditional norms of femininity within the gym, placing greater emphasis on strength, discipline, and functionality over appearance – whilst adopting more traditional or conventional feminine styles of dress and presentation outside of it. The dichotomous nature of Rosa's gender expression – purposefully minimizing a more traditionally feminine appearance in the boxing gym but celebrating such femininity when not – was conscious and acknowledged (West and Zimmerman 1987). Participants recognized they embodied and constructed an identity within the gym that was perceived both by themselves and others as less feminine in conventional terms, than the presentation of self outside the gym. The display of traditional feminine standards outside of the gym was embraced by the majority of participants and not considered problematic, but it did not belong in the boxing gym (de Vos

*et al.* 2024). This supports research which acknowledges more nuanced ways of understanding gender than along the gender binary of femininity and masculinity as two opposed entities (Cover 2020).

In contrast, Hazel (35) resented the expectation that women should conceal their boxer identity when attending boxing events as spectators. Reflecting on the different reaction men and women boxers receive, particularly regarding visible facial injuries common in the sport, she explained:

> It's so annoying … people look at you (the woman with a black eye) sympathetically … … it's built into humans psyche … to worry when a woman or child are hurt … it's frustrating … looking at you (the woman) … like … there is trouble at home … when you go to a boxing show, the lads'll turn up in their tracksuits and … they'll have a black eye and no one will think anything of it. As a women, you just don't do that … you put makeup on and you put some girly clothes on because that's how people want to see you, they don't want to see you looking like you've been fighting.

Dominant Western ideals of femininity in sport and leisure emphasize appearance, heterosexual desirability, and bodily norms privileging whiteness, thinness, and toned aesthetics, reinforcing hegemonic gender constructions (Krane et al. 2004). Ruby captured this tension, stating:

> I just think cultural expectations of women are just so fucking ridiculous … I've never met them anyway, so boxing's just another way I don't meet them … I suppose part of that is being gay … you're not a good woman are you, you're a dyke.

Her reflection highlights how women boxers may resist conventional femininity yet still face exclusion from normative definitions of womanhood (Mansfield 2013; Mean and Kassing 2008).

The tendency of the sports clothing industry to 'pink it, shrink it, bling it' (Hoeber and Kerwin 2013; Sveinson, Hoeber, and Toffoletti 2019) was apparent in the market for women's boxing kit, with many of the items specifically marketed for women's consumption being the same items available for men, just limited by the colour choices to white and pink or with a flower print, with no attempt to address the need for a specific fit for the female anatomy. These concerns are now seeing a commercial response in the appearance of women centric boxing brands such as Unorthodoxx which are resizing their equipment and introducing elements such as an 'extended finger pocket providing additional room for longer nails' (Unorthodoxx 2016). Here, the very name Unorthodoxx explicitly centres the counter-hegemonic status of their products and women's participation in boxing.

Stella (39) articulated a clear resistance to binary gender coding through clothing, observing: 'I'm me in a dress, like I'm me in a head guard and a gumshield … one's girly and one's not … coz blokes never are. Ronaldo isn't more manly in his tuxedo … than he is on the pitch'. Her reflection underscores how clothing functions not as a source of identity, but as a socially legible performance aimed at fitting in with context-specific norms. Drawing on Entwistle's (2000) concept of the dressed body as situated within both comfort and constraint, Stella highlights that femininity is not felt internally but externally imposed. She describes an act of 'making an effort' to conform to heteronormative expectations. This aligns with Krane's (2001) analysis of how gender-conforming clothing can protect against marginalization, particularly in contexts where

deviance from traditional femininity risks social exclusion, disrupting conventional associations between appearance and gender identity.

Lisa's (39) account highlights the fluid negotiation of gender identity through clothing, describing a shift from the messy, masculine-coded appearance of the gym – 'we look like crap, we're in old clothing' – to hyperfeminine presentation outside – 'we look like a bunch of supermodels … it's like disguise'. Drawing on Entwistle's (2000) view of dress as situated bodily practice, this shift illustrates how material culture mediates social recognition. In the boxing gym, femininity is downplayed to gain credibility (Sveinson and Hoeber 2016; Sveinson, Hoeber, and Toffoletti 2019), while outside, hyper femininity reaffirms cultural acceptability (Krane 2001), revealing how gender is continuously regulated and performed across spaces.

Examples from the broader professional boxing culture reveal how women have historically employed strategic gender concealment to navigate exclusionary norms and gain access to male-dominated training and competitive spaces. Irish boxer Katie Taylor and British boxer Caroline Dubois both recounted concealing their gender identities as youths – Taylor by disguising herself as a boy and hiding her long hair under a headguard to compete, and Dubois by training under a male pseudonym at a boys-only gym. These practices align with Goffman's (1959) notion of impression management, where individuals adapt their presentation of self to fit social expectations. Shopland (2021) similarly frames such concealment as a strategic response to rigid gender boundaries. These examples show how women boxers use material culture – such as clothing and headgear – not only as functional protection but as tools for accessing space and legitimacy. The need for such strategies emphasizes the enduring barriers women face in claiming full inclusion within the sport.

In contrast, some women adopt highly visible expressions of femininity to navigate the same structural constraints (Channon et al. 2018). Serwa (30) reflected critically on this phenomenon, stating,

> If there is a female who's been interviewed … the comments will be 'she looks good' or it will mainly be about her appearance not about anything she's saying. Which is why somebody like Ebanie Bridges feeds into it because she's like, I can work this to my advantage.

Bridges, known for her 'Blonde Bomber' persona and wearing lingerie at weigh-ins, exemplifies how material culture – through clothing, branding, and social media – is mobilized to assert visibility and commercial appeal (Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce 2017). Her 'Blonde Bomber' moniker fuses whiteness, desirability, and traditional femininity with a masculinized symbol of aggression, creating a marketable contradiction that aligns with Parry's (2016) notion of reworking feminine stereotypes as empowerment, while simultaneously exposing the persistent objectification of women athletes (Bruce 2016; Hargreaves 1997). Such branding affirms how identity is mediated through boxing's material culture. While Bridges' moniker affirms whiteness and desirability, Caroline Dubois' 'Sweet Caroline' invokes nostalgic whiteness, positioning her Black British identity within a national sporting culture coded as white. These choices reveal how gendered and racialized identities are constructed and negotiated through the symbolic artefacts of boxing, highlighting the sport as a contested space where visibility, legitimacy, and belonging are persistently shaped by intersecting power relations.

## Gendering 'protective' boxing equipment

The negotiation of femininity within boxing is inextricably tied to the material culture of the sport. As examined in the previous section, participants expressed a sense of empowerment in resisting normative gender expectations within the gym, while still enjoying traditionally feminine expressions outside it. However, this empowerment is tempered by the continuing lack of equipment designed for the female body. Gloves, boots, and guards remain largely based on male physique, contributing to exclusionary processes for women in boxing (Gravestock 2013).

Protective equipment such as gloves and gum shields are essential for protecting from injury, yet most are poorly fitted for female athletes, therefore providing less protection than intended (Cahn 2015; Channon and Matthews 2018). The only items specifically designed for women – chest and pelvic guards – are not mandated by EB regulations and are therefore often avoided by athletes due to discomfort or compromized mobility. This creates a paradox where the available protection and the material character of its size and shape, simultaneously endangers and disempowers female boxers (Cahn 2015; Channon and Matthews 2018; Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce 2017), reinforcing the gendered inadequacies in sporting equipment design, and institutional neglect of women's embodied needs. Rosa (20) noted that she gets a lot of punches to her solar plexus when sparring because 'all the boys now know, I can't cover [solar plexus]' due to the rigid design of the moulded plastic chest guard which restricts the placement of the arms tight to the body. As Entwistle (2000) argues, clothing and equipment are 'situated bodily practices' through which power and identity are negotiated. Poorly fitting kit and protective equipment therefore become a material expression of structural inequality in sport.

This gendered disparity in protection not only manifests in the physical design of equipment but also in the symbolic messages it communicates. Equipment that is ill-fitting or absent altogether implicitly signals that womens' participation is secondary or supplementary to mens'. It suggests that female bodies are either not expected to occupy the space seriously, or that they must conform to male bodily norms to do so. This reflects what Bourdieu (1984) describes as the subtle violence of symbolic domination, where the rules and artefacts of the game are made to appear neutral, but in practice reproduce masculine norms and privileges. The mandatory use of headguards for female fighters, despite their removal for senior male amateur boxers by the International Boxing Association (AIBA) in 2013, underscores persistent gendered assumptions around risk, fragility and the presumed vulnerability of female bodies which manifest in material obligations regarding what protective equipment women must wear (AIBA 2013; Hargreaves, 2002; Messner 2002). This policy divergence serves as an institutionalized embodiment of protective paternalism, reinforcing the idea that women require safeguarding, quite literally through material encasement, in ways that men do not (Hargreaves, 1994; Messner 2002). Clare (30) likened this practice to the paternalistic trope of 'women and children first'. She reflected on the widespread perception that such protective policies, while seemingly rooted in genuine concern for safety, often feel condescending and infantilising. Rather than empowering, they reinforce a gender binary embedded in boxing's material culture and reflect persistent marginalizing forces shaping women's experiences in the sport (Hargreaves, 1994).

Participant frustrations over glove sizing, and the improvization required to make male-designed kit fit and function more effectively, reflect the politics of material culture. Mia's (30) choice of lace-up gloves echoed nostalgic masculinity and boxing tradition, reflecting to some extent the reinforcement of masculine ideals for boxing equipment by women themselves when she noted

> you can get this shit [laces] and tie it around the wrist, you could really get the glove on there snug … I guess there's a bit of tradition bias there like, 'this is what all the greats (male boxers) did'.

As Kwon and Armstrong (2006) note, sports gear is often consumed for its symbolic value. However, these choices are constrained by availability, with women frequently forced into suboptimal purchases that heighten injury risk and mark them as outsiders in the sport due to its protective qualities being compromised by its ill fit.

This material marginalization extends to footwear and groin protection. With limited sizing for women's boots and a lack of gender-appropriate pelvic guards, many participants either adapt men's gear or go without, despite the risk of injury. This asymmetry is institutionalized with groin guards being mandatory for male competitors, yet female boxers are not required to wear equivalent protection under EB regulations, despite the potential risks to female reproductive organs. No research has been conducted into the risks to females of not wearing adequate groin protection. There is then, a logic of risk embedded within boxing rules and regulations. Male bodies are often framed as resilient, able to absorb and endure, whereas female bodies are constructed as inherently vulnerable (Connell 2005; Young 2005). Despite this narrative claiming female fragility, women are offered fewer material protections.

The expectation that women adapt to ill-fitting equipment or box without the same material protection as men reflects a broader gendered asymmetry in sport, where women athletes are often required to 'make do' while male athletes are afforded tailored, performance-enhancing design. This disparity exemplifies protective paternalism (Hargreaves, 1994; Messner 2002), which constrains women's agency under the guise of care. The absence of mandated pelvic protection for women boxers is not simply a regulatory omission, but a structural decision that reflects and reinforces the marginal status of women's bodies in sport. As Schyfter (2008) argues, such exclusions may reorient the sport towards speed and skill for women, but these shifts are not inherently empowering when they stem from inequity. This aligns with Cockburn and Ormrod's (1993) notion of the 'gendering of design', wherein technologies reflect dominant social values and prioritize male bodies as the default. The lack of appropriate equipment subtly signals which bodies are deemed worth protecting, reinforcing what Messner (2002) describes as a systemic devaluation of female athletic labour. Some boxing protection therefore exists as a gendered artefact that shapes identity, autonomy, and legitimacy. Viewed through the lens of material culture theory, the boxing gym emerges as a site where gender is not only performed but materially negotiated and constrained.

## Conclusion

This paper explores how clothing and equipment shape the gendered experiences of women in boxing, highlighting the boxing gym as a space where women must

continuously negotiate and resist male-centric norms, asserting their identities in defiance of traditional expectations of femininity. The boxing gym becomes a site of identity negotiation, where overtly feminine attire is rejected in favour of a more androgynous appearance. Participants stressed that they did not see themselves as behaving or dressing like men, but rather as boxers. This subtle distinction underscores the emergence of a strong, competitive form of femininity that challenges traditional norms of passivity and sexualization, even if that resistance often remains confined to the gym. While some professional boxers adopt a hyper-feminized or sexualized persona, particularly through social media, this reflects broader cultural shifts and commercial pressures related to income generation. Although ill-fitting kit may push the sport towards less physical styles for women, improved access to functional, female-specific equipment could better support women's performance and acceptance, as the current lack of appropriate equipment and standardization of regulations reinforces symbolic inclusion, rather than full participation. This emphasizes how the material culture of sports spaces reflect and reproduce gender hierarchies.

This research offers a contribution to leisure studies and the sociology of sport by highlighting how clothing, equipment and spatial dynamics shape women's embodied experiences in boxing. It reveals how disparities in regulations and limited availability of appropriate protective equipment continue to undermine genuine inclusion of women in the boxing gym. By centring women athletes lived experience, the study challenges dominant narratives of gender in sport and advances sociological understandings of identity, resistance, and power in traditionally masculinized spaces in sport. By foregrounding the material culture of the boxing gym, we reveal how ill-fitting equipment not only undermines physical safety and comfort but also reinforces feelings of exclusion amongst women who box. These insights highlight implications for policy and practice. Kit manufacturers should address gender specific design needs, accessibility and inclusivity must be continually evaluated for effectiveness, and governing bodies must ensure that material and infrastructural standards support rather than hinder women's full participation. We also open new avenues for future research into the material and institutional barriers that shape participation, inclusion and identity in traditionally masculinized spaces.

## Note

1. OnlyFans is a subscription based social media platform popular with adult content creators.

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