Volenti non fit injuria: Women in boxing and the negotiation of identity and gender

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis brings together works produced over a period of six years. It is a qualitative study of women's boxing in England, centred on the ethnographic study of two mixed-gender boxing gyms in the Midlands region.

The original plan for data collection involved 18 months of continuous ethnographic fieldwork, however the unprecedented context of the Covid-19 pandemic opened up new methodological possibilities. 28 online interviews were conducted during lockdown, and a new creative elicitation method was developed using the boxers kit bag and the kit contained as an elicitation tool. Data from the limited observations, online interviews, and subsequent kit bag encounters form the basis of this thesis. The material was analysed using thematic analysis, with methods and findings represented across three papers.

The first paper introduces a novel elicitation method which used the contents of boxers' kit bags to explore embodied practice with female boxers. While data vignettes are included to demonstrate usefulness of this method, the paper primarily highlights how immersive sensory encounters with activity-specific objects can reveal how material items foster belonging and support narrations of transition in and out of character. The second paper is an empirical study examining intersections of material culture and gendered identity in women's boxing. Focusing on clothing and equipment, it demonstrates how these shape contested feminine identities, influence inclusion, and mediate experiences of resistance and belonging in the gym. The third paper employs a Lefebvrian framework to analyse women's spatial experiences in boxing. Findings suggest that women's inclusion is often more symbolic than substantive.

Collectively, the thesis makes novel methodological and theoretical contributions to the sociology of sport and beyond. It demonstrates how in many ways, women remain minority interlopers within the culture of boxing, their presence tolerated yet continually negotiated within a landscape still shaped by masculine traditions, hierarchies, and expectations that govern belonging and legitimacy.

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This thesis has had many break points along the way and at many times it felt like I would never make it to the end. Left to my own devices, I strongly believe it never would have come into being at all, so here I take a moment to thank all of those that have contributed to its existence.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

This thesis investigates the lived experience of women boxers in England, UK. It is presented as a collection of papers and comprises five chapters. This introductory chapter first provides an overview of the thesis, followed by a background to and history of ethnographic methods, which form the foundation of the research. The research questions are then outlined, along with a description of how the project came into being followed by justification for the research and its unique contribution to the sociology of sport. A brief history of women's boxing is presented to contextualise the study, followed by the current organisational structure and governance of all the Home Nations and GB Boxing squads, before concluding with a final recap of the contents of the remainder of the thesis. The title of the thesis contains the Latin phrase *Volenti non fit injuria*, a legal term which translates to "to a willing person, no injury is done." I selected this title because the project originated from a desire to understand what motivates women to take what many might consider an unnecessary risk by willingly entering a legal fight with another woman. In doing so, they not only expose themselves to the risk of physical harm - without recourse to complaint, having consented to it - but also to potential emotional and social harm if treated as outsiders in the traditionally masculine domain of the boxing ring.

In accordance with Brunel University of London's requirements for a thesis by publication, this work contains five chapters: an introduction, three academic papers published in or submitted to peer-reviewed journals, and a conclusion. I chose this format following the development of a novel method during the COVID-19 lockdown, designed to replace the originally planned ethnographic participant observations. What began as a practical response to pandemic restrictions became a creative and original exploration of material and sensory methods, the significance of which I felt warranted publication to capture its relevance to the global health crisis and its novel methodological contribution to the sociology of sport. This shift in method provided a conceptual anchor for the second paper, which explored material culture emerging from the first paper's data analysis. Having committed to a paper-based structure, a third paper was developed to complete the trilogy, focusing on women's spatial experiences in the boxing gym. This was a topic central to the original research proposal. Lefebvre's spatial theory was chosen as the analytical framework to provide a novel approach to the study of gendered sporting space. From a personal perspective, presenting the thesis by paper offered several advantages. The rigour of the peer-review process strengthened my academic writing and analytical clarity, while the structured publication timeline provided discipline and focus. Producing work in discrete papers also mitigated the sense of being

overwhelmed by the scale of a traditional monograph. Although this format means there is no standalone “results” chapter, the breadth of data collected throughout the project provides ample opportunity for further publications.

Each academic paper is embedded within its own chapter and introduced by a detailed contextual section and literature review. Chapter Two presents the first paper, which introduces a novel method - the “Kit Bag Encounter” - developed in response to the closure of training facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter outlines the dynamics of fieldwork access, the importance of researcher–participant relationships, and the methodological adjustments required during lockdown. Chapter Three presents the second paper, which explores the intersections of material culture and gendered identity in women’s boxing, linking material artefacts and rituals to belonging, resistance, and identity formation. Chapter Four presents the third and final paper, offering a Lefebvrian analysis of women’s spatial experiences in boxing gyms. This chapter also engages with Foucault’s (1986) concept of heterotopias, Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity, and the institutional constraints and microaggressions that shape women’s participation in sport.

To ensure this thesis met the Brunel University of London PhD thesis submission requirements, the papers presented in this thesis were submitted to peer-reviewed academic journals. An authorship statement outlining each author's contributions is included before each paper. As the first author on each of the three submitted papers, I conceptualised the research and was wholly responsible for all data collection and analysis, drafting the papers, and leading revisions. The supervisory team contributed guidance and advice throughout the research process and manuscript writing and editing and as such are named co-authors on all papers. At the time of thesis submission, papers one and two have been published in academic journals and paper three has been submitted for peer review (see table 1). Table One provides an overview of the papers included in this thesis. For consistency, spelling and referencing have been standardised throughout. Harvard referencing and English (UK) spelling conventions have been used.

Table 1: Overview of papers

Chapter	Paper	Additional notes
Two	de Vos, E., Mansfield, L. and Stephens, N., 2025. Elicitation using kit bag methods: Exploring embodied practice with female boxers. *Qualitative Research*, *25*(3), pp.732-751.	Published in Qualitative Research (2.9 Impact Factor 2024).

Three	de Vos, E., Mansfield, L. and Stephens, N., 2025. Fighting fit: clothing, equipment and material objects as identity formation in women's boxing. *Annals of Leisure Research*, pp.1-20.	Published in Annals of Leisure Research (2.0 Impact Factor 2024).
Four	de Vos, E., Mansfield, L. and Stephens, N., 2025. Fighting for Space: Gendered Spatial Exclusions and Inclusions in Boxing.	Submitted to International Review for the Sociology of Sport (2.6 Impact Factor)

1.1 Methods: Origins and Application of Ethnographic Research

Ethnography, though rooted in anthropology (Malinowski, 1922; Evans-Pritchard, 1940), has evolved into a central methodology across the social sciences, from education and nursing to sport, as researchers recognise the epistemological value of immersion and 'being there' (David and Sutton, 2011; Pink, 2015). Its strength lies in producing situated, contextual knowledge through close engagement with people and practices in their natural settings. Although ethnography's acceptance into a breadth of academic fields represented a welcome departure from earlier critiques of its rigour, some consider that the proliferation of ethnographic work has led to inconsistent application of its core principles (Hammersley, 2018). This concern is longstanding, echoing Gans's (1999) reflections two decades earlier on the increased use of participant observation, where the enthusiasm to use certain methodological approaches sometimes eclipsed methodological discipline. Ethnography is not simply a collection of qualitative methods but a process and a product, presenting an interpretive account of lived experience from the perspective of the researcher (Van Maanen, 2011). Its emphasis on the researcher's embodied presence means that knowledge is always partial, relational, and shaped by social interaction (Williams *et al.*, 2021). While early ethnographers sought the 'other' in distant societies (Wolcott, 2008), the Chicago School of the 1920s and 1930s turned ethnography inward, documenting the lives of marginalised groups within industrial urban life. Robert Park famously urged students to "go out and find a story," encouraging a form of engaged, experiential sociology (quoted in Dingwall, 1997, p. 54). However, as feminist scholars later observed, these narratives were overwhelmingly produced by men and for male audiences, reflecting gendered hierarchies of authority in knowledge production (Beal, 2018).

Feminist ethnography emerged in opposition, seeking less exploitative and more dialogical relationships between researcher and participant (Junqueira, 2009; Olive and Thorpe, 2017). This approach privileges women's voices and embodied experiences as

legitimate sources of knowledge and situates gender, power, and emotion at the centre of the research encounter. Feminist ethnography also rejects universal categories of 'woman' in favour of intersectional understandings of identity shaped by class, race, sexuality, and embodiment (Allen-Collinson, 2011; Beal, 2018). Such perspectives have been particularly influential in sport and physical culture, where ethnography can capture the complexity of gendered participation in spaces long dominated by masculine norms (Smith and Sparkes, 2016; Olive and Thorpe, 2017). Building upon this tradition, the present study employs feminist ethnographic methods to explore the lived experiences of women boxers in England, UK. It examines how gender, power, and belonging are negotiated within boxing gyms, and how women construct meaning and identity within a historically masculine sport. Ethnography, with its focus on presence, participation, and reflexivity, provides an effective framework for exploring these dynamics.

1.2 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Historically, much scientific enquiry has been conducted by white, middle-class men with access to educational privilege, shaping not only who conducts research but also which questions are considered worthy of investigation (McCorkel and Myers, 2003). Feminist scholarship challenges this partiality by foregrounding the importance of researcher positionality and reflexivity, recognising that knowledge is never neutral but always socially situated. From a standpoint epistemological perspective, all knowledge is produced from a particular social location, requiring researchers to make explicit the contexts and positions from which they generate understanding (Harding, 2013). In this study, my positionality as a middle-aged, white, female doctoral researcher shaped both access to the field and the nature of interactions within it. In some respects, I shared common ground with participants, particularly in relation to gender and, unexpectedly, educational background, as many participants were highly educated. These shared characteristics facilitated rapport and at times eased entry into conversations around gendered experiences in boxing. However, positionality is not reducible to demographic similarity. As McCorkel and Myers (2003) note, the insider/outsider binary is often overstated. While shared identity markers can support access and trust-building, they do not automatically confer insider status, nor does their absence preclude meaningful ethnographic engagement. This is particularly significant in ethnographic research, where sustained immersion in the field and the development of trust-based relationships are central to generating rich, contextually grounded data.

My experience supports this more fluid understanding of positionality. While I may have benefitted from being of a similar age to many coaches and from possessing a relatively neutral or "classless" Scottish accent within the English context, my role as a researcher

remained visible. Rather than claiming expertise, I deliberately positioned participants as knowledgeable actors, inviting and encouraging them to guide my understanding of the boxing environment. This approach redistributed some degree of power within the research relationship and facilitated more open and reflective dialogue. Such an approach aligns with ethnographic principles that prioritise participant perspectives and recognise knowledge as co-produced through interaction between researcher and participants. Although this project is not autoethnographic, as my own experiences are not the primary focus of analysis, embodied participation played an important role in developing contextual understanding. Engaging in training as a novice boxer and in gaining my England Boxing Coach certification enabled a deeper appreciation of the physical and emotional dimensions of the sport. While my embodied engagement may have differed from that of younger or more experienced participants, it provided valuable insight into the sensory and relational aspects of gym life. This form of participant observation is a core feature of ethnographic methodology, enabling access to forms of tacit, embodied knowledge that may not be fully articulated through interviews alone.

Reflexivity was central throughout the research process. This included ongoing consideration of how my presence influenced interactions within the gym, how relationships with participants shaped the data collected, and how my own assumptions and experiences informed interpretation. As Elster (2017) suggests, reflexivity operates through existing "background configurations" including prior experiences, social positioning, and shared cultural meanings, all of which shape how researchers interpret the social world. In this sense, reflexivity is not a methodological add-on but an embedded and continuous process. Within ethnography, such reflexive awareness is particularly critical, as the researcher is not a detached observer but an active participant in the social world under study, inevitably shaping and being shaped by the field. Conducting research within community-based boxing environments also required sensitivity to broader social and economic dynamics. Researchers working in contexts where participants may occupy different socio-economic positions must navigate these differences carefully (Fine and Hancock, 2017). While this study did not focus exclusively on economically marginalised communities, awareness of potential disparities remained important in shaping respectful and ethical engagement.

Language and communication further contributed to the development of rapport and partial insider status. Beyond shared spoken language, understanding the specific vernacular, humour, and embodied expressions of boxing culture was essential. Familiarity with these forms of communication enabled more nuanced interpretation of interactions and meanings within the gym environment. Such linguistic and cultural alignment is a key component of ethnographic practice, allowing the researcher to interpret not only what is said, but how meaning is constructed within specific social contexts. Reflexivity does not render research

more objective or “true”. Its value lies in making visible the researcher’s role in shaping the research process (Delamont and Atkinson, 2021). By explicitly acknowledging positionality, readers are better able to evaluate how knowledge has been produced and to consider the potential influence of the researcher’s social location on both data collection and analysis. Positionality, therefore, does not invalidate findings but provides essential context for understanding them.

This study recognises that knowledge production is inherently relational and situated. By engaging reflexively with my own position within the research process, I aim to provide a transparent account of how the data were generated and interpreted, while acknowledging the partial and contingent nature of all social research. The research remains consistent with ethnographic commitments to depth, context, and the co-production of meaning, ensuring that findings are grounded in the lived realities of participants rather than abstracted from them. The following section outlines the aims and objectives, and contributions of this research, establishing how the study advances current understandings of gender, embodiment, and power within the culture of boxing.

1.3 Study Aims, Objectives, and Contributions

The primary aim of this study was to engage with the boxing community utilising ethnographic methods to explore the lived experience of female boxers. The primary research objectives include:

1. To examine the experiences of women within the boxing community and consider the relationship between boxing, identity and a sense of belonging.
2. How notions of femininity are negotiated within the traditionally male spaces of the boxing environment.
3. To develop an understanding of the dynamics of power related to gender within the environment of the boxing.

This study offers original contributions to knowledge as one of the first ethnographic investigations of women’s boxing in the UK to examine both the materiality of boxing kit and the lived experiences of female boxers. Methodologically, it advances qualitative approaches within the sociology of sport by demonstrating how material methods can capture embodied practice and sensory experience in settings where specialised equipment mediates participation. Beyond sport, these methodological insights have relevance for any context in which tools, artefacts, or uniforms shape identity and belonging. The study also provides a novel application of material culture theory to explore the complexities of gender presentation in sport, revealing how clothing and equipment can simultaneously constrain and enable

inclusion. Finally, it extends Lefebvre's theorisation of space through a gendered lens, offering new understanding of how spatial practices and power relations are experienced and negotiated by women within the masculinised culture of boxing. Ethnographic inquiry is inherently shaped by the researcher's position, motivations, and journey into the field. Understanding the origins of this project therefore provides context for the methodological and theoretical choices that underpin the study, as well as the personal and intellectual questions that drove its development.

1.4 Project inception

This project was conceived following the completion of my Master's dissertation, which examined the initiation and hazing behaviours of elite youth rugby players through the lens of deviant leisure. Deviant leisure, a perspective within cultural criminology and an established concept within the sociology of sport, explores behaviours that may not be illegal but can nevertheless be considered harmful, often in the context of leisure pursuits. While clear demarcations exist between criminal and non-criminal behaviours as defined by law, what constitutes harmful or deviant behaviour is less certain, shaped by context and open to personal judgement. Morality is subjective, influenced and to some extent controlled by dominant social structures and systems. This creates blurred boundaries between violence deemed acceptable on the rugby pitch, regulated by the rules of the sport, and the same behaviours, considered deviant when enacted off the pitch beyond those formal confines.

My Master's research found that acceptance of, and over-conformity to, deviant behaviours reinforced hierarchical systems within rugby culture. These were underpinned by beliefs that such behaviours fostered team skills and group cohesion. Deviant over-conformity (Coakley and Pike, 2014; Waldron and Krane, 2005), in which individuals engage in practices that perpetuate hierarchical value systems without critically considering their potential negative consequences, is often condoned and even encouraged by coaches keen to foster team identity and discipline (Kowalski and Waldron, 2010). However, establishing where harmless integration practices end and humiliation or violence begin is itself socially constructed (Dias and Sá, 2014). Behaviours deemed acceptable in one setting may be regarded as inappropriate in another. Importantly, such distinctions are also gendered, as behaviours considered appropriate or even celebrated for men, such as aggression, violence, or physical domination in sport, are often deemed inappropriate, deviant, or unfeminine when enacted by women, reinforcing wider stereotypes around gender and sporting participation. Katz (1988) argues that deviant forms of leisure emerge from a timeless human desire to seek thrills, pleasure, and excitement. This raised questions for me about women's sport: surely this quest for excitement was not confined to men? It was from these questions that the

conceptual bridge to this doctoral research began to form. If men's expressions of risk, aggression, and transgression are legitimised within sporting spaces, what happens when women enter those same spaces and perform similar acts? How are these embodied practices interpreted, constrained, or transformed when enacted through female bodies?

Having established that team cohesion and masculine bonding contributed to deviant behaviours in rugby, I became curious about contexts where hypermasculine behaviours might emerge outside the framework of team belonging. This inquisitiveness led me to propose a doctoral project examining hypermasculine behaviours that could be defined as deviant, in what I considered the polar opposite of a male team sport - women's boxing. Boxing is a sport historically associated with hypermasculine ideals of aggression, endurance, and control, yet it is increasingly claimed by women as a space in which to contest restrictive gender norms. Women's presence in the boxing gym can therefore be understood as a form of spatial transgression, entering a site long organised around male bodies and masculine ideologies. At the same time, the material culture of the gym, from gloves and clothing to rituals and routines, plays a central role in shaping women's experiences of belonging, resistance, and identity. This project therefore developed as a vehicle to enable me to explore the lived experiences of female boxers. By stepping outside of Criminology, my focus shifted towards embodied experience, identity, meaning, and the ways in which space is produced, contested, and lived through the everyday practices of women who box.

It is necessary to situate these questions within the wider historical context of women's boxing having outlined the intellectual and personal trajectory that gave rise to this project. From prohibition and marginalisation to Olympic recognition and beyond, the next section provides an essential backdrop to understanding the social, cultural, and institutional forces that continue to shape women's participation today. The following section traces the history of women's boxing in England, illustrating how issues of visibility, legitimacy, and resistance have long defined women's presence within the ring.

1.5 History Of Women's Boxing In The United Kingdom

1.5.1 Introduction

Understanding the contemporary experiences of women who box requires attention to the sport's history and development as it is marked by exclusion, resistance, and gradual inclusion and acceptance. The gendered hierarchies that shape women's present-day experiences in the gym are not new but are deeply embedded in the sport's historical formation. Examining how women have been positioned within boxing's evolution illuminates the endurance of power structures that still prevail and continue to inform women's participation, legitimacy, and visibility in the sport today. This historical overview therefore

provides essential context for the aims of this research: to understand how women experience and negotiate belonging, identity, and power within a sporting culture long defined by masculine ideals.

Although boxing has been included as an Olympic sport for men since 1904, the 2012 Olympics in London, England were the first to include female boxers in competition and marked it as the final Olympic sport to include women in the competition. However, with historical records of female participation dating back to the 1720's in England, women's boxing is certainly not a new sport. The earliest records describe fights in England as unregulated, often involving the use of weapons and ending only when one fighter was no longer able to fight (Smith, 2014, p.5). Following the introduction of Jack Broughton's Rules in 1743, which prohibited striking a fallen opponent, eye-gouging and other extreme practices, the London Prize Ring Rules of 1838 and the adoption of the Queensberry Rules in 1867 further formalised boxing. These codifications significantly changed the sport with associated shifts in cultural and gendered connotations (Boddy, 2008). Although early bouts were well publicised and popular spectator events, due to prevailing gender norms relating to "appropriate" female behaviour, women's boxing was gradually pushed to the margins of society, largely forcing them to take place outside the public gaze (Smith, 2014). With the institutionalisation of modern sport in the late nineteenth century, sport became a distinctly masculine cultural space, where physical strength, aggression, and competitiveness were valorised as male traits, while women were confined to marginal or "appropriate" activities that reinforced ideals of femininity such as passivity, gentleness and grace. (Hargreaves, 1997). This period of the "New Woman" heralded greater numbers of women taking up physical activities such as cycling, golf, hiking and tennis in which women assumed feminine qualities and women who boxed were considered to be transgressing prevailing gender norms by not adhering to 'appropriate' female behaviour.

1.5.2 Paving The Way

Barbara "the mighty atom" Buttrick, is considered by most to be one of the pioneers of the modern sport for women in the UK. Having struggled to put together an all-female football team due to lack of willing participants, at age fifteen Buttrick took up boxing after seeing an article in a newspaper about Polly Burns, a travelling fairground pugilist who boxed men in boxing booths around the country (Smith, 2014). Born and raised in Cottingham in Yorkshire, England, Buttrick moved to London at eighteen to train with Len Smith, whom she would later marry. Having honed her skills sparring in her back garden with neighbourhood boys and girls, she was taken on by a London talent agency as a "tough girl". Following a great deal of press coverage, Buttrick was booked to fight middleweight Bert Saunders at the Kilburn Empire,

London in March 1949. Her aspirations to become a professional boxer were thwarted first by the Variety Artistes' Federation (VAF) and London County Council (LCC), and then by the British Boxing Board of Control (BBBC). The VAF moved for the other acts on the bill at the Kilburn Empire to boycott stating that they felt the show would be "degrading to the best interests of society, public entertainment, the boxing profession and womanhood" (Smith, 2014, p.89). The theatre manager was then threatened with revocation of his theatre-operating license by the LCC if the show went ahead. With further warnings of punitive action from the BBBC to her proposed opponent, the contest was scrapped and Buttrick instead appeared as an exhibition act displaying shadowboxing and punchball work to great applause.

Buttrick continued to press the BBBC to lift the ban on women boxers during 1948 to no avail. The BBBC raised a number of issues which prevented women being allowed to box including the need for special rules for women and "protective devises to prevent permanent injury to girls who slug each other" (Smith, 2014, p.92). It was argued that women's abilities to bear and suckle children could be compromised due to hard hits to the reproductive organs of the female. However, the female reproductive organs are probably less susceptible to injury than those of men due to their positioning inside the body cavity (Hargreaves, 1997). In June 1949, left with no route into professional boxing, Buttrick began touring the country in boxing booths often fighting up to 30 rounds a day, mostly with men. Picking up a few 'professional' fights along the way with other female boxers, after a season touring France, she left with Len Smith, now her husband, for the United States in June 1952. The burgeoning women's boxing and wrestling scene in America allowed Buttrick to continue to fight with great success. Although she fought in the first televised female boxing match in 1954 (McCarver, n.d) and claimed the accolade of 1st ever Women's world champion in 1957, the first professional license was not issued until 1975, long after Buttrick had stopped fighting. Buttrick retired from boxing in 1960 but remained heavily involved becoming a licensed boxing manager in the 1980's and being elected to the International Boxing and Wrestling Hall of Fame in 1990. Further, she became the first female president of the Veteran Boxers' Association of Florida, helped found the Women's International Boxing Federation (WIBF) in 1993, was inducted to the International Women's Boxing Hall of Fame (IWBHF) in 2014, and became the first female to be inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame (IBHOF) in 2020.

The institutional barriers faced by Buttrick illustrate how control over women's participation has long been exercised through moral, medical, and bureaucratic means; processes that continue to shape women's access to and legitimacy within boxing spaces today. As will be explored in later chapters, these historical exclusions have contemporary consequences in the subtle regulation of women's bodies and behaviours within the boxing gym.

1.5.3 Professional Licensing

Following the first professional license issued in Nevada state in 1975, it was only California and New York that followed suit over the following 3 years. Although trailblazers such as Jackie Tonawanda and Marian “Lady Tyger” Trimiar challenged the New York State Athletic Commission in the mid 1970’s to gain the right to fight professionally, it was not until 1978 that the first professional license was then controversially issued to a white lightweight boxer, Cat Davis, rather than to the two African Americans who had been fighting for three years through the courts for the right to pursue a career in the ring. They were overlooked in favour of Davis who went on to become the first female ever to be on the front of The Ring magazine in 1978. This selective recognition underscores the intersection of race, gender, and media representation, highlighting how marginalized groups often face systemic barriers that limit their visibility and opportunities in mainstream platforms (Blodgett *et al*, 2017). Davis remained the only female to grace the cover of a major athletic magazine until Christy Martin appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* in 1996 (Jennings, 2016). Such advances in allowing women to fight professionally were not to happen in the UK for a further twenty years. It took another lengthy legal battle with the BBBC by Jane Couch before women were finally given professional status in the UK in 1998 (van Ingen and Kovacs, 2012).

1.5.4 Amateur Boxing

Between the first professional licenses being issued in the mid-1970’s and the emergence of a regulated amateur boxing scene in the late 1990’s there was a murky world of soft-porn magazines such as *Amazons in Action* (originally *Aggressive Women*) which covered the ‘Foxy Boxing’ scene where women fought topless and in mud with pillow like gloves for the titillation of men (Bunce, 2020). With no option to hone their skills in the amateur ranks, women who wanted to box had limited options: Toughwoman contests, “white collar” club fights or “catfight” foxy boxing shows. As none of these options came with any form of governing body regulation, there was high risks of injury involved as opponents were often mis matched in height, weight or experience (Smith, 2014, p.193). Further to the battles being fought to have the professional sport recognised by the governing body, there was a similar battle raging to allow women to fight as amateurs. The amateur sport in the USA was banned until 1993, and it was another three years before the Amateur Boxing Association of England (ABAE now known as England Boxing) lifted the 116-year ban, finally allowing women to compete in 1996. This final recognition and acceptance of the amateur sport for women marked a crucial turning point but entrenched cultural hierarchies were not quick to be dismantled. The persistence of gendered assumptions about aggression, capability, and

legitimacy continues to shape how women's participation is framed and experienced in contemporary gyms, an issue that is explored throughout this thesis.

1.5.5 Contemporary Women's Boxing

The formal inclusion of women's boxing in international structures and the Olympic programme marked a pivotal turning point in the sport's history. Following the lifting of amateur bans in the UK and USA in the mid-1990s, the International Boxing Association (AIBA, now IBA) sanctioned women's international competition. This led to the inaugural European Cup for Women in 1999 and the first IBA Women's World Championships in Scranton, Pennsylvania, in 2001 (IBA, 2001). These institutional changes reflected growing recognition of women's boxing globally and finally provided a legitimate developmental pathway for female boxers. One of the most significant moments in amateur boxing for women came in 2009 when the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced that women's boxing would be included in the 2012 London Games. The event marked a symbolic and practical breakthrough, providing women with a global platform equivalent to that of men for the first time. At London 2012, Great Britain's Nicola Adams became the first female Olympic boxing champion, a victory that not only brought increased visibility to the sport, and along with it national pride, but also inspired a new generation of female boxers and catalysed rapid growth in participation across the UK (Tjønndal, 2016; van Ingen and Kovacs, 2012).

Domestic tournaments such as the Haringey Box Cup, held annually at Alexandra Palace in London, also serve as important platforms for amateur boxers, both male and female. Established by the Haringey Police and Community Boxing Club in 1999, it has grown over the years into Europe's largest open boxing tournament, attracting over 500 male and female competitors from across the UK and internationally. The tournament has been instrumental in the development of numerous boxing talents with notable past participants including Olympic gold medallists, turned professional Nicola Adams and Katie Taylor. Terri Kelly serves as one of the lead organisers of the Haringey Box Cup and is a prominent figure in promoting women's boxing through her initiative, *This Girl Can Box*. Kelly has been instrumental in orchestrating events that showcase female talent, such as the London Women and Girls Project event held at Earlsfield ABC in 2024 which featured fourteen female bouts with boxers from across the UK, which in partnership with Matchroom boxing, highlighted her dedication to empowering women in the sport. In the professional sphere, the visibility of women's boxing has continued to rise through key showcase events. Katie Taylor's historic bout against Amanda Serrano at Madison Square Garden in April 2022 represented the first time a women's fight headlined at the iconic venue. The event sold out the arena and drew global media attention, signalling a shift in commercial viability and cultural legitimacy for

women's professional boxing (McRae, 2022). Taylor's subsequent trilogy with Serrano, culminating again at Madison Square Garden in 2025, reinforced women's capacity to command major audiences and headline global sporting stages (Tennery, 2025).

Despite significant advances, inequalities within the sport both amateur and professional still remain. While Olympic inclusion and an increase in professional promotion have expanded opportunities, gendered assumptions about aggression, appearance, and marketability persist within the sport (Tjønndal, 2016; van Ingen and Kovacs, 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed structural inequalities, as women's sport experienced greater event cancellations, reduced funding, and fewer broadcast opportunities compared to men's disciplines (Bowes *et al.*, 2021; Crosson and Ní Chumhaill, 2023). The COVID-19 lockdown period was pivotal for women's boxing, providing both challenges and opportunities for the sport's development. With traditional venues and events suspended, innovative approaches such as Eddie Hearn's "Fight Camp" allowed female fighters to continue competing, maintain visibility, and demonstrate their skill on a professional stage. This period highlighted the resilience and adaptability of women in the sport, while also exposing ongoing structural inequalities, such as disparities in funding, promotion, and media coverage compared with male counterparts. By sustaining competitive opportunities during a global crisis, these events contributed to the professionalisation and legitimacy of women's boxing, helping to shift perceptions of the sport as a predominantly male domain and solidifying its presence on the international stage. This account of the challenges faced by the sport historically underscore that while women's boxing has moved from marginalisation to mainstream recognition, it continues to navigate institutional and cultural barriers rooted in long-standing gender ideologies.

This historical trajectory highlights the ongoing negotiation between visibility and legitimacy that defines women's participation in boxing. From Buttrick's struggle for recognition to Taylor's headline bouts at Madison Square Garden, the sport's history reflects the endurance of women's resistance within systems that alternately exclude and commodify them. It is against this backdrop that the present research situates itself. By examining how women who box navigate the effects of these institutional and cultural histories in the everyday life of the gym and by foregrounding women's lived experiences, this study seeks to understand how legacies of exclusion, control, and marginalisation persist in contemporary spaces of boxing. Additionally, it examines how women continue to reconfigure these environments through embodied practice, material engagement, and community.

1.6 England Boxing Current Organisation And Structure

England Boxing is the national governing body for amateur boxing in England, overseeing the sport's development, governance, and competitive structures. It operates through a federated model comprising eleven regional associations, each being responsible for local clubs and competitions. Additionally, there are associations for the Police, Army, RAF and the Navy, collectively referred to as the UK armed forces and operationally included in the Southern division. The central body provides strategic direction, resources, and support, including coaching development, safeguarding, and competition management. The performance pathway is tiered across Schools, Juniors, Youth, and Senior levels, with talent identification and development programmes aimed at nurturing athletes for national and international competition.

1.6.1 England Boxing Policies

England Boxing complies with the UK Sport and Sport England Governance Code (England Boxing, 2024a), which was introduced in June 2016 and became mandatory for organisations seeking public funding from April 2017. The Code sets out the levels of transparency, accountability, and financial integrity required from sports organisations in receipt of government or National Lottery funding and has three tiers of compliance, based on the regularity with which the organisation receives funding and the monetary value of such funding. EB have been allocated to Tier 3 of the Governance Code EB based on the level of funding they received from Sport England as one of Sport England's long-term partners in their 10-year strategy to level up access to sport and physical activity, receiving over £9m in funding. Full details of the Sport England 10-year strategy can be found here: https://www.sportengland.org/funding-and-campaigns/long-term-partnerships

England Boxing received official confirmation from Sport England in December 2017 that it had achieved compliance with the Code of Sports Governance. The Code was revised in 2021 with UK Sport and Sport England announcing changes including ensuring that bodies in receipt of substantial public funding have a detailed and ambitious diversity and inclusion action plan to increase diversity on their boards and senior leadership teams, as well as across their wider organisations. A governance review later undertaken by BDO (governance consultancy) in 2022 identified fifteen key recommendations to improve the organisational effectiveness, transparency, and inclusivity of EB (England Boxing, 2023). Although the full list of recommendations has not been published, EB's 2023 and 2024 governance reports (England Boxing, 2023; England Boxing, 2024a) indicate that they centred on strengthening board effectiveness, improving diversity and representation at leadership levels, and embedding accountability mechanisms across all tiers of the organisation. EB have since reported enhanced oversight structures, clearer reporting lines, and measurable equality,

diversity, and inclusion (EDI) objectives which align with EB's broader Diversity, Equality and Race Review (2022), which sought to address historical inequities and under-representation within the sport (England Boxing, 2022). Collectively, these reforms demonstrate EB's commitment to operating within the framework of the national governance code while acknowledging the need for cultural and procedural change to ensure greater gender equity and inclusivity throughout the sport.

England Boxing reaffirmed its commitment to the Code in its 2024 Annual Governance Report, noting that it had addressed or implemented all fifteen recommendations from the governance review commissioned by Sport England, and conducted by BDO in 2023 (England Boxing, 2024a). In addition to the governance review, England Boxing received a Governance Action Plan (GAP) analysis from Sport England in December 2023, which identified two outstanding actions. To address these outstanding actions, an externally facilitated Board review was undertaken in Q4 of 2024 and a discussion on the People Plan took place during the AGM in September 2024 (England Boxing, 2025a). Following the introduction of the Governance Code, EB confirmed at the June 2017 board meeting that it would "adopt a target of, and take all appropriate actions to encourage, a minimum of 30% of each gender on its Board; and aim to achieve gender parity and greater diversity on the Board including, but not limited, to Black, Asian, minority ethnic diversity (BAME) and disability" (England Boxing, 2022) in accordance with the requirements of the second principle of the Code. At the time the second principle stated that organisations abiding by the code ought to "recruit and engage people with appropriate diversity, independence, skills, experience and knowledge to take effective decisions that further the organisation's goals" (Sport England, 2016). Full details of the governance report 24/25 can be found here:
https://www.englandboxing.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/2024-Governance-Report.pdf

According to data reported in the 2025 Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan, it can be seen that this commitment to gender diversity at board level has not been met with only 18% of board members currently being female (England Boxing, 2022).

Board Breakdown

Figure 1: Board Members Gender (England Boxing, 2025c)

Additionally, although women make up 51% of the population, women and girls account for only 11% of the England Boxing membership. It must be taken into account however that data is not currently collected from recreational boxers of which there are thought to be a significant number of females (England Boxing, 2022). Data also suggests that there is a significant gender gap in competitive boxing, despite efforts to increase female participation. The full DEI report can be found here: https://www.englandboxing.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/England-Boxing-DIAP-2025.pdf

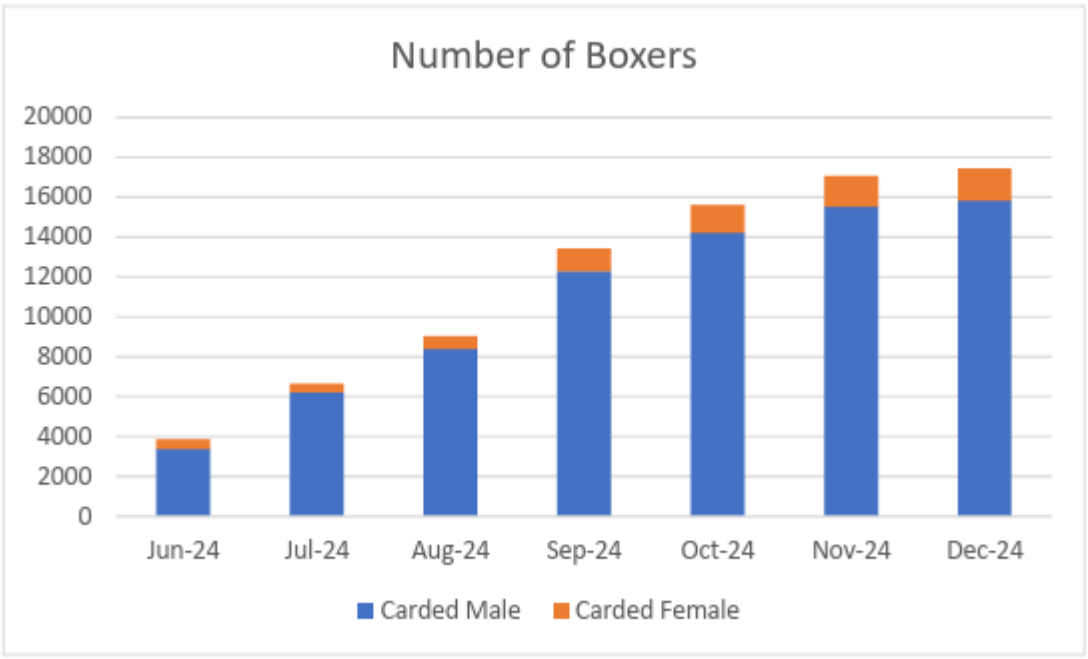

Figure 2: Gender of carded (competitive) boxers 2024 (England Boxing, 2025a)

Despite an increase in the number of competitive boxers, the proportion of those who are female has remained fairly constant. Although there has been a slight increase in female membership overall, there has been a drop in the number of female boxers and coaches. On International Women's Day in March 2025, a closing celebration was held for the 4th and final cohort of the Women's Coach Development Programme, having achieved the goal of recruiting 50 female coaches to make a lasting legacy for women and girls inclusion in boxing. This may indicate that there is a problem of attrition that has not been addressed and the that the closure of the Women's Coach Development Programmes may have been premature. Similarly, an increase in the number of female officials may be related to the new cohort who have joined the Women's Officials Development Programme. The annual report also mentions that EB have secured partnership deals with Boob Protect and boobydoo, providing discounted products to members and educational resources to help equip coaches with all the tools to effectively coach female boxers with women and girls health at the forefront (England Boxing, 2025a). Although EB have expressed a commitment to the protection of their female athletes and state that the collaboration with Boob Protect aims "to raise awareness and ensure that vital information becomes widely known across the sport at all levels... giv[ing] all female boxers the knowledge and option to make informed decisions about their safety and protection" (Boyd, 2025), there is very little information about breast protection on the EB website, nor a commitment to a change in the governance to make breast protection mandatory for competitive boxers as is the case with male groin guards.

Table 2: Comparison between Women and Girls participation 2024 and 2025
(England Boxing, 2025a)

	2024	2025	Difference
Membership	10.85%	11%	+ 1.4%
Boxers	10.15%	9.4%	- 7.4%
Coaches	10.08%	9.5%	- 5.8%
Officials	16.18%	19.1%	+ 18%

The full AGM annual report 24/25 can be found here:
https://www.englandboxing.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/AGM-Report-2025-Final.pdf

It has also been recognised that whilst a range of ethnically diverse communities are represented at the participants level, this is not true of coaches (particularly at performance level), nor referees and judges. England Boxing intend to address these imbalances through targeted initiatives and creating more opportunities for development (England Boxing, 2025b).

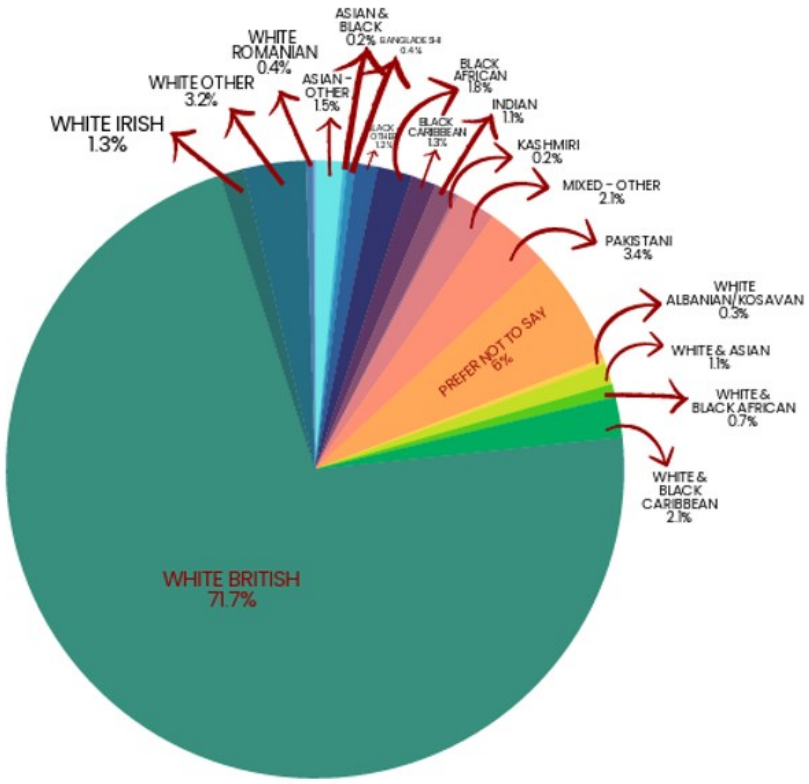

Figure 3: Ethnic Diversity of England Boxing members (England Boxing, 2025c)

1.6.2 Sport England Governance Code

The Code is structured around five key principles:

1. **Structure**: Organisations shall have a clear and appropriate governance structure, led by a Board which is collectively responsible for the long-term success of the organisation and exclusively vested with the power to lead it. The Board shall be properly constituted and shall operate effectively.
2. **People**: Organisations shall recruit and engage people with diversity of background, thought, independence, skills and experience to take effective decisions that further the organisation's goals and best serve their communities, stakeholders and wider UK society.
3. **Communication**: Organisations shall be transparent and accountable, engaging effectively with stakeholders and nurturing internal democracy
4. **Standards and Conduct**: Organisations shall uphold high standards of integrity, promote an ethical and inclusive culture, and engage in regular and effective evaluation to drive continuous improvement.
5. **Policies and Processes**: Organisations shall comply with all applicable laws and regulations; consider the social and environmental impact of their decisions;

undertake responsible financial strategic planning; and have appropriate controls and risk management procedures.

1.6.3 Olympic Governance

In June 2023 the IOC announced that it would withdraw recognition of the IBA amid long-running concerns about governance, transparency and officiating integrity (BBC, 2023). Subsequently, a new international body, World Boxing (WB), was established and England Boxing was accepted as one of the six founding members alongside USA Boxing, New Zealand Boxing, Boxing Australia, GB Boxing, and the Dutch Boxing Federation (Worldboxing, 2023). 55 National Federations were confirmed as members of WB by the end of its most recent Congress on 3rd November 2024, and at the time of writing a further 70 National Federations had been accepted as members taking the total to 125 (Worldboxing, 2025). In February 2025 WB received provisional recognition as the International Federation within the Olympic Movement governing the sport of boxing at world level. (Worldboxing, 2025; Reuters, 2025). EB formally announced it was terminating its association with the IBA and the European Boxing Confederation (EBC) on 1 August 2025, aligning instead with WB and its regional structures to protect athlete pathways and maintain access to Olympic qualification (England Boxing, 2025a). These moves have direct consequences for women's boxing. Controversies under IBA including disputed eligibility exposed uneven application of rules and damaged confidence in the global governance of the sport, particularly for women who have historically faced additional barriers to recognition and fair treatment (Ingle, 2024).

In March 2023, the IBA disqualified Algeria's Imane Khelif and Taiwan's Lin Yu-ting from the Women's World Championships after both were said to have failed gender-eligibility tests. The IBA offered no clear explanation of the criteria used, prompting widespread criticism for a lack of transparency and consistency (BBC, 2024a; Topping, 2024). The decision reignited debate about the ethics and scientific grounding of sex verification in sport, particularly concerning fairness, human rights, and the potential psychological harm to affected athletes (Karkazis and Jordan-Young, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2020; OHCHR, 2024). The IOC later cleared both boxers to compete at the Paris 2024 Olympics, a move that underscored tensions between the IOC's framework for inclusion and the IBA's contested governance (BBC, 2024b). Eligibility regulations shaped by gendered and racialised assumptions have raised questions regarding attempts to police women's bodies, suggesting they often rest on problematic and scientifically contested ideas of sex and advantage (Karkazis *et al.*, 2012; Henne, 2015). The controversy surrounding Khelif and Lin therefore not only exposed the fragility of IBA's regulatory legitimacy but also highlighted continuing inequities in how women, particularly racialised women are scrutinised in elite sport.

EB's decision to align with WB provisionally recognised by the IOC promises clearer eligibility, safety and anti-doping frameworks and therefore more secure pathways towards the 2028 Olympic games in Los Angeles, safeguarding domestic athletes' Olympic prospects. However, such governance disruption and institutional instability can both stall progress by disrupting competition pathways and funding, and create moments for reform that might offer possibilities to correct gendered inequalities in selection, media visibility and policy (Tjønndal, 2016; van Ingen and Kovacs, 2012).

1.6.4 England Boxing Board

The articles of association were agreed in November 2013 when the organisation was renamed and restructured after formerly being known as the Amateur Boxing Association of England (ABAE). These have been amended over the years, most recently due to the change of membership from AIB to WB. The EB Board is comprised of 12 Directors, of which 7 are EB Non Executive Directors, 4 Independent Non-Executive Directors, and one non-executive chairman (England boxing, 2025a). The EB board of Directors is responsible for Providing strategic leadership, ensuring regulatory and financial compliance, safeguarding the integrity of the sport, and promoting inclusive participation at all levels. It is responsible also for balancing accountability to members, regulators, and the wider boxing community. Although the Board retains ultimate authority for the management of EB it may also delegate specific powers or responsibilities to sub-committees or working groups to ensure efficient governance and specialist oversight. The number of subcommittees was reduced as a result of the BDO audit and were listed as Audit, Renumeration, Nominations, Technical, Rules, and Officials, Compliance, Legal and HR, Championships and Equality and Diversity To this list, a number of Advisory Groups have been added to deal with Medical, Communications, Clubs, Membership and Development, Performance and Commercial (England Boxing, 2024a). England Boxing is split into fifteen regional associations, each of which is supported by a regional secretary. These secretaries support the clubs and members within their association. Each region also has a medical registrar who is responsible for the administration of medical forms, boxer, coach and officials record books and DBS forms (England Boxing, n.d).

1.6.5 England Boxing Rules

The rules set out below are pertinent to the calendar year 2025. Boxers can register with EB from the age of ten up to the end of the calendar year of their 40th birthday which will enable them to participate in training, sparring and competition (with appropriate medical card). All boxers under eighteen must have parental permission to box. As competitive boxing

is graded based on the number of bouts that an athlete has had, if an athlete wishes to register with EB with previous individual contact sport experience, credits are given based on the number of competitive bouts they had in their previous discipline. The full list of credits applicable to transfers can be found in Appendix 1. If a boxer with a professional licence wishes to register as an elite boxer with EB, they are able to do so only if they, relinquish their professional license and are deemed medically fit to box.

Full details of the rules pertaining to competitive boxing in England can be found at https://www.englandboxing.org/rules-regs-resources/rule-book/ and an abridged version of age specific rules for England Boxing can be found in Appendix 2. The following table contains the rules which are different for males and females.

Table 2: England Boxing rules which differ based on gender.

Head guards	All male Senior male boxers will box without head guards. It is mandatory that all Minors (boys and girls), Schoolboys and Girls, Junior (boys and girls), Youth (boys and girls) and Senior female boxers wear head guards.
Breast and groin protection	It is mandatory for male boxers to wear groin protection for all competitive boxing. It is not mandatory for Female boxers, of any category, to wear either a breast protector or groin protector, should the boxer elect to wear a breast protector it should conform to the following description; The breast protector must be designed to protect the soft tissue of the breast up to the point that the breast protrusion merges with the chest wall. Breast protectors may not shield any other part of the target area. Breast protectors must have no metal part except fastenings at the back of the boxer.
Declaration of non-pregnancy	All female boxers are to declare or be declared as not pregnant on the Declaration of Non – Pregnancy form at the point of registration with their club (the form is to be stapled into the back of the boxer BCR1), as follows; a. Under 18 years of age – form to be completed by parent or guardian b. From 18 years of age – form to be completed by the individual A boxer will be prohibited from boxing if she is pregnant.

1.6.6 National Tournaments

There are a number of age-based tournaments that offer appropriate competition for boxers. These are organised on the basis of age, gender, and then weight category (see Appendices 2 and 3 for details). The youngest boxers, compete as minors. A boxer is classed as a Minor from their 10th birthday until the end of the calendar year in which the boxer celebrates their 11th birthday. Boxers then progress through the age bandings based on their year of birth. At the point of writing, School boxers are those born in 2011 – 2013, Junior boxers are those born in 2009/2010, Youths are 2007/2008 and finally Seniors are those born between 1985 – 2006. Each of these age-based tournaments has a development and an elite arm of competition. Other than the age group tournaments already mentioned, there are other tournaments run nationally in England. A brief outline of each tournament is described in the table below:

Table 3: National Tournaments in England

EB National Development Championships	The National Development Championships gives up and coming talent at Junior and Senior level the opportunity to showcase their skills. This category is opened to male and female boxers of junior age (14, 15 or 16, based on date of birth) and senior boxers (18 to 40 years of age) in a wide range of weight categories ranging from Under 36kg to Over 91kg (males) and Under 40kg to Under 81kg (females).
EB National Amateur Championships	Formerly known as the Elites and the ABAs, the NAC is the oldest and most prestigious amateur boxing competition in the country. Dating back to 1881, it is open to male and female boxers between the ages of 18 and 40 in weight categories ranging from Under 48kg to Over 92kg (males) and Under 48kg to Over 81kg (females).
Women's winter box cup	The EB Women's Winter Box Cup made its debut in 2018 and is now an annual event. The International women and girls-only event – which was the first of its type in the UK when established – is open to Juniors, Youth and Elite boxers across a variety of weights. It aims to help developed the strength in depth of women's boxing and also act as an inspiration to other women and girls who may wish to get involved in the sport.
GB Three Nations	Held once per year, EB competes with Boxing Scotland and Welsh Boxing in the prestigious GB Three Nations

	competition. The competition is contested at Schools, Junior, Youth, and Senior levels, with one country hosting, on rotation, all age groups in one multiple-day mega-event. This is a change to the previous schedule which involved each nation hosting one tournament each per calendar year. Entry is by invitation only and is based on performances in whichever EB National Championships is applicable to the particular competition.

1.6.7 Performance Pathway

A boxer may become eligible for the England's talent pathway in a number of ways. The following infographs explains in detail how boxers may become eligible for inclusion in the talent pathway for EB.

Figure 4: Schools: EB Performance Pathways (England Boxing, 2024b)

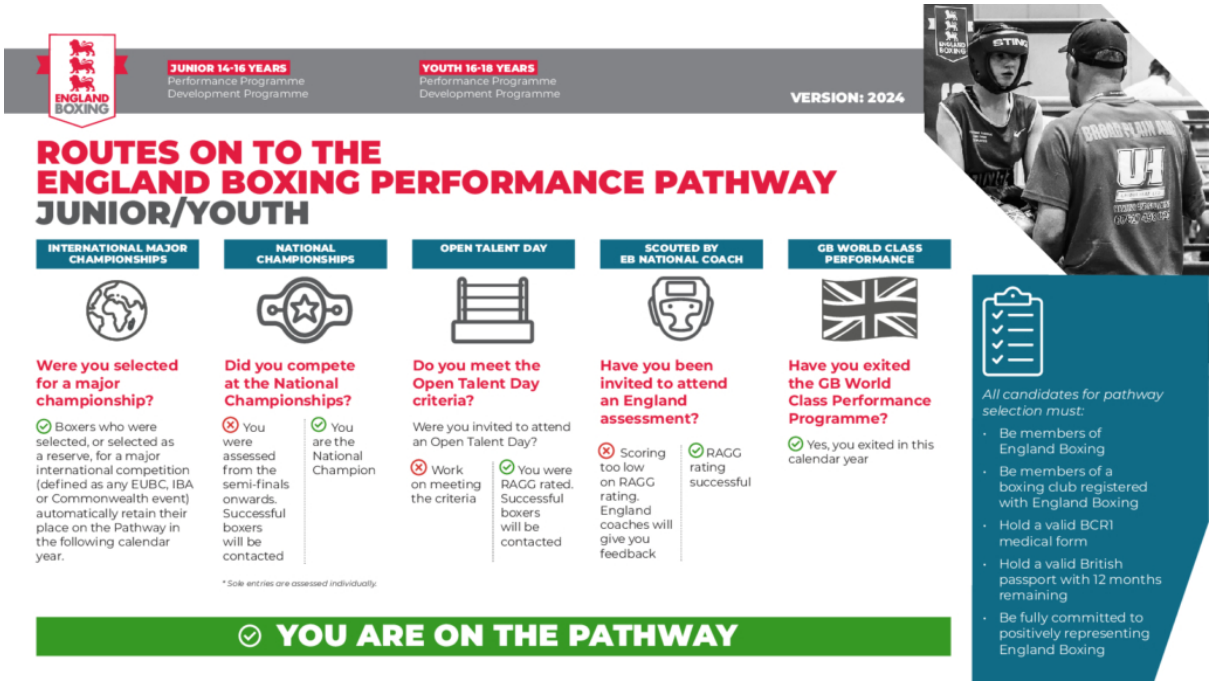

Figure 5: Junior / Youth: EB Performance Pathways (England Boxing, 2024b)

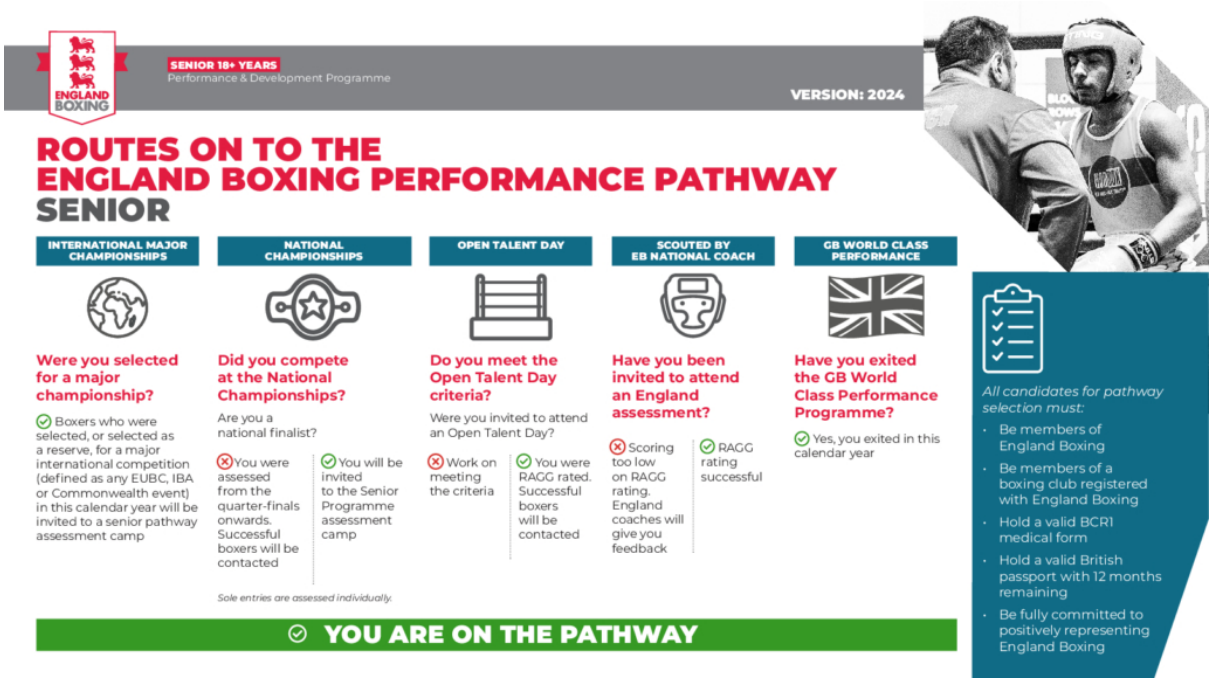

Figure 6: Senior: EB Performance Pathways (England Boxing, 2024b)

1.7 Boxing Scotland

Boxing Scotland (BSL) was established in 2000 with the specific mission to promote and develop Boxing in Scotland. It is recognised by the International Boxing Association (AIBA), UK Sport, the Scottish Government and spòrsalba (sportscotland) as the official and only acknowledged Scottish National Governing Body for the Olympic and Commonwealth

Games sport of AIBA Open Boxing (AOB). BSL was a founding member of World Boxing but according to the latest information available, they also currently retain membership of the International Boxing Association (AIBA).

Boxers can register with BSL from the age of eight up to the end of the calendar year of their 40th birthday which will enable them to participate in training, sparring and competition (with appropriate medical card and subject to the following exceptions). During 2024-25 season, Boxer's training within any affiliated BSL club with years of birth 2015-2017 will be eligible to become a BSL registered club cub which will allow them to take part in skills bouts, but not competitive bouts. All Club Cub skills bouts will be contested over 3 x 1 minutes regardless of age. It is a mandatory requirement to have a Supervisor, Referee, Timekeeper, MC, Doctor and Recorder present for any skills bout involving Club Cub boxers. Most of the rules details for EB boxers are the same for those registered with BSL. A link to the complete rules book for 2024/25 season can be found at https://www.boxingscotland.org/version2/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/20211216-BSL-Club-Domestic-Regulations-V7-Jan-25-Final.pdf

1.8 Welsh Boxing

Funded by Sport Wales, BocsioCymru (Welsh Boxing) is the national governing body for amateur boxing in Wales. It is a member of World Boxing and European Boxing. It is also a home nation member of the British Amateur Boxing Association, which is funded by UK Sport through GB Boxing. Formed in 1910, the Welsh Amateur Boxing Association (WABA) was established as a way of promoting and developing amateur boxing in Wales. The WABA is managed by the Board of Directors which consists of a The Chair, Director of Regulations, Finance Director, and up to nine other Directors, who shall either have been elected by the Annual General Meeting (to be called 'Elected Directors') or appointed by the board to fill vacant positions on the basis of relevant skills and experience (to be called 'Appointed Directors'). The WABA Chief Executive Officer, who shall be appointed by the Board, has the right to attend all meetings of the board and its committees. (Welsh Boxing, 2025)

Boxers can register with WABA from the age of eight up to the end of the calendar year of their 40th birthday which will enable them to participate in training, sparring and competition (with appropriate medical card). Most of the rules details for EB boxers are the same for those registered with WABA with the following exceptions: Boxers may partake in skills bouts from the age of 8 with a limit of 4 skills bouts per season. Schoolboys/girls, Juniors and Youths may partake in up to 15 bouts per season. A link to the complete rules book for 2024/25 season can be found at https://welshboxing.org/s/2025-Welsh-Boxing-Domestic-Rules-Final.pdf

1.9 GB Boxing

GB Boxing was established in August 2008 to manage the World Class Performance Programme (WCPP) for boxing. The purpose of the organization is to train and develop the best male and female boxers from England, Scotland and Wales and give them the best possible opportunity to win medals at major international tournaments and the Olympic Games. GB Boxing oversees the men and women's Podium and Academy squads (previously Podium Potential squad) since it was set-up in the aftermath of the 2008 Olympic Games. GB Boxing's principal stakeholders are the national governing bodies (NGBs) for boxing of England, Scotland and Wales. GB Boxing is based in a purpose-built training facility at the English Institute of Sport Sheffield, and its largest source of funding is a grant of £14.6 million from UK Sport, made up of contributions from the National Lottery and the Exchequer. It also receives revenue and value-in-kind contributions from a range of commercial partnerships (GB Boxing, 2024a).

The role of the board of GB Boxing is to oversee the strategic direction of the organisation and the management of the World Class Performance Programme (WCPP) for boxing. The board shall consist of not less than seven members (consisting of at least the Chairman, the Chief Executive, three Independent Directors and two Home Nations Directors) nor more than twelve (GB Boxing, 2025b).

1.9.1 Open Boxing (AOB)

Formerly known as amateur or Olympic boxing, this is the most common form of boxing within the IOC and World Boxing and is the one used at the Olympic Games and World and European Championships. It is also the one practiced in the 1000+ boxing clubs in Great Britain that are affiliated to the national governing bodies (NGBs) in England (England Boxing), Scotland (Boxing Scotland) and Wales (Welsh Boxing). AOB bouts take place over 3×3 minutes rounds for men and women. Competitors wear vests; women wear headguards, but since 2013 these have been removed for men for senior and elite competitions. Three judges are used and bouts are scored using the 'ten point must' system. The judges will score each round, and at the end of the bout the boxer who is deemed the winner by the majority of judges will win the bout. Bouts can also be stopped by the referee in the event of injury or a serious imbalance between the boxers. There are thirteen weight classes for men and twelve for women following changes made in August 2021 by the IBA. See Appendix 4 for the weight classes.

National championships in England, Scotland and Wales and European Championships are held at all 13 weights for men and 12 weights for women following changes made to the

weight categories by the IBA in 2021. World Championships according to new rulings brought in by WBA as of the 1st January 2025 will have 10 weight categories for both men and women. At the 2028 Los Angeles Olympic Games and the 2026 Glasgow Commonwealth Games, the men's and women's competitions will for the first time have an equal number of weight categories for men and women with both competing in seven weight categories.

1.9.2 GB Boxing Squad

GB Boxing manages the Podium squad as well as the Academy squad. Up to 46 places are available across the two squads, which are made-up of men and women from England, Scotland and Wales. Every member of the squad is funded and receives an Athlete Personal Award (APA), which varies depending on their achievements and track record. The Podium squad is the senior group and is made-up of male and female boxers that are expected to compete and win medals at major international competitions and the Olympic Games. The Podium squad are full-time athletes and train from Monday to Thursday at GB Boxing's headquarters at the English Institute of Sport Sheffield. The boxers also take part in training camps around the world with other nations and compete at competitions sanctioned by the Internal Olympic Committee (IOC) and World Boxing. The Academy squad trains fortnightly from Friday to Sunday in the GB Boxing gym. The squad is generally younger and is made-up of boxers that have been identified as having the potential to one day become a Podium squad boxer.

To be considered for selection to the Academy squad and ultimately make it into the Podium squad a boxer is expected to meet a range of criteria which include:

- To have been successful in their home nation's National Championships
- To have some experience of boxing for their home nation internationally at junior and/or senior level
- To have been through an assessment with the GB Boxing coaches at its training base in Sheffield and demonstrated the capabilities to become a full-time GB Boxer

Boxers that have been assessed and are considered to have the potential to reach a high international standard but are not yet ready for the top international competition are considered for selection for Academy squad. Boxers that demonstrate the ability to achieve medal success at major multinational events are considered for selection for the Podium squad (GB Boxing, 2024c)

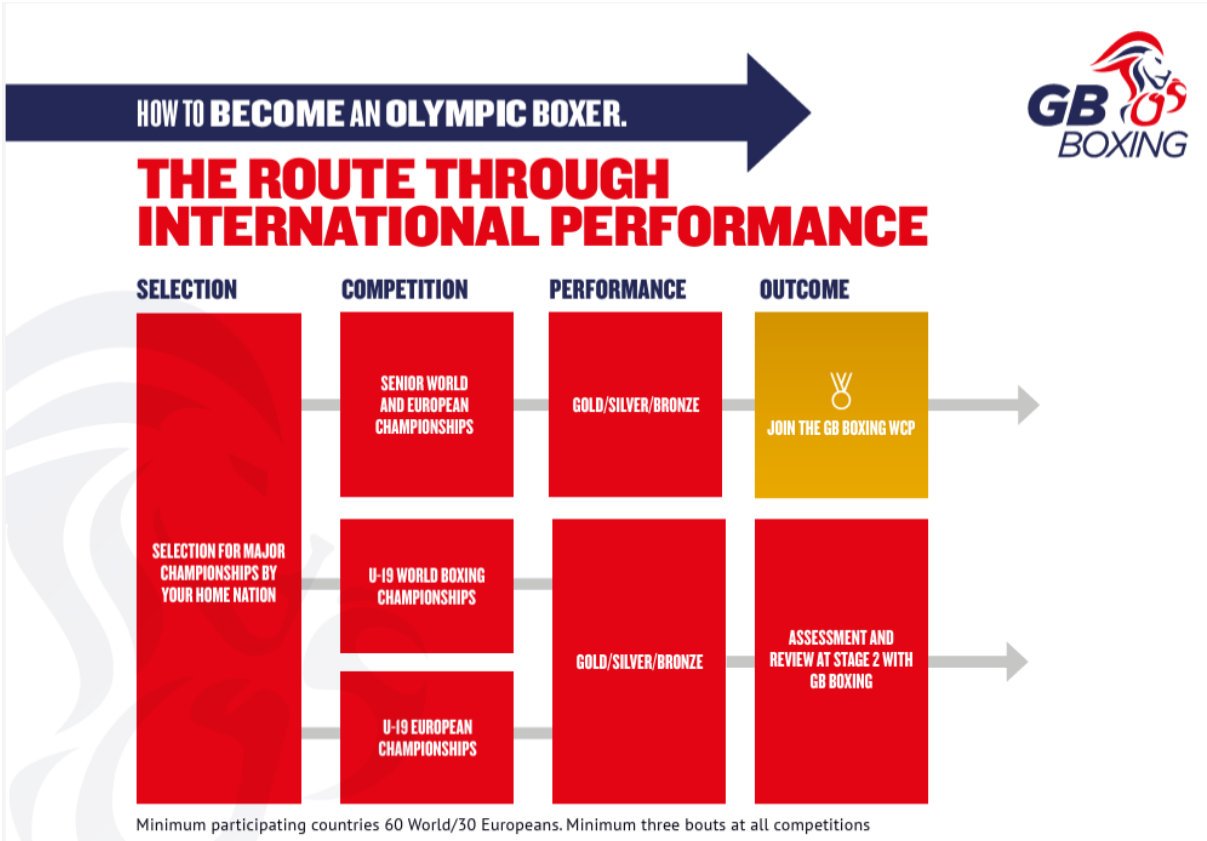

Figure 7: Route Through GB International Performance (GB Boxing, n.d.)

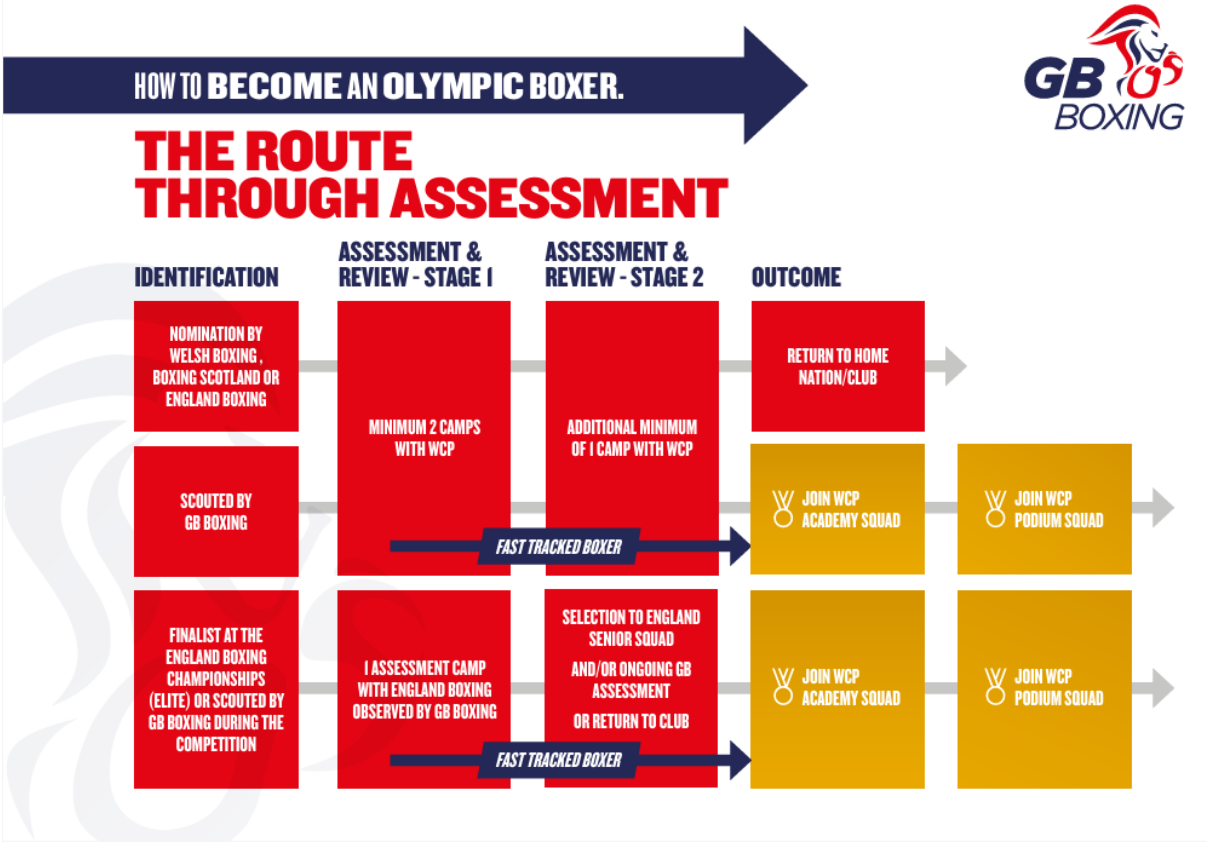

Figure 8: Route Through GB Assessment (GB Boxing, n.d.)

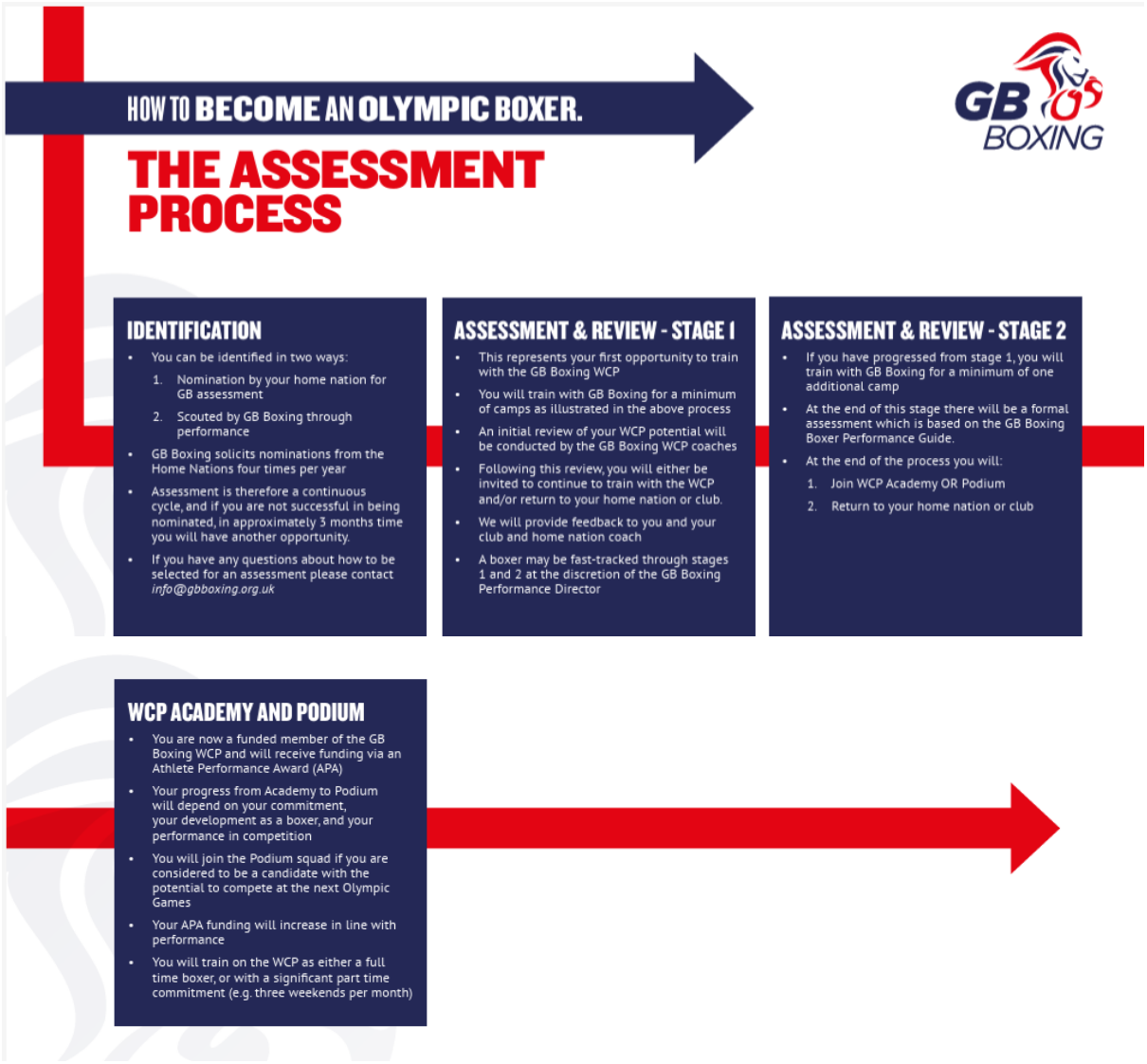

Figure 9: The GB Assessment Process (GB Boxing, n.d.)

1.10 Conclusion

This opening chapter has established the foundations of this thesis. By outlining the emergence of women's boxing within a broader historical context of gendered exclusion in sport, it demonstrates how women's participation has long been shaped by restrictive social norms, limited access to facilities, and the policing of femininity. The chapter also reviewed contemporary developments in women's boxing, highlighting the complex interplay between increasing visibility, persistent inequities, and the cultural legacy of boxing as a masculinised domain. The chapter then introduced the epistemological and methodological orientation of the project, explaining the choice of ethnography as the overarching approach. It emphasises that this study addresses a paucity in research examining embodied, and materially focussed exploration of women's lived experiences in a sporting context. It further set out the thesis

aims and research questions and established how the thesis contributes to the sociology of sport by placing material practices and everyday spatial encounters at the centre of understanding women's participation in boxing.

The remainder of this thesis is split into four chapters. The first three chapters will each introduce an academic paper which has either been published or submitted for review to a peer reviewed journal. The first of these chapters, Chapter 2, will introduce the multiple methods of ethnographic practice, including ethical considerations. The first academic publication of the thesis is then embedded which details a novel material method developed and used in this study. Chapter 3 builds on this by examining how clothing, equipment, and material artefacts contribute to identity formation within women's boxing. It begins with a literature review that situates the paper within the field of material culture before embedding the second publication. Chapter 4 introduces theories of space by way of a literature review and then embeds the final academic paper which examines women's experiences of boxing gyms from a Lefebvrian perspective and explores how women navigate and negotiate gendered spatial boundaries within these environments. Finally, Chapter 5 draws together the themes and findings from across all three papers, synthesising their contributions to address the overarching research questions and reflect on the implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Chapter 2 – Being there, virtually: Methodology and Methods

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter, how access to the field of study was both gained and maintained during the research project is firstly discussed. This is followed by a detailed consideration of how participant observation and interviews were used to develop an understanding of the culture of the boxing gym and the importance of the relationship between researcher and participants to knowledge acquisition. It then outlines the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on this research project and the methodological/ methods mitigations employed. Finally, the first paper of this thesis, detailing the development and implementation of a novel research method - the 'Kit Bag' encounter - is introduced and embedded.

2.2. Accessing the inaccessible - Ethnographic practice using multiple methods

2.2.1. Becoming familiar - Forming relationships and entering the field

The research process began by conducting an internet search of local boxing gyms, ensuring that they were practically close enough to facilitate long-term field observation. I also searched social media and local press coverage to establish which gyms were the most active. A Facebook page for a local regional squad for female boxers provided further potential for observations. In addition to these potentially long-term field sites, I came across the Winter Box Cup (an England Boxing female only boxing championship), and a female only boxing participation fundraising day that were taking place imminently. With one taking place in a sports complex in Guildford and the other in a gym in North London, both were a two-hour drive from my home in the Midlands. Having never watched live boxing other than on the television and never having participated in boxing myself, I considered that both of these events would be excellent windows into the world that I would hopefully soon be immersed in. Although entry to both events was in principle, very straight forward as they were both ticketed public events, the reality of obtaining ethics approval for observations was more complicated than I had imagined. With a move towards standardisation of ethics procedures which are often mismatched with the complexities of qualitative research (Miller and Boulton, 2007), difficulties in agreeing the required level of informed consent for such observations proved to be a challenge which I had not anticipated. Although the intention was merely to observe at the championships, the ethics board required that to do so, I would first have to obtain consent from England Boxing (EB) as the sport's governing body and event organisers. Access to the research sites in the first instance swings the balance of power from the researcher to the gate keepers and continued access is again, in the hands of the members of the study population.

The gatekeeper can facilitate access to a field site but can equally obstruct such access (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Either outcome is dependent on being able to identify them in the first instance.

The tight timeline on this occasion meant that a gatekeeper was not identified, and formal ethics approval was not obtained. I did however attend the BUCS Championship 2020 as it was held more locally and provided an opportunity to observe space and place and the organisational aspects of a boxing tournament. Although I again failed to obtain authorisation from the appropriate gatekeeper to enable observations in an official capacity, this highlighted the difference between entry and access to the field site (Reeves, 2010) and the importance of the gatekeeper relationship to the success of some ethnographic research. It transpired that this was to be the last opportunity I had to observe a competitive event as due to Covid-19, very few amateur competitive events took place until September 2021. The full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on my research will be covered in more detail in section 2.2.5. The event which I attended as a participant, although less complex regarding obtaining consent from the organisers, was made more complex from an ethics perspective due to added risks associated with participating in a contact sport.

After some persistence, early in 2020 I made contact with two of what were to become my main gatekeepers - the EB Club Support Officer for the Midlands and the founder and head coach of a local community boxing gym. All institutions and organisations have the right to permit or deny access to their information for research purposes, unless such information is already published in the public domain (Singh and Wassenaar, 2016). By forging relationships early in the project with those that could not only grant me access to research sites for observations but would also potentially provide a network of further contacts within the boxing community would prove to be invaluable as the Covid-19 situation developed. Reliance on gatekeepers for access can have influence on the matter of informed consent. Informed consent can be distorted by the relationship of both the participants and the researcher with the gatekeeper. If the gatekeeper recommends to participants that they ought to take part in the research, their ability to remove their consent may be diminished (Miller and Boulton, 2007). Additionally, to have a high-profile member of the governing body seeing significance in my research and in some ways sponsoring its success may have reduced the participants desire to consider its significance themselves, making them more open to partaking than they may otherwise have been without his approval (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

Establishing an early relationship with the EB Club Support Officer, who had himself a keen interest in the development of the sport for females, was instrumental in gaining access to field sites. Due to the seniority and longevity of his position within the sporting body, having his backing for my research assisted me in not only gaining access, but also in acquiring

legitimacy by association. I did however remain mindful of the gatekeeper's power to direct me towards participants who he felt were 'right' for my research, in some ways preselecting my study population for me, and perhaps diverting me away from the stories he didn't want to be told (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p60) point out, an ethnographer can often be positioned as either expert or critic by the gatekeepers. I certainly was never assumed as an expert, but I had to overcome his initial suspicion and concern that I would be producing some kind of expose piece in criticism of EB before access would be granted. Once trust and rapport had been established, this relationship had important consequences for the shape of the research project (Mansfield, 2016; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p58) as through this contact, I gained not only authority and support to access local clubs, but also a funded place on an EB coaching qualification. This opened up new opportunities for data gathering as well as supplementing my understanding of the experiences of females within the broader boxing community.

Woodward (2008) states that as a female in a boxing gym, one either has to take an asexual maternal role or situate oneself as a gender-neutral outsider due to the sexualised positioning of women within boxing. Perhaps a sign that things have moved on considerably since Woodward's research or testament to the inclusiveness of the particular field sites that I chose for my research, but I did not feel the need to desexualise myself or position myself as an outsider to be welcomed. Equally it is possible that this experience was unique to my field sites as those that welcomed my presence did so by virtue of their involvement in female boxing and their willingness to be part of a project that endeavours to understand this world in order to progress it.

2.2.2. Hanging out and hanging about – Immersive methodology

"If you want to find out, why not go see for yourself?" (Wolcott, 2008, p10).

By virtue of their locations, often in "ghettos and economically disadvantaged locations" (Woodward, 2008, p551; Sugden, 2014, p192; Wacquant, 2004, p29-30), the inner sanctum of the boxing gym is not familiar to most of us. Public knowledge of boxing is largely limited to Hollywood representations of rags to riches stories such as that of Rocky Balboa, told in the film Rocky (and its five sequels) or World title heavy weight face-offs which are becoming increasingly theatrical. As the primary data collection tool in traditional ethnography, participant-observation provides an opportunity to challenge such preconceptions and potential misrepresentations of the culture of boxing. By immersing myself in boxing gyms both as an observant participant and as a participant observer offered a hybrid approach to

fieldwork which encompassed both proximity to the participants whilst hanging about (Woodward, 2008) and insight garnered through active participation (Seim, 2021).

Stemming from anthropology, ethnographic research requires direct and sustained contact with human agents within their daily lives and cultures. As Delamont (2011) states "you have to sit there long enough that people have stopped doing a specialist performance for you" (Delamont, 2011., 00:02:46). For the immersive aspect of my research, I secured two local field sites where I would be able to conduct weekly observations over a period of 18 months – one a fairly new community boxing gym that largely catered for recreational boxers and a second that was a well-established traditional amateur boxing club that had recently produced a female England representative and Tri-nations champion, and had achieved regional and national success with male boxers for the past 10 years. By keeping my field sites local, I was able to maximise the opportunities for observations. I also committed to attending as many competitive events as possible, including the Olympic qualifiers at the Copper Box arena in London, as well as monthly regional female only training events to extend my exposure to the broader culture of the sport (Sands, 2002). Through prolonged immersion in a setting, the researcher becomes familiar with the spatial dimensions of the research setting, and its socio-cultural dynamics, but also how those dynamics may change at certain times of the day, week or year. Although traditional anthropological immersion of 24/7, 365 days per year is not practical in many of the modern applications within social sciences, including my project, the principles of immersion still remain, enabling the researcher to get closer to the lived experience of the participants.

Finding a balance between involvement with, and detachment from respondents is a skill which is necessary for effective ethnographic practice but is hard to achieve and is an ongoing process of negotiation (Crow and Laidlaw, 2019; Elias, 1994). Holt and Sparkes (2001) note that "[t]he ethnographic insider has the task of making the familiar seem strange in order to maintain analytical distance" whereas "the ethnographic outsider has the problem of making the strange seem familiar." Remaining reflexive to ensure as much as possible that I don't become too involved or too detached is further complicated by the relationships not just within the club itself with athletes and coaching staff, but to the wider community within the sport of boxing including the 'old boys club' and indeed the wider societal acceptance or otherwise of women in combat sports. Gaining trust from the population under study requires a level of intimacy and familiarity but getting too close can prevent effective academic practice. At all stages of the ethnographic process, addressing the power balance between the researcher and researched are important. Ensuring that there is no exploitation, particularly of marginalised population in the interest of a 'good story' is paramount (Finlay, 2002a;2002b).

It became obvious very early on that it was going to be a challenge to not be seen as a collector of stories and that my very presence in the gym could be affecting the 'performance'

of the both the athletes and the coaches. As Sugden says “we are interested in naturally emergent (or concealed) social truths, not good stories.” (1996: 211). One coach in particular appeared to be narrating the training session for my benefit and I found myself with a feeling of being in the way physically, in what was a very confined space, on numerous occasions. Although uncomfortable for me as a novice ethnographer to feel initially like I was obstructing natural behaviours, this highlights the need to spend an extended period in the field to become less ‘visible’ (Delamont, 2011). Balancing this with a need to not become a detached observer or ‘fly on the wall’ is important to maintain meaning in context. As the researcher becomes intertwined with the field of study and its participants (Emerson *et al.*, 2011), so the culture of interaction within the study population may be exposed.

There were occasions during my observations where an understanding of the power held by the gatekeepers was starkly apparent. I received a text message asking me not to attend one of the field sites for “a couple of weeks” (Anon, 2021). This was due to a developing situation regarding tenancy and membership fees with the sports and social club where the boxing gym was situated and occurred some ten months after my observations at this site had begun, albeit, interrupted and disrupted by Covid lockdowns and restrictions[1]. This situation persisted far beyond the two weeks suggested to more than ten weeks. This impacted not only on the relationships already formed but also on the formation of new relationships with members who had joined in my absence. It also meant I was not party to the interactions resulting from the developing situation which may have offered good insight into the wider societal power struggles that are faced by community sport generally and boxing more specifically. Whitehead (2005) describes what would have traditionally been known as informants as hosts, emphasising the collaborative process and the removal of the assumption that the researcher holds the power. A second instance of access being removed by the same gatekeeper resulted in the termination of my observations at the same site. Although this was initially proposed as a temporary arrangement and at this time, an exit strategy had not been formally considered, the timing was such that it seemed sensible to end observations at this time. Whilst resolving the often problematic issue of how to exit the field site without upsetting the hosts (Whitehead, 2005), this did not come without emotional consequences for the researcher. A range of emotions as described by Morrison *et al.* (2012) were experienced by the researcher, from shock at being expelled from the research site without explanation, to relief at not having to myself initiate the departure and guilt at leaving without the opportunity to thank the participants for their willingness to accommodate my presence in their gym. The sadness and deflation I felt upon leaving the site so suddenly after a long period of immersion

[1] The initial lockdown began in England on 26th March 2020 and restrictions which affected the normal operation of boxing gyms remained in place until 19th July 2021.

indicated just how much immersion in a research site can affect the researcher, particularly when a good rapport has developed (Snow, 1980).

Conversely, as discussed by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p7), an expectation of involvement with the field sites beyond what I anticipated was also at times difficult to negotiate. Having been offered the opportunity to achieve my Level 1 EB Coaching award, I did so with the belief that it would provide further opportunity to immerse myself in the world of boxing. As this opportunity had been funded by EB as part of an initiative to bring more females to the coaching aspect of the sport, I had anticipated that achieving this qualification may result in an expectation from one or both of the field sites that I assist with coaching on occasion. Negotiating this expectation, without becoming beholden to the clubs involved was complex and at times distracted from the need to observe. Whilst it is impossible to conduct social research without some level of involvement (Matthews, 2021), balancing this necessary involvement with reflexive attempts to understand social interactions and behaviours is articulated well by Mansfield (2007:126)

> Striving for an appropriate involvement-detachment balance includes a capacity for reflexivity, an ability to critically examine one's own passions and personal interests throughout the research process. Involvement-detachment should be thought of as an ever-changing balance of emotional involvement-detachment with topics, theories and methods of research.

Keeping a reflexive journal alongside observation notes helped to facilitate this critical examination of self and how my positionality may affect the field.

2.2.3. Seeing and sensing – Observation and participation

Although participation gave me insight into the embodied aspects of being a female boxer, it also brought to the fore how difficult it is to observe whilst participating in such a physically demanding sport. Apart from the obvious impracticality of trying to take field notes whilst wearing boxing gloves, it did allow me to appreciate embodied experiences that others may discuss in the interview stages and offer some appreciation of the difficulties that female boxers may encounter with equipment and the use of space and place. Wacquant (2004) suggests that his participation in the boxing gym was vital to his cultural understanding of the sport but as Matthews states, Wacquant's account was no more authentic nor more complete than any other as it remained partial and subjective (2021, p108). Spending a significant amount of time with a group as an insider or participant-observer may give access to subjective knowledge necessary to understand lived experience but this alone does not

legitimise knowledge claims. The next section will cover the approach to taking field notes during observations.

2.2.4. Writing it down - Field Notes

Although some fully immersive ethnographic writings are effectively reconstructions of important events created long after the event occurred (Emerson *et al.*, 2011, p22), the intention with this project was to inscribe in situ in the form of jottings which would be written up into full fieldnotes as soon as possible after the event (Emerson *et al.*, 2011, p23). These detailed notes would then be analysed along with the interview transcripts to create as full a picture as possible of the lived experience of female boxers. Taking field notes even when merely observing was also found to be challenging. Although not physically participating in the actual boxing, I have realised over time that to maintain a position of participating-observer required me to be actively participating in the session as an observer, not feverishly writing notes in my fieldnote diary. Wolcott (2008) relabels participant observation as 'experiencing' (Wolcott, 2008, p46) and I never felt like I was truly 'experiencing' whilst taking field notes in situ.

For the early stages of my observations, I always had my field note diary with me and always took notes or jottings (Emerson *et al.*, 2011) as moments of interest presented themselves. These notes have proved to be excellent for researcher reflexivity, but I found over time that to retrospectively take notes about a session after it happened meant that I was in fact far more immersed in the experience as it happened. Developing a cultural understanding became less about detailing every minutia and more about the overarching experience of being there or hanging about (Woodward, 2008). Additionally, my sense of belonging improved when I manifest as less of a researcher and more as a participating observer. The relevance of even the most detailed field notes only really becomes apparent after iterative reflection, analysis, and immersion in the field. To move from the position of witness of events, through interpretation, to writer of realities and meanings (Emerson*et al.*, 2011), develops with cultural appreciation and understanding. To further this cultural understanding, interviews were used to add depth and context to what had been observed at the field sites.

2.2.5. Tell me how it is - Phase 1 – Semi structured interviews

Observations in the field coupled with interviews have always been the staple of ethnographers but the semi-structured interview replaced the unstructured interview post World War II to counter "passivity, blandness and drift" (Lee, 2011, p141) often associated

with this method. Although ad-hoc conversations in the field could be considered an interview of sorts, the selection of participants for the more formal semi-structured interviews can occur in a number of ways. Participants may self-select, participants may be put forward by a gatekeeper or other invested party, or participants may be selected by the researcher (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p103). The self-selecting participants can be of great use as they have, by virtue of their self-selection, a bona fide interest in the project and a willingness to talk about the subject in question. Conversely, participants put forward by a gatekeeper, may be selected for their ability to tell a story that suits the narrative of the gatekeeper or is representative of what the gatekeeper wants to be portrayed about the population under study (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p104). Getting access to potential informants is often controlled by the gatekeepers but this should not deter the ethnographer from actively seeking a variety of participants.

Consideration must be given to the notion of 'voluntary consent'. Nelson *et al.,* (2011) consider that there are two conditions required to satisfy voluntary consent, intentional action and the absence of controlling influences. Although it is often necessary to follow up with participants more than once, either to secure an interview or arrange details, there is a fine line between reminders and coercion. Although interested in the research early on, and responsive to discussions about progressing with participation, there were two participants who were never included in the research as I felt that it had gone beyond the point where their inclusion would have been entirely voluntary. If access is granted by the gatekeeper to one or more participants, or indeed the researcher has one or more self-selecting participants, snowball sampling can be useful to extend the pool of participants. Snowball sampling is particularly useful when researching a hard-to-reach population (Parker *et al.*, 2019) as was the case with my research population due to COVID.

Covid restrictions made spending an extended period of time in the field impossible and therefore the potential to identify potential interview participants from the field was therefore compromised. With uncertainty around field observations, and my research methodology dictating a need for data to be collected from a variety of sources and in a timely fashion, I instead selected my interview participants from social media platforms on the basis of publicly available personal information that inferred their eligibility for my study (Gelinas *et al.*, 2017). Although this could be considered as selection bias, I feel that the sample population is diverse both geographically, and demographically with participants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, ages and levels of involvement in the sport so are broadly representative of the study population.

Starting from the initial contacts I had made early in my research, I used their 'followed' and 'following' contacts on social media to identify other individuals who presented an identity of female boxer either in their biography or in their profile picture. I then approached them

directly using Direct Messenger to inform them of my research and invite them to participate in an interview using remote technology as in person interviews were not possible at this point due to the Covid restriction in place. This proved to be very successful with twelve of my participants recruited in this manner with a further five participants joining the project through snowball sampling from the original respondents. A further six participants were recruited via a single contact made through my social media recruitment. Although this single contact was not involved themselves in the interview process, they facilitated contact with others who were keen to be involved. Sampling momentum (Parker *et al.*, 2019) developing from these original respondents was not utilised to its fullest as I felt I had reached target sample size, but I felt comfortable that the rapport that had built with the respondents meant I could return to them for further referrals if required. A further four participants were recruited from the field through my continuing interaction both online and (latterly) in person with the boxing community.

There are shifting boundaries between the professional and personal in research relationships (Miller and Boulton, 2007) and I was mindful that my privacy was harder to control and could perhaps be compromised by approaching potential participants directly on social media using my personal account rather than a research specific account (Olive, 2025). I was comfortable however that participants would not have to try very hard to find me even had I not approached them directly using my personal account and that I had nothing to hide or fear from potential participants. This openness to my personal space may have in fact encouraged an openness in return from my participants.

Phase 1 interviews were used to build a meaningful relationship and rapport with the research participants (Brown, 2018) as well as to examine the lived experience of participants regarding their experiences of either being a female boxer or working closely with them. Although insights from participant observation would usually inform an interview schedule in ethnographic research (Adler and Adler, 1994), minimal observational opportunities due to COVID-19 prior to the commencement of the interview cycle meant that the overarching themes of the research were used to guide the conversations. These themes probed on issues of gender, physical health and wellbeing. To help with the building of rapport, I made sure that the interview schedule was individualised for each participant using information that I could find online regarding their career as a boxer. By including information about them specifically enabled me to display my interest in them as an individual and not just as a representative of a community. As Stephens (2007) describes of his PhD research, as I became more experienced, moving from being a novice researcher at the outset to being more skilled both in my approach and in my understanding of the issues faced by female boxers, my interview schedule developed and ultimately became a guide rather than a schedule.

All participants were sent a Participant Information Sheet and consent form prior to the interview (see Appendices 5/6/10/11). If a participant had not returned their consent form at

the point of the interview (n = 6), a verbal confirmation of their understanding of informed consent was acquired at the beginning of the interview after recording had begun. The implications of participation, issues of confidentiality and anonymity and the participants right to withdraw were discussed and the participant was given the opportunity to ask any questions. These issues were discussed at the beginning of every interview, even if a consent form had been returned to reconfirm the participants understanding and provide opportunity for the participant to raise any concerns or questions before the interview formally began as I had not met most of the participants in person. This issue of consent was considered an added layer of complexity which would not have been the case if participants had been interviewed face to face at which point the consent form would have been reviewed and signed in person by the participant.

28 participants were interviewed in Phase 1 with 2 participants interviewed twice. Interviews were between 38 minutes and 122 minutes with the average being 73 minutes. Three of the interviews were conducted over the telephone as this suited the participant and their availability. All remaining interviews were conducted via zoom with camera and microphone on with one exception where the participant requested that she be interviewed with her camera off. Although the 'head shot' provided by video interview software limits the observable non-verbal cues (Lo Iacono *et al*, 2016), they are still apparent and help to prevent interruptions often experienced during telephone interviews (Stephens, 2007). I felt that the anonymity offered by the removal of video did however increase the participants willingness to share personal experiences. Self-disclosure has been found to have therapeutic effects and anonymity can encourage disinhibition (Ma *et al*, 2016) which may not have been the case had we been face to face, even if only virtually. Although online interviews were considered a new 'methodological frontier' for innovative data collection as recently as 2010 (Madge, 2010), the lockdowns associated with the Covid pandemic meant that online technology was widely used by most to keep in contact with family and friends. I feel that this was beneficial as participants were not only familiar with the software but were also routinely using it to communicate in an informal manner which suited the requirements of my interviews. Although I used Zoom to conduct my interviews, participants were offered the opportunity to select a different platform if preferred and my use of Zoom is in no way an endorsement of its suitability for this purpose over any other platform. The methodological and ethical considerations for using this or any similar technology to conduct remote interviews is the same.

Using a digital platform to conduct the interviews had several advantages over a more traditional qualitative interview approach which would usually involve meeting the participant in person. Participants from geographically remote locations could be included in the research without any additional time or cost investment for either the research or participant (Gelinas *et al*, 2017; Howlett, 2022). This opened up the pool of available participants considerably and

resulted in me having participants from as far afield as Dorset and Tyne Tees and Wear. Often interviews are constrained both by the availability of participant and a suitable venue where the interview can be conducted (Howlett, 2022). Participants often chose to conduct the interviews in the evening in the comfort of their own homes which may have been more challenging if a neutral public venue were to be sought. Additionally, consideration of privacy or lack thereof depending on the participant living situation could make the home better or indeed worse from a perspective of speaking freely about their experiences. I did not obviously encounter any participants who were not willing to share their experiences in a frank and open way. However, as I have no direct comparison to establish if this openness would have been affected by interviews being in a more public place, I cannot comment further on the benefits or otherwise of participants being in their own home.

It may be considered that the building of rapport and trust may have been impacted by conducting interviews remotely, however, this did not appear to be the case. On the contrary, I was surprised on more than one occasion by the candid responses of my participants which may have been encouraged by the relative security of the interview effectively being conducted in their own front room. Such openness however, whatever the reason for it, reflects a high level of trust (Miller and Boulton, 2007). I made an ethical decision not to ask participants what their sexual orientation was as I felt this was of little relevance to my study and may serve to reinforce rather than diminish stereotypes that are often associated with female athletes, particularly those in traditionally masculine sports such as boxing. However, many of my participants offered, without prompting, details of their sexual preference which may suggest an acceptance of non-dominant sexualities within the boxing community. It was however suggested on more than one occasion that the same acceptance would not be true of a male who presented as non-heterosexual.

Conducting the interviews remotely did offer the potential for technical issues to hinder the clarity or fluidity of the interview, however, I was fortunate that there was very little interference or breakdown of technology which affected the flow of the interviews. Stephens (2007) identified eight issues that he felt affected the efficacy of remote interviewing, most of which were related to the absence of visual cues during telephone interviews. Although visual communication could be considered constrained by the field of vision granted by the lens of the device used for the Zoom interviews (Howlett, 2022) they were not entirely absent, so facial expressions and hand gestures which we use to aid and consolidate meaning were still apparent. In some ways, I consider that conducting the interviews using video software remotely actually aided the process as I was able to refer to my notes and take jottings in a less conspicuous manner without the constraint of holding a telephone handset (Stephens, 2007). Additionally, by informing participants that the interview could be stopped, started, paused or rescheduled at a moment's notice to accommodate unsolicited interruptions, the

pressure to 'perform' was lessened and the need to "control the environment", as in Stephens' study, was removed. On one occasion where the interviewee did not 'arrive', I was grateful that it had been arranged online as the potential participant lived over 140 miles away. The biggest negative of conducting my interviews online meant that my available pool of participants was stratified both by digital literacy and access to technology. However, I am confident that due to the high ownership of smart phones, even by those in the most disadvantaged populations meant that research participation should have been available to all.

2.2.6. Show me what it's like - Phase 2 – 'Kit Bag' Interviews

Having the flexibility in approach to choose the correct method based on the circumstances of the research as it changes meant that when immersive observations became impossible due to COVID-19 and the closure of gyms, I was able to creatively address the research question by adapting the methods used to suit the changing landscape. Although intended as an ethnography at its inception, disruption to field work caused by COVID-19 meant that although I attended to ethnographic principles throughout the research project, I do not believe that it can be claimed as strictly ethnographic. As Mansfield (2009) states in her time limited study of 'green' fitness cultures, this research may be "best defined as a series of ethnographic visits" (Mansfield, 2009, p348).

I consider that my biggest challenge during the several lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic were how I would gain a sense of encounters and of interaction, and a sustained understanding of the social or cultural. During the most severe lockdowns, it was not possible for the boxers to access the gyms and even when they reopened, they were severely restricted as to the amount of physical contact they could have with each other. Pad work, partner work and sparring were all forbidden which one must assume, concretely changed the interactions that one would usually expect in a sport whose entire purpose centres on literal physical interaction with one's opponent. Not only was the environment in which boxers trained constrained by a need for regular sanitisation, no sharing of equipment and physical distancing from one another, but the constant locking down and opening up of training facilities meant that the formation and sustenance of relationships was challenging. This was true not only for the boxers but for the relationships that I had developed with gatekeepers. Such relationships and associated access are being constantly negotiated and under such trying circumstances, there was a concern that my research was of low priority to the gatekeepers and therefore potentially disposable if their energy did not stretch far enough to cover everything that needed attending to. As Vigurs found in her ethnography of a community learning centre, although gaining access to the field had initially been fairly straight forward, maintain field relations with

gatekeepers and participants became an ongoing site of emotional labour (Vigurs, 2019, p139).

As the Covid restrictions eased and boxing began to return to normal operation in mid-July 2021 for the first time in 16 months, I was able to return to the field-sites and recommence my observations. With competitive opportunities on the horizons, for the first time for many of the boxers in my participant cohort, the intensity of training and sparring was vastly different to that which I had experienced previously in the gym. Finding a way to examine the meaning of involvement, importance of self-expression and identity attached to my participants involvement in boxing, I began to develop my interest in the use of material methods to explore these areas of interest using the boxer's own kit.

2.3. Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations for this project were many and varied. Due to the physical nature of boxing and the confined spaces of the field sites, I was often in close proximity to the pugilistic bodies and heavy equipment used to hone the boxer's body. Blood and sweat are not confined to the body in such environments and were often distributed from boxer to opponents' gloves or onto walls or equipment. Negotiating the risks I was willing to take in such environments extended far beyond the formal risk assessment completed as part of the ethics process. From the obvious dangers of being in a space where risk of physical injury was a very real and frequent threat, to the consideration of working with those who are under 18, the impermanence of consent remained relevant throughout the project. This impermanence was made even more stark due to the sporadic nature of my presence at the field sites and changing participants due to the lockdowns associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, a reflexive approach to ethical practice was taken throughout. Consent was never considered as a once and for all process but rather an active negotiation with participants.

All data collected during interviews and kit bag encounters was saved to a secure Onedrive which was password protected. All transcriptions were anonymised to protect the identity of the clubs and the individuals involved.

2.4. Rationale for Paper 1 – 'Kit Bag' Encounters

These immersive methods were developed as an original contribution to the qualitative study of sports practice recognising that they could be used to explore other embodied practices. Here, they were employed to partially replace the participant-observations that were lost due to lock downs imposed as a result of COVID-19 which severely limited access to

boxers in the gym environment but developed within a critical consideration of retaining the principles of ethnography.

2.5. Publication Status and Authorship

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● Elaine de Vos (80% contribution): conception of the research idea, data collection, data analysis, drafting the article, critical revisions of the paper, and final approval of the paper for publication.

● Dr. Neil Stephens: advice with research design and direction for paper, support with drafting the paper, critical revisions of paper, and final approval of the paper publication.

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2.6. Paper 1: Elicitation using Kit Bag Methods: Exploring Embodied Practice with Female Boxers

2.6.1. Abstract

In this paper we present a novel qualitative research method that uses a boxer's kit bag, and the items contained within, to explore the relationship that participants have with activity specific material items. These immersive sensory encounters 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. This method contributes to the field of material methods and elicitation by using everyday objects to stimulate expression of embodied experiences. By observing participants interacting with their boxing kit and encouraging reflective attention to how the body responds to each item, we can examine how objects can both promote a sense of belonging in the boxing gym and support the narration of transitions in and out of character. This method could be used to explore other sports, occupations or activities which require activity specific objects.

2.6.2. Introduction

This paper introduces a novel qualitative research approach – the kit bag method – that examines situated and sensorial experiences of participants who engage in embodied activities. It employs an elicitation approach centred upon the participants' kit bag and its contents - the clothing and other materials brought into a research setting – and how these are put on, used, stored, and made portable. The participant performs their kitting-up process in dialogue with the researcher, while being filmed, and responding to researcher prompts, to detail their experiences and reflections of the process. We also collect images and accounts of how the kit bag is stored, packed, and transported between key sites such as the home, work, gym, and competition space. The method was developed as part of a larger research project exploring issues of health and wellbeing specifically related to the development of identity of women in boxing. We show how the method is particularly valuable for studying the relationships between objects and identity, sensory experience, framings of portability and mobility, and transitions in and out of character. It records and analyses an immersive encounter with participants' boxing kit - as an elicitation tool - to narrate the embodied experience of dressing in their kit and their experiences as a boxer. The method, we argue, can be employed in other settings beyond boxing, and as a standalone method or as part of a larger ethnographic project. In this paper, we detail the context of development of the kit bag method, situate it within the literature on embodiment and elicitation, detail how it was implemented, and discuss its value and areas for development.

The paper is divided into six sections. The first introduces key issues related to gender, sport and bodies, particularly in the context of boxing. The second focuses upon sensory, embodied, and elicitation orientated methods to articulate the framing that has shaped our thinking on the kit bag method. The third section outlines our research context, to describe the broader project and the genesis of the kit mag method in practice. This is followed by the fourth section in which we provide a detailed explanation of the kit bag methods and underlying methodology, including an account of our methods of analysis. Section five builds further upon our analytical discussion to identify a set of themes that arose in our analysis that, we argue, can operate to sensitise any subsequent analysis deploying the kit bag approach, which we report by working through some illustrative examples from our own data. Finally, the conclusion closes our articulation of the method by stressing its value and summarising its key principles.

2.6.3. Gender, bodies and boxing

Women's boxing is gendered and embodied. There is extensive literature within the field of sports analysing dominant narratives of male physical superiority, accompanied by an idealised version of physical capital, muscular superiority and the prioritisation of heterosexual desire and competitive athletic prowess (Hargreaves, 2002; Francombe-Webb and Toffoletti, 2018). (Hetero)sexualised images of female sporting bodies and associated assumptions about females, femininity and sport reinforce suggestions that muscular strength and athletic skill are unfeminine (Cooky and Messner, 2013; Dworkin and Wachs, 2009). However, sport and the embodied experiences of gendered bodies are complex and often contested making the continued exploration of the relational and competing nature of femininities and masculinities important. Continued research into what gendered bodies are capable of, and if and how they access sporting spaces suggests that established principles about gendered bodies can be both reinforced, and resisted, negotiated, and transformed (Maguire and Mansfield, 1998; Markula, 1995).

In this context, women's boxing is inherently a site of historical struggle around gender identity and equality. While there is a long history of women boxing in the UK, with records dating back to the 1720's (Smith, 2014), competitive boxing was banned until 1996, and was not included as an Olympic sport until 2012. Boxing has historically been a highly gendered practice with the raw aggression required often, although not exclusively being seen as contrary to the nurturing stereotype usually attributed to women (Oates, 1987; Hargreaves, 1997; Gammel, 2012). Policies to encourage increased participation in physical activities by women and girls have been developed specifically to address their under-representation. However, historical exclusions based on 19th century medical discourses which defined female

bodies as weak, fragile and in need of protection, still prevail (Velija and Mansfield, 2017). Gendered assumptions concerning 'appropriate' sports for women and girls, coupled with class-based associations, may contribute to barriers to female participation in certain sports that are deemed to be an inappropriate match to established ideas about femininity. Patterns of participation and inclusion can be attributed to inequitable treatment that women have experienced historically and there is a continued assumption due to perceived gendered differences in physiological characteristics, that the experiences of sporting women and men will always be distinct (Hargreaves, 2002; Wellard, 2016).

The history of women's boxing frames the experiences of females in clubs and competitions at all levels of the sport. With changes in policy in the 1990's in both the USA and the UK to allow women to box competitively, and the inclusion of the sport as an Olympic event for women in 2012, there has been a steady rise in participation (Woodward, 2014). This can be seen from the Sports England Active Lives survey which shows an increase of female participation in traditional boxing of more than seventy-three thousand between 2015 and 2020[2] (Activelives, 2022). The rise in female participation in combat sports has often been attributed as being in response to a rise in male violence and harassment (Sugden, 1996), however, health and wellbeing benefits of sports participation and a broadening of the societal acceptance of the complexities of gender roles and sporting femininities (Hargreaves, 1997) has made the previously masculine spaces of the boxing gym more accessible to women. While the Olympics boosted the visibility of the amateur sport, the professional sport received a similar increase in audience during the Covid-19 pandemic. In a mark of this progress, in April 2022, Katie Taylor, along with Amanda Serrano, became the first woman to headline Madison Square Gardens – a key global site in the sport - to a sell-out crowd. As we will show, the kit bag method enables the exploration of the meaning and making of women's bodies in these spaces, by centring the kit as an important tool in eliciting sensorial and situated, embodied experiences of female identities against this history of gender inequality.

2.6.4. Sensory, embodied, and elicitation orientated methods

The sensory has become a recurrent feature of qualitative methods (Pink, 2015; Mason and Davies 2009; Orr and Phoenix 2015). It recognises the multifaceted ways in which we engage with the world and make sense of ourselves and the situations we inhabit. Experience is multi-dimensional, and sensory experiences are often hard to engage through methods that reduce all knowledge to spoken language (Eisner, 2008). Aligned with this, the body too has

[2] Figures before 2015 were collected using a different metric so have not been included and post 2020 show a drop due to the COVID-19 pandemic so have been excluded.

become increasingly central to sociological thinking, although it was for a long-time subordinate to the study of social structures which affected them, such as racism and social inequality (Shilling, 1991; Adelman and Ruggi, 2016; Turner, 2008). Restrictive discourses of difference which focus on the gendered aspects of bodies and embodiment are prevalent due in part to an increase in feminist approaches which encouraged women to 'reclaim' their bodies (Shilling, 1991, p.30). Such narrow dialogue can be avoided by employing a more flexible starting point to researching embodiment which acknowledges the subjective, corporeal, lived experiences of activities in which the body is central, taking into account other social factors such as age, class, race, religion and (dis)ability (Wellard, 2016). Embodied research encompasses "the physiological, the psychological, the sociological, and the temporal and spatial elements" (Wellard, 2016, p2), signalling how the researcher should accommodate a range of disciplinary perspectives. For Woodward (2008), not only are our bodies crucial to our understanding of selfhood, but also to the processes through which people position themselves within the social world. This intertwining of not only the body, but also the things that we use within our social worlds, make such things inseparable from and interconnected to our social world. The kit bag method has been designed to capture this, with elicitation through, and narration of, embodied practice.

Elicitation techniques also have a long history in qualitative methods, as a set of approaches that provoke encounters and reflections beyond the standard interview. MacLean (2018) argues that asking participants to discuss what is meaningful to them without prompts can leave them feeling blank or vulnerable to judgement. For Rose (2007), incorporating photographs and objects into the interview process may facilitate conversation and deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. They "can show us details in a moment that it would take pages of writing to describe" (Rose, 2007, p247). Research has shown that using photographs to elicit conversation may result in a more participatory project that establishes a comfortable research setting for participants, offering them an alternative method for communicating (Mills and Hoeber, 2013). By giving participants the power to determine what deserves consideration and creatively represent their experiences using photography (MacLean, 2018), a participants' ability to articulate experiences when 'words were not enough' can be enhanced (Warren, 2002). However, as Ingold (2010: p3) states, "the road to understanding and empathy lies in what people do with objects".

Lived experience is multi-dimensional and multi-sensory, yet research into lived experience often makes only limited attempt to recreate this multi-sensory experience to elicit authentic responses. Gore *et al.* (2020) use "explicitation interviews" and self-confrontation using video trace to "delve further into the 'granularity' of the [embodied] experience[s]" (p154) of participants. However, their interviews are reflecting upon practice rather than examining embodiment in-practice. By using objects during interviews, it becomes possible to explore

the sensory, embodied experiences that such items elicit and to explore the role that objects play in the negotiation of identity. Woodward (2020) identifies key differences between object interviews and object elicitations, primarily focusing upon the difference found in the active role that the objects take in an object interview. In this way, an object interview may be considered "interactive and co-constructed" (Woodward, 2020, p37), moving beyond theoretical discussions about the objects. By combining Gore *et al's* (2020) explicitation techniques with an extension of Woodwards' object interview concept, a more authentic representation of lived experience can be achieved and insight into objects 'in action' can be explored.

A recurring principle of ethnography is to de-emphasise the verbal and focus on non-verbal cultural practices and in doing so allowing things and artefacts to be centred. The materiality of objects engages participants beyond the visual. By exploring the touching, smelling, tasting, seeing and/or hearing sensorial responses we gain a deeper understanding of both the object in terms of its design and the practices of use and wearing, and also our participants, by way of their multi-sensory engagement. Connecting with objects in their usual environment of use can help participants explain practices that are taken for granted by the study population (Woodward, 2020, p37). Engaging physically and sensorially with objects and 'noticing' characteristics such as textures, colour, stains, marks and smells may help to evoke certain memories of connections to people or places and enhance the sense of entanglement that people have with their everyday objects. This also helps us understand how the body acts and is acted upon when interacting with objects, to further engage with unspoken dimensions of lived experience. The kit bag method looks to connect these elements - embodiment, elicitation, and the material - to provide distinct and valuable insights into the lived experience of daily activities, in our case, women's boxing.

2.6.5. Research context: Ethnography of women's boxing

The overarching project analyses the culture and experiences of women who take part in boxing to explore the impact of participation on their identity. By examining the lived experience of female participants, the research aims to establish how gendered expectations and female identities are negotiated and interconnected with belonging. The project conducted observations in two gyms in the Midlands region of England during 2019-2021. The first phase involved semi-structured interviews conducted with 28 participants – 26 women and 2 men – between the ages of 12 and 53, remotely online due to the COVID-19 restrictions on physical proximity. This paper focuses upon the second phase, when a novel methodological approach - the kit bag method - was developed, in part as a response to the continued restriction on observations due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research project was originally envisioned to be a classic ethnography – conducted by the first author - in which immersive techniques of protracted observations at field sites, participant interviews, and analysis of documentary sources and other artefacts would have been employed. This, however, was curtailed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which closed the training facilities. When the uncertainty about facilities reopening was extended by the UK Government indefinitely, the project team conducted a series of creative workshop sessions to explore ways in which the project could continue without the face-to-face immersive methods usually employed during traditional ethnographic research. As “being there” is one of the most significant aspects of the ethnographers' methodological orientation, proximity through mediated interaction was explored (Hine, 2015). The initial experiments using the kit bag involved asking participants to share a photograph of their bag as an elicitation technique during online interviews. Photographs elicit a different type of information than verbal interviews alone, as images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness (Harper, 2002). The photo-elicitation approach yielded promising results, so a strategy was developed to use the physical kit bag and enclosed kit to explore the entanglement between the material items of a participant’s kit bag and their experiences of feeling and wearing their kit, aiming to bring the participant closer to their experiences of “being there” as a boxer without the availability of training facilities. At this stage, this was still intended as a response to COVID-19 restrictions. By asking participants to interact with the clothing and equipment contained within their kit bag, we intended to explore the sensory, embodied experiences that women boxers have with their kit, and the role objects play in the negotiation of identity. By studying how the body acts and is acted upon when interacting with the boxing kit bag items, we envisaged we could create a novel opportunity to engaged with embodied and lived experience. The ethical, logistical, and practical constraints of recruiting participants remotely led us to focus upon a subset of participants from the earlier interview phase of the project for this new approach. However, COVID-19 restrictions had relaxed by the time the method had been fully developed and ethical approval had been received. We did not want to jettison what we believed could be a valuable method so we continued with the approach, but with the immersive encounters with the kit bags taking place primarily in the boxers usual training facility – the gym or competition space - as this would enhance the contextual aspects of ‘kitting-up’.

In practice, eight women between the ages of 17 and 49 participated in the immersive kit bag study, all in person. These eight encounters were conducted by the first author, between September and November 2021. The total recorded data was 537 minutes with the average length of encounter being 67 minutes. All but one took place in a boxing gym, with the remaining encounter conducted in the participants home at their request. Six of the participants had already been interviewed during Phase one of the project, and two were

recruited from existing ethnographic field sites. Two were recreational boxers, three competed at national level, and two have competed internationally for England, with one winning several national titles. One participant was prevented from competing due to religious and cultural dress limitations[3]. Three of the participants were from London, and the remainder were from across the Midlands region of the UK. All participants were from different boxing clubs, and all trained in mixed gender environments. Four were also qualified England Boxing coaches. Having participants with a diverse range of involvement in the sport helped to identify whether the meanings attached to kit are common across all levels or if they are distinct to either particular levels of involvement or particular individuals. In what follows we detail the procedure followed, before discussing key practical and ethical issues, and reflecting upon the types of data and understandings we were able to gain through its use.

2.6.6. Conducting kit bag method research: the procedure in practice

Our eight participants had all previously participated in the project and were known to the researcher. Each was provided with an instruction sheet in advance of the encounter which detailed the process in full. Participants were asked to pack their bag or bags as they would if they were preparing for a typical event, including all kit items required for that event. Any additional items that they would usually pack, including food, medicines, toiletries and supplements or lucky mascots, were also to be included. This was not an exhaustive list provided to participants, rather a list of things to stimulate the deeper consideration of what would usually be in their bag for the selected event. They were given the choice of exactly what type of event to pack for – either training or competition – to give them agency over the context, rather than being told what to bring. They were advised that the research encounter would work best in person at the usual facility where the activity takes place, as previous research shows that context in which research is conducted is as important as the items discussed during the encounter (Woodward, 2020). Participants were given the option to conduct the meeting remotely, or to use an alternative location if this was more convenient. It was suggested that the participants meet with the researcher at the chosen facility an hour before their regular planned activity was due to begin if possible, as this would be the most practical and convenient for participants, although again this was at their discretion.

Before meeting for the kit bag encounter, participants were asked to provide a photograph of their kit bag as it is stored at home, and a second photograph of where it is usually stored at the usual location of the activity, both in advance of the arranged meeting. A

[3] England Boxing changed the dress code in 2020 to allow women to wear full skin covering including a Hijab. Until then, female boxers were bound by the same dress code as males which did not allow for shorts beyond the knee, or arm coverings.

reminder was sent a week before the planned meeting if photographs had not been received and again, closer to the meeting if required. If photographs were received, they were printed in hardcopy before the meeting. These photographs were used to stimulate a general conversation about the kit, the bag it was kept in, and where the bag was stored at both locations. This served as a valuable icebreaker at the beginning of the encounter and opened further discussion about the various spaces the participants and their kit bags journey through in their routine activities. In practice, on all but three occasions, the requested photographs were not received prior to the encounter, despite several reminders. This given, the same sensitising questions were asked of participants regardless of whether photographs had been provided, but it was noted that this aspect of the encounter was much more interactive with photographs, as participants did not need to describe in as much detail. For completeness of data, participants were contacted again after the encounter to provide a photograph, and all subsequently did so.

Participants were prompted when discussing where their bag was stored at home to consider which items stayed in the bag and which were removed and why. If items were removed, we discussed established routines around repacking the bag. Then the participants were asked about what they were wearing and why they chose those items. Next, they were asked to remove each item from their bag, as if they were preparing for their chosen event. Prompts were prepared to stimulate discussion of the sensory aspects – how items felt on the body or in the hand, if there were any memories or emotions associated with each item, how they had chosen the particular brand they used, and how they decided when items needed to be washed, replaced or upgraded. In practice, there was little need for these prompts as the participants quickly took on the role of narrator, and embellished their physical actions with an explanation of what they were doing and why. The order that items were removed from the bag and then later, the body, was dictated entirely by the participant. An embodied discourse guidance technique (Vermersch, 2009) was employed, with the extent of the questioning being mostly limited to prompts such as “What’s next?” or “How does it feel?” to avoid inducing answers (Gore *et al*, 2020). Participants discussed clothing and kit in terms of sensory experiences including temperature, support, comfort, protection, but also related their experiences of kit to their sense of belonging in the boxing gym and their identity as a boxer. Detailed explanations of particular occasions that required deviation from the routine use of the kit, such as training activities that required a gum shield and/or head guard, and at what point in the session this would be appropriate came forth. Additionally, items in the bag but not used for training such as skull caps used to contain the hair for competition were discussed.

A dynamic dialogue was cocreated between participant and researcher with the researcher acting as a prompt but the participant leading the agenda in terms of eliciting

knowledge. A narrative storytelling element which prioritised the voice of the participant was embedded into the work and reflected the ethnographic principles which were central to the collection of data. Through this, the dialogue was led by the participant as they engaged in the dynamics of storytelling to narrate the self into the process, providing an account that is always 'moving', through the process, in relation to the unpacking and reorganisation of the kitbag materials. Subsequently, the progression of the encounters was different for each participant, preventing any generic linear structuring imposed by the method, as instead the patterns of discussion reflected their own situated ordering of their items, and their thoughts. Once the participant was fully kitted up, they were asked to talk through how they felt and if they felt different to when they first arrived, before they put on their kit. They were then asked how they would repack their bag at the end of a session.

The encounters were video recorded to capture and retain the narrative, physical gestures, and embodied process of dressing and preparing. As the kit bag encounters had been designed in part to replace the long-term observations of embodied aspects of being a female boxer which had been disrupted, being able to look back at video recordings would in some way replicate the iterative nature of observations. Matthews (2021, p89) notes that the more you develop as an immersive researcher, the more you will see. This iterative approach to observation applies not only to the field site participant observation but also to the repetitive watching of the same recorded encounter. Being able to attend to different elements of the 'kitting-up' process with each iteration, focussing at times on what was being done rather than what was being said, ensured the embodied practices and communicative forms were captured for sustained analysis.

Separate audio recordings were also made to prevent the need for participants to wear microphones. Participants were required to take off and put on items of clothing and kit, so a personal microphone may have inhibited movement, and the audio could be compromised. Boxing gyms are also frequently exceptionally noisy places, generating potential for further disruption and interruption to the recording. To mitigate for such events, a separate Dictaphone was placed much closer to the participant than the video recording equipment would allow, resulting in less interference and background noise from other gym users. There were also occasions when the video recording equipment either distracted the participant, or interfered with the participants desire to fully kit up. As such, we remained aware that what was captured by the video may only be a partial representation of normal processes (Knoblauch *et al*, 2014, p444).

Filming in spaces that are not private, and filming people getting dressed or undressed, raises distinct ethical issues. Prior written consent regarding the use of recording equipment was obtained from all participants. It was not possible to obtain such consent from all potential users of the facility, so there was therefore the potential for other gym users to be present in

the recording without their having provided consent. This was of particular concern due to the potential for there to be members present who were under eighteen. As a result, careful consideration was made with each participant as to where the recording should take place to minimise the risk of gym users being filmed inadvertently, and further mitigating this by conducting most encounters before other gym users were present. None of the kit bag encounters took place in the changing rooms, in part because the boxing gyms, being male dominated spaces, did not have female changing rooms at all. However, ethical considerations must be addressed if there is any potential for non-consenting bodies to be in the locality of the encounter (Fine *et al.*, 2003). Permissions were gained from gatekeepers at each facility in advance and stringent protocols of the university ethics process were also adhered to, as social responsibility toward participants and their wider social environment is important to ensure integrity in research practice (Fusco, 2008). Finally, in terms of the core respondents, even though express consent was given for the video and audio transcripts to be used in further research, including subsidiary presentations and printed materials, participants were contacted before any such use to ensure that they were happy with the specific image and where it would be used. In this method, then, ethical practice remained an ongoing and sustained negotiation between the researcher and research participants (Miller, 2012).

It was also necessary to consider and address the process of asking participants to discuss all the contents of their bags in a public space in the knowledge that there may be personal items in their bags, such as feminine hygiene products, that they may not be comfortable discussing where they may be overheard. It is also important to provide the opportunity for participants to unpack their bags themselves, allowing them the possibility to choose which items are removed and discussed. Accommodations should also be made for participants who may be uncomfortable removing layers of clothing or certain aspects of their kit, such as, in this project, protective items like breast protectors. In these cases, participants were given the opportunity to talk through issues associated with these kit items without actually putting them on. Even in these circumstances, this method retains the benefit of the participant interacting with the item in a material way which will still elicit valuable emotive responses.

The analysis process for kit bag encounters has both necessary elements and elements that are considered flexible. We suggest the kit bag method can operate in a range of contexts, as a standalone project, or as part of a broader methodological programme, be that ethnographic, interview-based, or other approach. The flexibility within the analysis process is necessary to allow the approach to integrate into a range of research designs. This given, in our case, the process adopted a defined but iterative approach. In practice, our kit bag analysis involved the careful familiarisation with and organisation of the data. This involves the familiar tasks of producing transcripts of what was said, but also requires annotating video recordings,

and ensuring the inclusion of reference to smells, textures, and the use of space. An important skill is developing an approach to effectively capture the non-textual data in a form appropriate for a more traditional text-based coding, for example, considering a writing format that embraces the pertinent information relating to the slapping sound of a boxing glove as it makes contact, or the clenching of a body part to articulate an experience that frames decisions about kit and its usage. In our case, this was achieved by watching the videos multiple times to analyse the physical signatures which accompanied the participants interacting with their kit and making notes, which could be developed into analytical memos. While this supported more traditional forms of text-based coding and analysis, the original video recordings could be returned to at any time to iteratively re-anchor the accounts in the sonic and visual context of their production. This work was discussed across the research team as analysis was conducted, allowing collective reflection upon the preliminary nature of early codes, as they were developed into broader themes, which were constructed, reviewed and defined in relation to the data. Some of these analytical themes – those most relevant to researchers looking to apply the kit bag method in other contexts – are further articulated in later following section.

While we stress that the analytical approach of kit bag methods can be flexible for different research designs, there remains a set of sensitising mandates that we consider core to the use of this method. First, analysis should be inductive and interpretative, building out of the narratives and embodied practices of the respondents' dialogue in concert with their own materials. Although the kit bag method endeavours to expose the embodied experiences of the participants, it must be acknowledged that by its very nature as qualitative research it is interpretative (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Analysis must also remain multisensory, retaining a focus upon smells, sounds, textures, and tastes, any sensory articulation or experience that enlivens the encounter. Applications of kit bag methods that retreat into analysis of the spoken interactions alone will miss the richness that makes the approach valuable. Finally, analysis should also remain focused upon the encounter as a process, not a snapshot in time. The kit bag encounter is an activity, a practice, with its own temporality. Photos of kit bags at home provide a pre and post anchoring of the encounter, but the unpacking and dressing are themselves chronological and processual. The analysis process needs to be attentive to this ordering, while also recognising that this need not be linear. The encounter itself is a site of reflection and deviation, that can introduce a circuitousness or circulatory, so the analyst must continue to deal with the tension of a potential linearity to the unpacking and dressing, against a free-flowing and reflexive narrative.

We continue our explication of the analytical approach for the kit bag method in our next section, that uses illustrative extracts from our data to articulate key themes that can both shape applications of the approach in other settings, and are valuable insights within our own

context, as way of detailing an appropriate analytical sensibility for working the data into findings, and stretching our understandings of embodied and material practices in new directions.

2.6.7. Key themes and an analytical sensibility for the kit bag method

Our use of the kit bag method proved useful and distinctive for multiple reasons. These include exposing the importance of clothing and equipment in negotiating identity, how clothing and equipment help participants narrate into and out of character, and how including the material items within the encounter helped to elicit participants' sensory experiences within their narrative. The mobility and portability of these items and the bag in which they were contained highlighted how such items can facilitate instrumental social exchanges when moving between social spaces, and can also represent an enactment of performance of character both inside and outside the gym. By incorporating the material items into the process and examining how they are used in situ also enabled the exploration of entanglements between the material items of a boxer's kit bag and the gendered culture of boxing. This centring of clothing and equipment that are essential to the practices of participants furthered our understanding of how the body acts and is acted upon when interacting with the items. We now discuss four key themes arising from our analysis.

Objects and identity

The first defining aspect of the kit bag method is that direct engagement with the kit enabled participants to articulate the importance of the material items to their cultural identity, and how these feature in their process of achieving a sense of cultural belonging (Gill, 2007, Delamont and Stephens, 2021). Such cultural identities are not an intrinsic property of individuals, but instead are relational and both develop and are maintained in relation to cultural groups and the artefacts that represent them (Heersmink, 2023). When interacting with their existing kit items, participants commented on their experiences as a novice boxer - with cheap, readily available high street items of kit that they initially thought represented how a boxer should look - to a more accomplished boxer with functional kit that provided the physical support and protection that was not provided by the entry level kit. Mia, a thirty-year-old competitive boxer and qualified coach, commented:

> I had the same [boots] that most boxers have when they start, which is the short Lonsdale ones. The black ones. I had them when I first started and I literally burned a hole in the bottoms from pivoting and so then I went to the Nike, Hyper K.Os and

> they were blue and red. Which I liked, because it's like no matter what corner you were in, you'd fit.

Here Mia articulates her sense of progression within boxing culture through the use of familiar material items. As confidence builds of her own capabilities and knowledge of the sport, identified by the reference to the red and blue corners of the competitive arena, she adapts the equipment used to suit their participation level and associated material needs. These boots, then, acted as both a marker of status and experience, and a practical adaption to the physical setting.

A sense of belonging also developed as participants became more confident in how to use the kit which resulted in an increase in social capital (Ahn and Davis, 2020). Hand protection in particular represented a transition from novice to experienced boxer. Participants described initially feeling intimidated by seeing others in the gym using hand wraps or bandages when they themselves were using high street gel inner gloves or the shorter hand wraps, which offer little or no support to the hand joints or wrist. Whilst putting on her hand wraps, Seema, a thirty-one-year-old amateur boxer, commented:

> [I] remember the first time I saw people tying their hands thinking that I did feel a little bit intimidated by it, and it felt a little bit overwhelming, especially the 4.5 metre wraps, they're so long you just think 'Where do I start…'.

Exploring lived experience using everyday items of kit invokes conversations about fit, about how the people and the objects they bring are aligned or mis-aligned with the expectations of the space, and how kit is used to mediate this. Participants had a strong sense of identity linked to their training clothes outside of the specific objects, such as the hand wraps, gloves, and boots required for boxing training. Their lack of respect for other women who they considered had dressed inappropriately - “as sexily as possible” or “dolled up” - was clearly articulated as they spoke disparagingly about “bougie boxing gyms… where… everyone's in LuLu's”, referring to Lululemon Athletica, a premium athleisure wear brand. This was presented in contrast, firstly, with their own training facilities where “we just wear whatever” and “feel comfortable being androgynous”, and secondly, with their own alternate identity as presented outside of the boxing gym. Rosa, a twenty-year-old elite boxer who was attending a boxing show later on the day of the kit-bag encounter stated, “I'm going to have hair curled, lashes, that's going to be me later”. This display of traditional feminine standards was not considered problematic, but it did not belong in the boxing gym (Krane and Symons, 2014).

Identity performances are bound to the objects used in their display and negotiation. These objects - such as the long hand wraps - can set standards by which users are judged, mark status within a group (Ahn and Davis, 2020), and intensify the experience for those using, or watching others use them in practice. Kit bag methods provide insights into these very processes, through, as we discuss in the next section, analysing transitions in and out the kit, and in and out of character.

Narrating transitions in and out of character

Another distinctive feature of the kit bag method is the direct narration of moments of transition - in and out of character - as articulated through the connections between the body, space, and the material adornments of clothing, chemicals, and equipment. In these moments of transition, we can analyse the situated assembly of new performances as they are being entered into, or as Goffman (1959) would say, in movements between front and back regions. The kit bag method allows this to be both narrated, and embodied, as participants talk through these transformatory moments. Here we study language-in-use - narrative accounts that accomplish social actions - in relation to the material affordances of the kitbag, to enact and transition through identities (Atkinson, 2015). In our boxing case, the encounters elicited responses indicating that there were physiological changes taking place as they transitioned towards their boxer identity. When items usually only worn for sparring and competing, such as the gum shield and headguard were put on, many participants described surprise at feeling a change in their heart rate, breathing, and body temperature as the final pieces were worn, even though they were not about to spar or fight. Rosa exclaimed “if you had a heart rate monitor right now, I can feel like my heart’s faster… your bodies like, ''I recognize this, I think someone’s gonna punch me in the face now’”. Attributing these physiological changes to the application of the kit, not the proximity to the fight, exemplifies the value of this elicitation method for demonstrating how kitting up is not only an echo of a previous boxing identity, but is actively bringing that identity and the associated embodied practices into being.

During the encounters, participants described how the kit became experienced less as material objects and more as an extension of their embodied selves. Mia, as she transitioned towards her boxer identity and talking about the headguard, said:

> I feel it when I put it on, and then I don't feel it. It's like, it becomes a part of me. So it's like, there's this awareness of it. And then it's like, right now this is like basically an extension of your head.

These experiences occur in real time during the kit bag encounter. Mia exclaimed, once fully kitted up, “Now I feel like a boxer, whereas before, it’s almost like you’re kind of in Clark

Kent mode or something". Sammy, a twenty-three-year-old retired competitive boxer and qualified coach, when asked how this fully kitted up version of themselves felt different to the one at the start of the encounter, said "you're ready, you're switched on, it's dead serious". These participants are describing a real time change in mental state, asserting that they felt motivated, intentional, purposeful and powerful once they were fully kitted up. They were also adorning themselves with the props to support their transitioning into a particular type of identity performance, as boxer, as competitive, as skilled, but also as a learner, as someone committed to the moral codes of the boxing gym, and as someone who was there to work hard. The kit bag could then also be central to transitioning back to a non-boxing performance of feminine identity. However, in our study, the lack of physical space to change within this male dominated environment meant participants typically carried elements of their boxing persona into other spaces, with only limited mitigation. Rosa told us, "I have gone to [supermarket chain] Tesco before in my chest guard, with sweaty hair in a bun", Seema explained, "as soon as I've finished, I'll put the hat on... because I'm all sweaty and if it's a little bit cold outside, I want to just keep my head warm." These processes of transitioning out of character are highly mediated by the space itself, and are subsequently spatially layered with the removal of some adornments - gloves and wraps - in the gym, but others - boxing vests and shorts, sometimes even protective gear - remaining in place until the privacy of the home. The kit bag, then, facilitates transition across multiple spaces.

During this transition in and out of being a boxer, participants were encouraged to narrate how each item of kit felt, how and why they chose it, and matters of hygiene. This naturally led to sensorial descriptions, as we discuss in the next section.

Sensory and embodied experiences

The kit bag method is inherently multi-sensory. It engages the relationship between the body and the kit, in how it looks and how it is talked about, but also how it feels, how it smells, how it sounds, how it sits on the body. Boxing gyms are deeply sensorial spaces, from the clash of pads, the whir of the skipping rope, and the intense smell of sweat and leather as you enter the room (Wacquant, 2004). Kit bag methods capture these experiences through active engagement with the material items and their role within producing or protecting boxers from these dense sensorial settings. Conducting kit bag encounters in these sensorial spaces and actively engaging the participants in 'noticing' everyday objects that are never usually considered in a sensory way offers an opportunity to connect to the materiality of the object. Our approach builds upon Pink's (2015) work on sensory ethnography by focussing the participants attention, as well as the researchers', to more sensory aspects of their interactions with their everyday items, and to be attentive to stains, marks and smells that may evoke memories of connections to people, places or events (Woodward, 2020).

Many of the sensory aspects of these interactions may have been lost without this material interaction during the encounter. There were comments regarding the hygiene or lack thereof of the hand wraps which were described as they were being put on as “still moist” from a previous training session. Utterances like this are examples of the noticing of the senses that the kit bag method invokes, that lead to articulations of the participants' embodied experience in the setting. Similar conversations about how and when the items were washed or replaced often led to confessions regarding the wraps only being washed when it was “not socially acceptable to stink this bad”. Rosa pointed out that the cracks in her white sparring gloves had “blood and stuff” in them as she never wiped them. This embodied detail was elicited by the physical interaction with the sparring glove towards the end of the encounter whilst discussing her relationship with bodily fluids, both her own and those of others. She recalled intentionally blowing her nose on a sparring partner’s white t-shirt as she was angry that “they'd punched me after a bell and that was what made my nose bleed”. This was in contrast to her relationship with the same bodily fluids outside the gym, explaining “I've got nieces and nephews, and if they've got like snot, or a bogey or something I'm like, can't do it, no”. Rosa acknowledged that the performance of her boxer self required a different level of tolerance for the sharing of bodily fluids than that of her non-boxer persona.

Rosa also detailed how the sound of the gloves changes when they are warm. The interactive nature of the kit bag encounter facilitated a shared experience between Rosa and the researcher which focussed our auditory attention on the embodied action of hitting an object with cold, hard gloves versus warm, soft gloves.

> I need to warm them up for them to sound nice…when you first put them on, if I hit a bag [Rosa walks over to bag and throws a big right hook], they sound alright whereas when you've got them warmed up a bit, and the leathers gone warm, and they've gone a bit softer, when you do pads, they sound a lot better

The benefits of being in the boxing gym interacting materially with the kit during the encounter allowed Rosa to demonstrate the difference in sound when the glove was cold, versus when it was warm, by hitting a bag, inviting the researcher to listen to the sensorial experience being described. Conducting the kit bag encounters in the same physical space that the material items are usually interacted with allows for conversations to emerge that are relevant to that environment. However, Seema, whose encounter took place in her own home, away from the usual environment of active engagement with her kit, reported an awareness of an internal mechanism linked to the adornment of her headguard and gumshield, by saying “I'm surprised by what I'm feeling right now. I've got this sort of energy in me, where I feel ready to go and spar.” Although the context may contribute to the participants account of their

lived experience, evidently the connections and physical responses were the same regardless of context in this instance. This internal mechanism of senses, stimulated by the kit itself rather than the environment, highlighted the usefulness in this method of examining the mobility of items and their relevance to identity and meaning outside of the usual environment of active use. Moving the kit from its natural place of purposeful use did not diminish the embodied experience. By using a method which examines not just the material items contained within the bag in use, but also how these items are transported and stored, allows mobilities and portability to be examined, enriching the material exploration beyond the research setting.

Mobility and Portability

Space can be conceptualised as constructed out of social relations and as such should be considered as inseparable from them. The dynamic nature of social relations impacts the dynamic nature of space, which is tightly bound to time (Massey, 2011). The research field has often been perceived as a bounded space with the concept of mobility expressing a metaphoric bursting out of such bounded spaces (Coleman and Collins, 2020). By exploring the spaces that the participants kit bag inhabits both at the participants home, in the gym, and during the journey to and from these places, we can analyse beyond these bounded field sites and see how the bag, its contents and the journey it takes can serve as an original and unique site for social analysis with rich analytic potential.

There was a strong sense with many of the participants that the visibility of their kit at home served as a daily reminder of the centrality of boxing to their identity. Amy, a forty-nine-year-old recreational boxer and qualified coach when talking about her wraps said:

> (I) just hang them up, in my bedroom. And that's a nice reminder actually, that they're next to my bed…it's just nice to wake up and see wraps and my bag…boxing is what just gives me the most joy in life at the moment.

This visual stimulus in the participants bedroom gave her meaning and purpose and connected her to the activity whilst away from the gym.

The bag in transit also became a literal vehicle for expression of identity and a non-verbal communication tool which challenged gendered assumptions. Lisa, a thirty-eight-year-old competitive boxer explained “you carry your head guard strapped on your bag…so people will know that that's why I've got a black eye”. This symbolic gesture pointed to the fact that a female with a black eye would usually be considered a victim of domestic violence and the headguard deflected any questions that might be otherwise be asked of a woman in such circumstances. Ruby, a thirty-nine-year-old coach and retired boxer mentioned the visible headguard being used by way of explanation for leaving work:

> my head guard is here attached to my bag…and at five o'clock I'm going. I used to say to people, “boxing is my kids”… you'd let people leave the office if they said I have to pick my kids up from school…they'd understand that that's your boundary…boxing is my children. I don't have children, but I do have boxing. I felt that that wasn't really understood or respected.

The material object was used here both as an expression of identity and as justification for a need to move from one space to the next – transition from workspace to gym. The gendered boundary work that was being performed requires attention. The flexibility of the work/home boundary was seen by the participant as established for women with children but had to be negotiated and demarcated by her through the visibility of her boxing kit. Challenging current conceptualisations of space and place, such as the historically masculine space of the boxing gym requires us to challenge dominant forms of gender definitions and gender relations (Massey, 2011: p2).

Physical settings come into being with idealised users in mind. In boxing, this has historically been men, to the marginalisation of women. Precisely where the kit bag was kept at the gym highlighted key aspects of gendered disparity in space availability, with Rosa explaining “everyone kind of had a space at the gym, so the boys had lockers, but I could never have a locker because all the boys kind of got changed where the lockers were”. The kit bag here, as a portal container, reveals to how participants prepared for and adjusted to the expectations of the space. The boxing gym, as a traditionally male coded space, is not as easily aligned with the needs and preferences of female boxers as it is for men. The kit bag formed part of our participants strategy for managing this, to allow them to bring with them the tools and props to engage in the repair work that modified the space and the practices it affords to their own needs and preferences, but also move their preparation spaces around the gym in response to the male dominance of space and lockers. Female boxers would need to bring with them the items that allowed them to adapt to any inadequate changing facilities, unsuitable training or protective equipment designed for men, or other aspects of the masculinised space, and these items would be transported within the kit bag. Additional training kit, female hygiene products, medicines, and female safety gear, were all brought to the gym, and taken back home after. To invoke Mary Douglas (1966 [2003]), the kit bag supported moving matter in and out of place, in an attempt reframe the gender scripting of the boxing environment for the duration of their training session. The kitbag then, as portable container, can be understood as a sorting device, that is active in drawing and disrupting boundaries and categorisations, here of gender and sport (Bauer 2020), as the very mobility of the kit bag supported identity performances in spaces developed around other – here

masculine – performances of identity. This given, the kit bag encounters showed that these strategies do not fully compensate for the gendering of space. As Rosa – who had to change away from the lockers – explained, despite being one of the most decorated boxers participating in the research, she never felt like her needs as a female were catered for at her gym. The mobility of the kitbag and its contents in this instance could challenge boundaries, but not irradicate them.

2.6.8. Conclusion

The kit bag method described in this article examines how employing material objects as tools of elicitation can encourage a more sensory exploration of participants' entanglements with their everyday items (Rose 2007). By providing an opportunity for individuals to notice the sensory aspects of their interactions with clothing and equipment and narrate their experiences, a deeper understanding of the importance of material items to identity and belonging can be explored (Atkinson, 2017). By focusing upon what participants bring in and out of spaces, how they bring them, and why, we can gain an understanding of what participants value, what they feel challenged by, and how they work to align the practices and performances with the expectations they anticipate within a specific space (Bauer, 2020). By using data from the research on women boxers we explore how clothing and equipment act as active agents in the negotiation of identity and how they help participants narrate their transitions in and out of character (Delamont and Stephens, 2021). We also use data examples from our project to explore the sensory experiences of participants in concert with their everyday objects and consider how these objects can expose gender disparities in shared spaces (Maguire and Mansfield, 1998). We would encourage the use of everyday material items as elicitation tools both as a standalone method and as an addition to ethnographic field observations. By encouraging a focus on our participants sensory experiences, a richer exploration of, and further insight into lived experiences can be developed.

We suggest this method can be used as a framework for research in any field where there are material items moved in and out of recurrent spaces. This study was focussed on the kit of female boxers in a training environment, but it could equally be extended to examine the kit and associated items in the competitive field or in other sports due to the frequent need for specific kit items for many sports and the embodied entanglement with kit and the body. There are many occupations which require very specific items which are central to the role or the environment where the job takes place, be that paramedic, vet, construction worker, chef, teacher and lab technician. The kit bag method could be effectively employed to explicate the relationship between the individual and their work specific items to develop an understanding

of identity and belonging associated with their role through the material items that they use. As with this research project, witnessing participants as they interact with their job specific kit, in the environment where it is used, could help to explore space and mobility, how the kit helps participants narrate into and out of character and further expand on the sensory experiences of sight, sound and smell.

This method has limitations in particular regards to the need for detailed ethical consideration. It is highly likely that other individuals will be in the vicinity when participants are actively engaging with their 'kit' in the natural environment for that activity. If recording equipment is being used to allow for iterative analysis of the data, as is recommended, the potential for unauthorised recordings of non-participants is evident. Certain environments will remain inaccessible due to safety issues or access constraints so kit bag encounters may have to take place away from the natural environment of engagement, limiting elicitation due to environmental specific factors and necessitating a negotiated ethics approach.

To conclude, the kit bag method is a novel embodied sensorial elicitation method. It takes seriously the kit bag as a portable container used to support the adornment and preparation of the body and aligned practices for specific settings. What is put in, and taken out, of the kitbag is formative of social relations and their contestation. By conducting real time observations of the use and application of the clothing and equipment contained within a boxer's kit bag we explored how these material objects contribute to the formation of identity and a sense of belonging, and made apparent underlying assumptions and taken-for-granted aspects of social experience. It connected our research to the embodied and sensorial nature of boxing through a different pathway to traditional ethnography, that, we suggest, provided additional value through the broadly structured and comparative encounters with multiple participants, and the demands of the method to elicit certain types of narrative articulation about the body, the objects, and the associated sense-making practices. The method facilitated analysis of the narration in and out of character, and the use and movement through spaces enabled by the kitbag, and the affordances it offered in terms of negotiating social relations. The method demands a considered and iterative interpretative analytical strategy, but one that is sufficiently flexible to be applied in different settings and under different research designs. The kit bag method proved its value to us in better understanding women's gendered experiences of boxing, and will, we hope, prove its value to others seeking deeper understandings of embodied experience across a range of social settings and empirical contexts.

Chapter 3 – Material Encounters: Boxing Gear and the Making of a Fighter

3.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on the methodological and epistemological foundations established in the previous chapter, where the contents of the boxers' kit bags were used not only as elicitation tools but also as generative sites of meaning. Engaging with boxers through their embodied interactions with the equipment they use in training and competition proved to be more than a method of prompting memory or conversation. Through analysis, it became clear that these material engagements offered a powerful lens for exploring identity formation as something enacted through, and in relation to, material things. Whereas the previous chapter explored boxers lived, sensory engagements with equipment as a form of embodied materiality, this chapter shifts focus to material culture, examining the shared social, symbolic, and historical meanings that objects, clothing, and spaces carry within boxing's gendered environment. In this chapter there is firstly an overview of how women's bodies have historically been discussed in sporting literature to provide a background to the following section which discusses embodiment and the lived experience of women in the sporting context. There is then a section positioning the gendered disciplined body within material culture followed by a section on identity, gender and symbolic capital in boxing. Finally, the second paper of this thesis, discussing the use of material culture as a lens of analysis to explore identity formation in women's boxing is introduced and embedded.

3.2 Women, Bodies and Sport

From corsets and bloomers to running shoes and boxing gloves, the material world of sport has both reflected and shaped the cultural meanings attached to gender. The history of women's participation in sport is not simply a story of access or prohibition, but one of material negotiation on what bodies could wear, where they could move, and how they could appear in public. Early sociological and historical analyses show that women's engagement with sport has always been mediated through the things that make sport possible such as clothing, equipment, facilities and the social meanings embedded within them (Hargreaves, 2002; Vertinsky, 1994). These material conditions have both enabled and constrained women's sporting practice, acting as visible and tactile expressions of gender ideology. Women's participation in sport has long been recognised as reflecting broader struggles over gender, power, and social order. Early sociological and historical accounts positioned sport as a key institution in the formation of modern Western masculinity. Organised sport developed in the

nineteenth century alongside industrialisation and imperialism, drawing on militaristic ideals of discipline, competition, and control (Hargreaves, 2002). Physical strength and aggression were celebrated as civic virtues, aligned with national and moral superiority. As such, sport became a key site for the construction of national, racial, and gender hierarchies. Within this cultural framework, women's participation in vigorous physical activity was often viewed as inappropriate or threatening to prevailing notions of femininity (Vertinsky, 1994). The female body was perceived as delicate, reproductive and morally vulnerable, with a need to be protected from competition through medical necessity and social duty (Hall, 1996).

3.2.1 Organised Sport and Material Culture

The emergence of organised sport in the late nineteenth century was marked by the industrial production of sportswear and equipment, embedding gender distinctions in the material culture of athleticism. While men's sporting attire and apparatus were designed for and emphasised freedom of movement, strength, and performance, women's clothing was designed around, modesty, restraint and aesthetics (Hargreaves, 1997; Cahn, 2015). Corseted clothing, long skirts and heeled boots not only restricted movement, but symbolised Victorian notions of femininity constructing the female body as ornamental, fragile and inactive. Material culture subsequently became a disciplinary force and a mechanism through which gender norms were inscribed onto bodies, shaping not just what women could do, but what they could be seen to do. Medical and scientific discourses of the period reinforced these material constraints. Women were discouraged from participating in physically demanding sports on the grounds that such activity threatened their reproductive health and moral purity (Hall, 1996). In this sense, both the body and the material environment worked together to regulate behaviour. Sport functioned as an extension of broader society where ideas about the appropriate use and appearance of female bodies were continuously rehearsed and surveilled (Vertinsky, 1994). Gendered boundaries were reinforced by educational and medical institutions that equated athleticism with moral virtue in men but with deviance or pathology in women (Lenskyj, 1986). Consequently, the female athlete was often represented as an anomaly, either unfeminine or sexually suspect, which is a narrative that to some extent still persists (Krane *et al*., 2004; Mennesson, 2000).

The material conditions of women's sport continued to reflect wider structures of gender inequality throughout the twentieth century. Institutional control over facilities, equipment, and sponsorship reinforced gender hierarchies, ensuring that men's sport remained the economic and cultural centre of athletic life and that women and women's sport remained peripheral (Hargreaves, 2000; Scraton and Flintoff, 2002). Material inequalities extended to representation with sports media which foregrounded women's appearance and attire over

their performance, producing a commodified visibility that again contributed to the maintenance of masculine dominance (Kane *et al.*, 2013). As a result, material culture both enabled participation and reinforced gender hierarchy, offering women participation and visibility, but under terms that reaffirmed traditional gender order. The boxing gym provides an example of how material culture enacts and reproduces these hierarchies. It is not simply a physical space but an assemblage of material objects that encode specific bodily dispositions and values (Woodward and Greasley, 2017). Artefacts such as punchbags, gloves, mirrors, rings, and ropes are saturated with masculine histories of endurance, aggression and physical toughness (Wacquant, 2004). When women enter such environments, they engage with objects, that carry the cultural residue of these meanings. By interacting with these material items, a woman is confronting the tension between cultural inscription and personal experience as the kit both enables her participation and marks her as different.

Feminist scholars suggest that material culture does more than simply reflect identity, it actively participates in shaping it (Miller, 2008; Woodward, 2007). Clothing and other bodily adornments mediate between body and culture, enabling the body to be read within social frameworks of gender. Through how we dress, gender becomes visible, recognisable, and therefore socially meaningful. (Entwistle, 2000). Sporting uniforms and equipment extend this principle by regulating the body's movement, visibility, and legitimacy. A woman wearing equipment designed for men, such as oversized gloves or male groin guard may be restricted in their movement and performance, yet gendered alternatives risk being dismissed as decorative or less authentic (Krane *et al.*, 2004; Mennesson, 2000). Material culture therefore plays an active role in constructing the boundaries of authenticity within sport.

3.2.2 Feminist Research and Material Culture

During the late twentieth century feminist research drew on critical social theory to interrogate how power operates through these embodied and material practices. Foucault's (1977) analysis of discipline and surveillance offered a framework for understanding how sporting institutions produce docile yet productive bodies through regimented training, dress codes, and spatial organisation (Shogan,1999; Markula, 2003). The disciplined sporting body, while appearing free and autonomous, is shaped by normative regimes that define what counts as health, strength and femininity (Paloian, 2012). A broader body of feminist scholarship has developed rich accounts of embodied regulation and self-making within sport and fitness cultures. Authors such as Sassatelli (2010), Smith Maguire (2007), and Mansfield (2005:2011) have shown how bodily discipline, and material practices intersect to shape gendered subjectivities, emphasising that athletic embodiment is always intertwined with cultural norms and expectations. In parallel, Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity

redefined gender as repeated series of acts that materialise social norms. Feminist sport literature has applied Butler's insights to demonstrate how sporting femininities and masculinities are actively produced, policed, and contested through everyday bodily practices revealing the performative negotiations required of women in male-dominated sports (Caudwell, 2003). Sport, with its repetitive drills, ritualised gestures and codified aesthetics makes these acts particularly visible. The boxing gym exemplifies this tension. To participate in boxing requires the embodiment of toughness and aggression, traits normally associated with men and therefore coded as masculine, but women must also perform femininity to remain socially acceptable (Halbert, 1997; Mennesson, 2000; Channon and Matthews, 2018).

More recent research has extended these debates by foregrounding material culture as a site where emotion, embodiment and power intersect (Shilling, 2008; Allen-Collinson, 2009; Thorpe *et al,* 2017). Equipment is not a neutral tool but rather it is felt, modified and cared for, becoming integrated into bodily practice. Gloves soften and shape to the hand and wraps and headguards absorb sweat and scent. Such relationships illustrate how the boundary between body and object is porous. Material culture is incorporated into bodily experience and the body becomes materialised through these interactions. It is important to note that these relationships are gendered. Women often adapt or personalise equipment to assert identity and agency within environments that otherwise demand conformity (Thorpe *et al., 2017)*. Decorations, customised colours or symbolic accessories can signal individuality and subtly challenge dominant norms. These small acts of material self-expression are political gestures, asserting ownership of the sporting identity and belonging in the field. In the context of boxing, the intimacy between the body and equipment intensifies this process. Unlike many team sports, boxing relies heavily on personal equipment such as gloves, wraps, and gum shields which are rarely if ever shared between athletes. Such artefacts become extensions of the body, shaping both physical capability and symbolic identity (van Ingen, 2011). For women, these items often carry contradictory meanings, signifying entry into a masculine domain while simultaneously marking difference through ill-fitting design or colour with gendered association. Such perspectives move beyond discourse to consider how gender is felt, enacted, and materialised in everyday sporting practice. These material dimensions of sport are now recognised as central to how gendered subjectivities are produced and experienced (Thorpe *et al.*, 2017).

3.2.3 Risk Taking and Material Culture

The relationship between women, boxing, and material culture is not only about representation or performance, but also about the negotiation of risk and emotion that defines combat sport. As Lyng (1990) argues in his theory of edgework, voluntary risk-taking involves

a delicate balance between control and chaos, danger and mastery. Boxing is a structured arena in which this negotiation is ritualised through material artefacts. Gloves, headguards, and gumshields are not simply protective, they are technologies of moral regulation that transform acts of violence into legitimate sporting conduct. Katz's (1988) exploration of the emotional and sensory thrill of transgression which he referred to as the seductions of crime, offers a parallel insight. Boxing domesticates the thrill through codified, material practices. The ropes of the boxing ring, the presence of a referee, and the tactile resistance of the glove collectively frame violence as an acceptable spectacle. For women, this is doubly significant. Their participation transgresses gendered norms that equate aggression and risk with masculinity. However, the material apparatus that makes participation possible such as shorter rounds, lighter gloves, or mandated headguards, also reinscribes gendered assumptions of fragility and care (van Ingen, 2011). These artefacts therefore both enable and restrict agency. The glove becomes a symbol of empowerment and containment, the headguard a marker of progress and paternalism. Material culture here functions as both technology of inclusion and of differentiation, encoding assumptions about whose bodies require protection and whose do not. Material culture in boxing mediates the relationship between body, risk, and social order. It transforms potentially transgressive acts into legitimate performances of skill while simultaneously embedding gendered hierarchies of safety and legitimacy. For many women boxers, the negotiation between risk and regulation is not a contradiction but a defining feature of their experience. It is a means of claiming agency within a constrained framework. These embodied negotiations reveal how material objects are central to the production and policing of gendered boundaries in sport.

The study of women, bodies, and sport has evolved from descriptive accounts documenting exclusion to analysing the material, affective and spatial processes through which gender is produced and reproduced. Feminist scholars have shown that sport is not simply a backdrop for gender politics but a cultural technology that shapes how bodies are imagined, trained and adorned (Pavlidis and Fullagar, 2012; Thorpe *et al.*, 2017). The lens of material culture makes visible the ways in which gender is constructed through the everyday entanglement of people, objects and practices. The interplay between the social meaning of objects and the embodied experiences of those who use them underpins the following section.

3.3 Embodiment, Gender and the Lived Experience of Boxing

While feminist scholars have examined how sport's material cultures shape gendered identities, phenomenology offers a way to understand how these objects are lived and experienced through the body. Merleau-Ponty's (1962) established the notion of the lived body which is a body that perceives and knows the world not as a detached observer but as a body

actively engaged in the world. He proposed that perception is inherently embodied, as tools and objects become extensions of our bodily schema, allowing us to act in the world seamlessly, providing a powerful framework for exploring how material culture in sport becomes part of the athlete's corporeal experience. His theories allow for an understanding of athletic practice not as a mechanical application of skill but as a sensuous, pre-reflective, and relational engagement between body, space, and material environment (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2007).

In boxing, the equipment such as gloves, hand wraps, and boots, are not merely accessories but rather integral components of the boxer's bodily knowledge. Over time, they shape the body's sense of where and how it moves in space. The glove mediates the tactile feedback of each punch, whilst the bandage binding the wrist creates a sensation of unity between hand and fist. Through repetition, these objects become incorporated into the athlete's bodily awareness. The boxer does not think about the glove as separate, rather it becomes an extension of their body and of their capacity to act (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). However, this incorporation is socially mediated. Women's bodily comportment is shaped by cultural norms that teach caution and self-restraint, leading to a more tentative engagement with the material world (Young, 1980; Grosz, 1994). With its saturation of masculine artefacts and histories, the boxing gym intensifies this tension. For women, the required equipment can simultaneously empower and alienate as they serve as both symbols of participation yet reminders of exclusion. The objects carry not only utility but also ideology.

Merleau-Ponty's theory of intercorporeality, or the acceptance that individuals belong to a shared and common world, is built on the foundation of the relationship of action and perception. He posits that perception is an embodied experience which occurs in-the-world rather than the mind (Crossley, 1995). The perceiver and that which is perceived are interdependent and relational. Merleau-Ponty uses the term "flesh" to represent the body as both a perceiving subject which sees and touches and perceived object which is seen and touched. By further positioning perception as based in acquired behaviour, how we perceive is conceived not a passive process, but as active and constructed from our cultural, and behavioural schemas (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In boxing, this relationality operates not only between people but between people and things. The rhythmic exchange between a boxer and a punchbag, or the sensory feedback from canvas beneath the feet, creates a dialogue between body and material environment. This form of embodied communication transcends language (Allen-Collinson, 2011). The meanings of these relationships are shaped by histories of gendered exclusion and belonging.

Material culture therefore functions as both a medium of embodiment and a repository of cultural memory. Objects carry the sediment of past use and social value (Miller, 2008; Woodward, 2007). The worn gloves or sweat-stained wraps tell stories of labour, endurance,

and identity. For women boxers, engaging with these artefacts may evoke a sense of lineage and legitimacy, connecting them to the sport's broader history while simultaneously challenging its masculine dominance. However, the gendered politics inherent in the feminisation of sport through commercial marketing often redefines equipment and apparel as lifestyle commodities, emphasising aesthetics over function (Thorpe, 2017). By marketing sporting apparel in pink or pastel tones in an attempt at inclusion, it paradoxically reinforces difference. However, athletes often appropriate and repurpose material culture by modifying and personalising uniforms allowing them to inscribe identity onto objects in a ritual of self-definition. Through these everyday interactions, women construct embodied narratives of belonging and resistance.

Phenomenology has been particularly influential in feminist scholarship due to its emphasis on lived experience. However, although Merleau-Ponty's theories have been heavily drawn on by such scholars, they have also been heavily critiqued due to his limited attention to social difference. Although addressing the universality of 'being-in-the-world', his theories have the potential to erase or ignore the ways in which race, gender, sexuality and class mediate bodily experience (Blodgett *et al.,* 2017). Feminist scholars have extended Merleau-Ponty's work revealing how such social structures shape and mediate bodily experience (Young, 1980; de Beauvoir, 1989; Grosz, 1994). Women's bodily gestures, postures and movements, collectively known as comportment, are culturally produced. Women learn to limit their physicality, moving with self-conscious restraint due to social expectations of femininity. The gendered body can then be seen, both as a biological entity, but also as a product of learned relations between self, space and possibility (Young, 1980). Equipment, clothing, and space mediate inclusion and exclusion, visibility and legitimacy acting as active participants in the social production of gender. They are the tangible means through which power is felt, negotiated, and sometimes resisted. Material culture is not external to embodiment but constitutive of it. The body knows itself through things (Merleau-Ponty, 1962)

3.4 Material Culture, Gender and the Disciplined Body

Boxing is not simply permitted violence, but a symbolic and highly regulated performance of physical confrontation which occupies a distinctive space between violence and order. Its legitimacy as a sport hinges not on the absence of violence but on the ritualised, codified containment of it. Central to this containment is the way material culture, in particular the boxer's kit, functions as a set of disciplinary tools that govern the body and contain violence within agreed boundaries. The material objects of a boxer's kit alongside the broader material culture, such as weight categories, timed rounds and referees, regulate not only the physical

interaction between the fighters, but also the aesthetic and cultural meaning of the sport. Gloves for example, do not only protect the hands of the wearer and the face and body of the opponent from serious injury, but are symbolic of the civilised nature of boxing, marking a clear distinction from unsanctioned street violence. They channel the physical force of a punch in a way that is measurable, contained, and subject to rules, therefore making the violence acceptable within the sporting context within which it is performed (Sheard, 1997).The material items of the boxers kit also functions to construct and reinforce a boxer's identity as a disciplined athlete rather than a deviant or criminal actor. It contributes to the accumulation of symbolic capital within boxing's institutional field (Bourdieu, 1984), marking membership within a community governed by formal codes of conduct and social expectations. A punch thrown with a bare fist on the street may be interpreted as criminal assault, whereas the same action delivered in the ring, wearing regulation gloves and observed by officials, is legitimised as sport. The gloves and other material objects associated with the sport separate it from crime and mark it as performance rather than deviance. They form a material infrastructure that enables risk to be taken, but within culturally bounded and rule-governed limits.

Having established how boxing's material culture functions as a mechanism of regulation it becomes crucial to examine how specific material objects within this framework carry symbolic capital and contribute to the construction and negotiation of identity. The regulated space of boxing is not only shaped by the containment and codification of violence but also by the cultural meanings inscribed onto key artefacts. These material icons such as gloves, gumshields, boots, and ring jackets, serve as visible markers of legitimacy and membership, while simultaneously providing a medium through which gendered identities are performed, contested, and reinforced. The following section therefore shifts focus from the broader disciplinary role of material culture in boxing to a detailed exploration of these objects as active participants in the ongoing formation of boxer identity, particularly among women navigating a traditionally masculinised sporting environment.

3.5 Identity, Gender and Symbolic Capital in Boxing

Boxing is an inherently material practice. Its cultures are shaped through repeated interactions with material items, or as Ingold (2010) would assert, 'things'. Ingold (2010) makes an important distinction between objects and things, arguing that while objects are often understood as static and self-contained, things are active, relational, and brought into being through ongoing engagements and use. They are not simply present in the world but are shaped by and shape the social and material contexts in which they are embedded. In considering the cultural imagery of boxing, it is almost impossible to separate the figure of the boxer from the material objects that signify and legitimise their participation in the sport. The

boxing glove, frequently imagined in a bold red, functions as both a practical tool and a powerful symbol of combat, discipline, and identity. Additional artefacts such as the gumshield, high lace-up boots, and the elaborately customised ring robe, often bearing symbolic aliases such as Mike Tyson's "Iron Mike" or Tyson Fury's "The Gypsy King", are not merely functional. They carry with them layers of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984), marking the wearer as an authentic and legitimised figure within a deeply codified sporting culture.

This material iconography contributes to the accrual of cultural value and meaning. These objects are understood both within and beyond the sport as indicators of legitimacy, expertise, and embodied investment. Symbolic capital is not only earned through performance in the ring, but also through the appropriate acquisition and display of boxing's material culture. The donning of a ring jacket, typically the preserve of a 'successful' boxer, the way gloves and boots are laced, or the performative knowledge of boxing's greats, can all serve as markers of a boxer's embeddedness within the sport's hierarchies of skill, tradition, and respect (Wacquant, 2004; Woodward, 2007). It is important to acknowledge that the imagined figure of the boxer is often heavily gendered. The archetype typically invoked is that of a male fighter, bare-chested, muscular, and bloodied, performing an ideal of hypermasculine physicality (Messner, 1992). This image is reinforced not only through media portrayals but also through the material artefacts that structure the sport. As such, women who box must negotiate a material culture that has been historically structured around male bodies and masculine ideals, as their presence represents a deviation from the 'normative' male boxing body (Channon and Matthews, 2018; Woodward, 2006).

Training tools such as the skipping rope, speed ball, or heavy punch bag also carry symbolic weight. They serve not only as indicators of training practice but also as instruments within a gendered regime of visibility. Visibility is not neutral, particularly within the traditionally hypermasculine domain of boxing, where who is seen, how they are seen, and whether they are taken seriously is shaped by gendered norms (Olive and Thorpe, 2011). To be seen using these tools in a particular way, aggressively, effortlessly, and with a naturally rhythmic embodied flow, is to legitimise one's presence within these spaces and accrue recognition and credibility. This often still occurs in relation to the masculine archetype. The intersection of material culture and gendered identity is therefore central to the boxer's relationship with these objects. These relationships are not only enacted through physical engagement but also interpreted through culturally specific readings of gender performance. How they are perceived depends on how gender is performed, contested, or reinforced within these sporting spaces (Olive and Thorpe, 2011; Pink, 2015).

Auditory elements add further layers to this cultural construction. For example, the theme tune from the *Rocky* film series functions as a form of sonic elicitation. It evokes imagery tied to boxing's broader narratives of perseverance, masculine grit, and individual triumph.

While few may recall its title, many can hum the melody. Its familiarity signals the saturation of boxing's symbolic framework in popular culture. When considered alongside other cultural aspects of boxing identity, such as the ring name, these objects and sounds form a material-discursive field in which boxing identity is constructed and recognised. Material culture in this context is not secondary to performance or identity; it is constitutive of it. Objects serve not only functional purposes but act as carriers of meaning, value, and cultural recognition. Through them, symbolic capital is accumulated, identities are shaped, and gendered norms are reinforced, reshaped, and, at times, resisted.

Beyond the items and equipment already discussed which are immediately recognisable as those attributed to a boxer, more subtle objects are integral to the embodied experiences of being a boxer. A water bottle, often seen in professional matches being offered between rounds, by the coach or 'corner'[4] becomes symbolic of both care and control. The timing and delivery of both hydration and cooling, marks authority and hierarchy but also has practical elements. It is often the case that even during sparring or heavy bag work in the practice gym, someone other than the boxer is holding the water bottle for a boxer as the reality of taking gloves off every time a drink is required becomes cumbersome and time consuming. Further intimate body governance can be enacted by the application of non-petroleum skin protective jelly, applied by the coach, to the face and upper body of the boxer. Furthermore, the boxer's hair often braided or otherwise restrained, is further material indication of both readiness and regulation, transforming the head itself into a site of discipline.

Ingold's (2010) concept of 'things' is particularly pertinent in the context of boxing. A glove gains meaning not merely through its manufacture, but through use, through its contact with the boxer's body, and the repeated act of striking an object or opponent. Over time, it absorbs sweat, bears the marks of wear, and may carry traces of bodily fluids such as blood or saliva, embedding the glove with a sensory history that speaks to both exertion and intimacy. The leather softens with repeated impact, and this gradual transformation becomes part of a ritualised process of breaking in the glove, an experience that fuses the boxer's body with their equipment. Wearing gloves that belong to someone else, by contrast, often evokes discomfort, both physical and psychological. The sensation of sliding a hand into another's still-damp glove can feel intrusive, even repellent. This tactile encounter underscores how these objects are never neutral. They are saturated with the embodied presence of others, and with the boxer's own corporeal history. Similarly, a gumshield it literally moulded to the shape of a boxer's teeth and mouth and may bear tooth marks from contact. These artefacts

[4] A colloquial term used to describe the collection of official team members that support a competitive boxer during the breaks in between rounds in the allocated corner of the boxing ring.

are extensions of the boxer's body, not only physically, but emotionally and symbolically. They become repositories of repetition, of training, of identity in the making.

It is also important to consider the agency of material kit. These objects do not merely enable action, they shape how the body feels, responds, and understands its place in practice. The repulsion felt when skin meets the sweat-soaked interior of a borrowed glove, the smell of sweat embedded in the lining, or the discomfort caused by a hand wrap or boot lace tied too tightly or too loosely, exemplifies how material objects actively shape perception and bodily experience. This aligns with Gibson's (1977) concept of affordance - the idea that objects offer possibilities for action based on their material properties and the perceiver's bodily capabilities. These are not inert surfaces, they are tactile thresholds that invite or constrain movement, becoming central to how boxers learn, adapt, and inhabit the sport. While boxing is often framed as raw and violent in media and popular discourse, inside the boxing gym it is highly choreographed. The equipment used does not simply protect, it imposes order. Gloves and guards do not just restrain violence, they shape it, training the body to move in sanctioned, recognisable, and governed ways. Violence, in this sense, becomes stylised, learned, and crucially, contained through contact with things. Knowledge and identity therefore arise through ongoing, embodied interaction with the material world (Ingold, 2007). This approach highlights the inseparability of people, objects, and place in shaping lived experience. The next section builds on this concept to explore further how female boxers come to inhabit identities that are both enabled and constrained by their bodily engagement with the material culture of the sport.

3.6 Rationale for Paper 2 – Material culture and Identity Formation

As the data from the kit bag encounters was analysed along with the other secondary data analysis that had been undertaken during the research project, it became apparent that the physical items of kit and other material aspects of the boxing world such as "ring names" directly impacted the development of a sense of belonging and boxer identity for the participants. In realising this and exploring the literature which examined gendered identity formation in sport using a material culture lens, it became apparent that there was a paucity of literature in this field. This paper contributes to a growing body of research into material culture in sport.

3.7 Publication Status and Authorship

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● Elaine de Vos (80% contribution): conception of the research idea, data collection, data analysis, drafting the article, critical revisions of the paper, and final approval of the paper for publication.

● Prof. Louise Mansfield: advice with research design and direction for paper, support with drafting the paper, critical revisions of paper, and final approval of the paper publication.

● Dr. Neil Stephens: support with research design and drafting the paper.

3.8 Paper 2: Fighting fit: Clothing, Equipment, and Material Objects as Identity Formation in Women's Boxing.

3.8.1 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.

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 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 *et al.*, 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 under-stand 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.

3.8.2 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 active-wear 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 200m 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[5]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.

[5] OnlyFans is a subscription based social media platform popular with adult content creators.

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).

3.8.3 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, 2008). 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 con-structed 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).

3.8.4 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, 2008). 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; Kwon and Armstrong, 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 (2008) 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

3.8.5 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*., 2023; 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 a women's body should be protected is also explored to establish how this affects on participants sense of belonging.

3.8.6 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 what-ever. 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 under-standing 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 woman, 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; Meân and Kassing, 2008; Kennedy and Markula, 2011).

The tendency of the sports clothing industry to 'pink it, shrink it, bling it' (Hoeber and Kerwin, 2013; Sveinson *et al.*, 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 *et al.*,

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 *et al*, 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.

3.8.7 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 2018b). 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 compromised 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, 2018b; Thorpe *et al.*, 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 safe-guarding, quite literally through material encasement, in ways that men do not (Har-greaves, 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, 2002).

Participant frustrations over glove sizing, and the improvisation 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, 2005a; 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, 2002;

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.

3.8.8 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.

Chapter 4 – Taking up Space: Lefebvrian Analysis of Women's Experiences of Space in the Boxing Gym

4.1 Introduction

Space cannot be defined objectively. It is created and reshaped through ongoing social interaction and is therefore inseparable from other largely subjective concepts such as belonging, identity, and power (Puig and Ingham, 1993). The spaces of sport are not fixed or neutral backdrops against which human action unfolds but are socially produced and continually negotiated through embodied practice, discourse, and institutional power (Lefebvre, 1991). This view positions space as both the medium for, and the outcome of social relations, revealing how it simultaneously reflects and reproduces broader structures of inequality. Spatial relations are inherently political because they are always shaped by power - who has access, who is visible, and whose movements and identities are legitimised (Massey, 1994). Sporting environments, particularly those with deep cultural and historical ties to masculinity such as boxing gyms, make these dynamics visible in everyday practice.

Within such spaces, inclusion and exclusion are not simply matters of physical presence but of social legitimacy. Power operates not only through who occupies space but through how space is organised, who is represented, and which bodies are made to feel welcome. Feminist scholars have shown that gendered and racialised hierarchies are reproduced through spatial organisation, material culture, and embodied performances (Puwar, 2004; van Ingen, 2004). In boxing, where ideals of aggression, discipline, and control dominate, these hierarchies manifest in both overt and subtle ways, from the design of the gym to the unwritten codes of behaviour that define belonging. Conceptualising sport through this spatial lens allows for a deeper understanding of how identity, power, and embodiment intersect. It also provides a framework for analysing how women in boxing navigate, resist, and reshape the gendered order embedded within the very spaces they inhabit.

In this chapter, the concept of space is discussed firstly from the perspective of two key theorists in the field of sociology, Foucault and Butler, whose ideas remain central to contemporary understandings of how power, identity and embodiment are organised spatially. Although the paper later in this chapter is grounded in Lefebvre's spatial triad (1991), Foucault's concept of heterotopias (1986) and Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990) are introduced to establish a broader intellectual context in which the spatial production of gendered bodies has been theorised. Following these theoretical foundations there are two further sections which discuss other significant elements which shape and constrain a sense of belonging and inclusion in sporting spaces for women: institutional constraints and

microaggressions. These are discussed not as separate phenomena but as material and discursive mechanisms through which power becomes spatially encoded. Institutional constraints, such as policies, coaching practices, and organisational norms, structure who may enter certain spaces, who is granted legitimacy within them, and under what conditions. In contrast, microaggressions operate at an everyday level, shaping how space feels and how belonging is negotiated moment by moment. These sections demonstrate how spatial inclusion and exclusion operate simultaneously across policy, practice, and interpersonal interaction which directly supports the Lefebvrian analysis that follows.

Finally, the third and final paper of this thesis, exploring gendered spatial exclusions and inclusions in boxing using Lefebvre's spatial triad as a framework to analyse the experiences of women in British boxing gyms is introduced and embedded. The preceding discussion of Foucault, Butler, institutional constraints, and microaggressions therefore serves as a critical scaffold for understanding why space must be analysed not only in physical terms but through the social relations, embodied practices, and power structures that shape how women navigate boxing environments. Lefebvre's spatial theory is positioned as part of a broader interdisciplinary conversation about gender, power, embodiment, and the production of space.

4.2 Heterotopias and Leisure Spaces

Foucault's work remains central to sociological analyses of power, discipline, and the organisation of bodies within institutions. Foucault's theories demonstrate how individuals are regulated in society not only through explicit rules but through subtle techniques of surveillance, normalisation, and bodily discipline (1977:1978). His work shifted attention away from power as something possessed by particular actors and towards power as relational and embedded in everyday practices, institutions, and spatial arrangements.

Within this broader body of work, Foucault also introduced the concept of heterotopias, offering a way of thinking about spaces that are simultaneously embedded within society yet governed by distinct logics, rules, and power relations (1986). Heterotopias are "other spaces" in which bodies are ordered, categorised, trained, and separated in ways that reveal how wider social norms are reproduced spatially. In sporting spaces such as gyms, stadiums, and changing rooms Foucault's theory of heterotopias is a useful lens with which to analyse how such spaces operate as regulated micro-worlds that simultaneously discipline bodies and organise social hierarchies.

In the context of boxing gyms, Foucault allows us to see these spaces not simply as training venues but as regulated environments where gendered bodies are monitored, evaluated, and disciplined through routines, gazes, rules, and spatial arrangements. Introducing heterotopias provides a conceptual bridge toward the subsequent Lefebvrian

analysis as both frameworks attend to the ways in which space is socially produced and how power is made material through the organisation of bodies in place.

Following Foucault's (1986) notion of heterotopias as spaces of otherness that exist simultaneously within and outside dominant social structures, leisure environments can operate as heterotopias of resistance and identity reconstitution. Heterotopias are not imaginary or utopian spaces of absolute freedom, but real places that offer alternative modes of existence that mirror, invert, or challenge the norms of everyday life. Such places both reproduce and contest social order, existing as part of, whilst at the same time distinct from the environments that produce them. Leisure and sporting spaces can therefore be understood as arenas in which individuals negotiate their subjectivities in relation to dominant ideologies of gender, class, race, and sexuality (Johnston, 1996). Within these settings, alternative ways of being and moving become possible, even if temporarily and always bounded by the heterotopic physical and social frameworks that contain them.

Within this framework, the boxing gym emerges as a complex heterotopic site that both reflects and reconfigures the power relations embedded in broader society. Boxing gyms might be understood as "heterotopias of deviation" (Foucault, 1986, p. 25) in a more figurative sense that aligns with the deviant leisure perspective as spaces that gather those whose practices or identities sit uneasily within broader social norms (Smith and Raymen, 2018). Boxing gyms have historically been spaces of working-class masculinity, physical discipline, and social mobility (Wacquant, 2004). They operate as sites of discipline, governed by rules, hierarchies, and bodily regimes (Foucault, 1977), but they also function as spaces for those seeking transformation or belonging. As a traditionally male-dominated place tied closely to ideals of physical dominance, aggression, and control, the boxing gym symbolically and materially reinforces normative masculinity (Schyfter, 2008; Mennesson, 2000). However, for female boxers the gym is also a site of negotiation and contradiction. Women's participation unsettles the spatial and symbolic order by challenging gendered expectations about who belongs and what kinds of bodies are deemed legitimate in sporting contexts (Ashbolt *et al.,* 2018; Maclean, 2019).

Previous research shows that women who develop hyper-muscular physiques transgress conventional femininity and, in doing so, become hyper visible, subjected to both fascination and surveillance inside and outside the training facility (Johnston, 1996). These dynamics align with Foucault's theories of disciplinary power (1977). How bodies are produced through surveillance, normalisation, and spatial organisation provides a crucial lens for understanding why women's physically trained bodies attract heightened attention in sporting spaces and how this attention functions as a form of subtle control (Foucault, 1977). Foucault's theories of discipline bring allows us to situate the boxing gym not just as a setting for physical training but as a site where power is enacted through the arrangement of bodies, routines,

and gendered expectations. This produces a state of contradiction with women gaining empowerment through physical transformation but also marginalisation through deviation. The boxing gym, much like the weight room in Johnston's study, positions women within a physical space that simultaneously reproduces and destabilises patriarchal norms. Although women gain strength and confidence through participation, their presence is continually assessed against gendered ideals. Heterotopias often possess "systems of opening and closing" that make them both accessible and exclusive (Foucault, 1986, p. 26). The boxing gym's entry requirements have historically been gendered, governed by codes of conduct that emphasise discipline, hierarchy, and honour. While women have increasingly been granted 'permission' to enter these spaces, many of the expected gestures, rituals, and embodied practices remain heavily gender coded. Consequently, women's inclusion in such environments can sometimes operate as an myth of inclusivity. Whilst their participation is welcomed in principle, they continue to be measured against tacit masculine expectations that define legitimacy within the sport. This can lead to women's experiences of feeling tolerated rather than accepted in such spaces (Turnock, 2021). While Foucault's conceptualisation helps us understand the boxing gym as a site that simultaneously disciplines and liberates, feminist scholars have extended this thinking by asking, who is permitted to inhabit such spaces and under what conditions. The entry of women and racialised bodies into historically masculine or exclusionary environments exposes how power, embodiment, and belonging are spatially organised.

Puwar's (2004) notion of "bodies out of place" has been extended beyond the political and institutional settings in which it was first conceived. Her argument that women and racialised bodies entering historically male or white domains become hyper visible and subject to intensified scrutiny has been extended by research examining sport, fitness, and combat environments. Research exploring how female and racialised athletes disrupt, yet remain constrained by, the dominant bodily norms of elite sport (Messner and Musto, 2016) and how Muslim sportswomen use digital platforms to contest exclusionary representations, reframing online and physical sporting spaces as sites of resistance and visibility (Ahmad and Thorpe, 2020) extend Puwar's work into the sporting domain. Within leisure settings, Turnock (2021) shows how women's presence in commercial gyms continues to be governed by tacit rules of gendered belonging, echoing Puwar's analysis of institutional gatekeeping. These studies highlight how women's participation in sport and leisure involves a continual negotiation of both presence and legitimacy requiring an embodied performance of belonging that simultaneously challenges and reproduces normative power structures. Conceptualising women boxers through this lens positions them as both spatial and symbolic "invaders" (Puwar, 2004) whose entry into boxing gyms exposes the enduring boundaries of gendered space while revealing the transformative potential of occupying it. Channon and Jennings (2014) apply heterotopic thinking to martial arts and combat sports, arguing that these spaces

can offer women a means to challenge gendered power relations through embodied practice while remaining structured by patriarchal logics. Similarly, Maclean's (2019) research deals with how women in mixed-sex combat spaces negotiate spatial and embodied norms of gender, which aligns with the Puwar's "bodies out of place" concept.

The boxing gym also embodies the temporal layering that Foucault describes as heterochronic spaces. The repetition of training routines connects participants to a history of the sports development and a lineage of fighters that came before, while moments of performance and sparring suspend ordinary temporalities, producing a rhythm distinct from everyday life (Lefebvre, 1991; Thorpe *et al.,* 2023). These heterochronic layers are also gendered, as women's rhythms of training and progression are often negotiated within temporal structures historically aligned with masculine norms of endurance and discipline. For women, inhabiting this temporality can be central to the transformative qualities of the boxing gym. A rhythm is adopted that temporarily suspends societal gender expectations and allows the imagining of alternative embodied possibilities (van Ingen, 2004). However, these transgressions are transient and fragile, constantly monitored and negotiated against the persistence of masculine norms and institutional constraints. The gym as heterotopia is shaped not only by gender but also by intersecting dynamics of class, race, age, and sexuality (Jeanes *et al*., 2020). The boxing gym is not a neutral container but a living social product shaped continually by its occupants, how they move within it, and what meanings are attached to their movements (Massey, 2011). For some women, it becomes a site of community, solidarity, and self-determination whilst for some it remains exclusionary, constrained by hierarchies of expertise and access. These contradictions illustrate the heterotopic nature of the gym reflecting broader inequalities but at the same time offering opportunity for resistance and challenge.

Material culture further reinforces this spatial politics. Gloves, headgear, and hand wraps are not simply functional objects but material signifiers that mediate belonging and identity. For women, the act of wrapping hands or wearing gloves becomes both a ritual of inclusion and a claim to legitimacy in a masculinised space. The gendered negotiation of equipment, clothing, and locker-room space underscores how heterotopias are not only spatial but also material, shaped by tactile interactions that make gender and power visible and tangible. Such material encounters constitute affective and sensory dimensions of spatial belonging, transforming how bodies experience and produce space (Pink, 2015). Conceptualising the boxing gym as a heterotopic and heterochronic space highlights it as a site of exclusion, resistance, and negotiation. Women's engagement in these spaces, both spatially and materially challenges the binary logic of oppression and liberation. The heterotopic framing acknowledges this tension, recognising that resistance does not emerge from outside power, but through its reconfiguration in everyday practice.

While the heterotopic perspective reveals how the boxing gym is structured through spatial and material arrangements of power, it also invites deeper consideration of how those relations are enacted through the body itself. The gym is not only a site where gender is performed, it provides a backdrop for gender to be continually produced, embodied, and contested through the disciplined repetition of physical practices. Gender performativity becomes a critical extension to Foucault's spatial thinking, offering a lens through which to examine how the everyday movements, gestures, and interactions of boxers reconstitute and sometimes resist dominant gender norms within the heterotopic space of the gym (Butler, 1990).

4.3 Gender and Performance in Space

Butler's (1990) work has been pivotal in shaping contemporary understandings of gender as a social and performative process rather than a fixed biological attribute. Butler conceptualises gender as something brought into being through repeated acts such as gestures, speech, comportment and dress, that solidify over time to be interpreted as natural difference between genders. This perspective has been widely taken up in sport sociology, where gender norms are scrutinised and visibility is heightened through bodies, uniforms, behaviours, and spatial arrangements (e.g., Caudwell, 2003; Halbert, 1997; Kerr and Obel, 2018). Butler's framework illuminates how women in masculinised sports must continuously negotiate and reproduce gendered expectations to remain legitimate within these settings.

Incorporating Butler's theory of performativity (1990) allows us to link embodied performance to spatial processes. In boxing gyms, gender is actively and continuously done and undone through movements, routines, clothing, and interactions that make women's presence both highly visible and frequently questioned. As women boxers, performing toughness, resilience, and controlled aggression to align themselves with boxing's masculine norms occurs whilst they simultaneously manage femininity to avoid stigmatisation. These embodied negotiations occur within and through space, affecting how women inhabit, adapt to, or resist the gendered architectures of the gym.

Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity provides a critical framework for examining how gender is enacted, regulated, and destabilised within the boxing gym. Butler contends that gender is not a stable attribute or expression of an inner truth but a stylised repetition of acts such as gestures, speech, and bodily performances that produce the illusion of coherent identity. These acts are not performed freely but within the constraints of what is socially recognisable as male or female. Through this continual repetition gender norms are maintained, but Butler asserts that they are not beyond disruption. A space such as a boxing

gym that is saturated with cultural codes of masculinity, provides a perfect site for observing such performative negotiations.

Boxing culture continues to privilege the values of hegemonic masculinity, where competitiveness, strength, and control operate as key markers of legitimacy and respect (Connell, 2005a; Wacquant, 2004). The ideal boxer is not only strong but emotionally disciplined, projecting an embodied form of dominance and control. For women entering this arena, participation and acceptance necessitates the performance of these masculine traits to achieve legitimacy. However, these performances of toughness are not imitations, nor are they direct rejections of femininity. Rather, they reveal gender as a mutable construct. The embodied performance of women boxing – punching, footwork and 'taking a hit' - re-enacts but at the same time, subtly reconfigures what it means to be 'a boxer'. Women often navigate contradictory social expectations by proving their physical credibility through displays of aggression and strength, while simultaneously maintaining markers of femininity to avoid being stigmatised as too masculine (Mennesson, 2000). Halberstam's (1998) concept of female masculinity recognises women's capacity to inhabit and reinterpret masculine-coded behaviours. Within the boxing gym, such performances are often necessary for women to gain recognition and legitimacy, yet they also expose the fragility of the gender binary that underpins boxing culture. By working both within and against the sport's ideological foundations of hegemonic masculinity, women's embodied performances of gender become central to their acceptance and visibility within boxing culture.

However, women's adoption of masculine-coded dispositions can reproduce the very hierarchies they seek to challenge (Halbert, 1997). Women who embody toughness may be accepted as serious fighters but risk exclusion from normative femininity, while those who retain feminine markers may be trivialised as less authentic or committed. When resistance operates through the same norms that constrain behaviour, women become caught in the 'double bind' of performativity (Butler, 1990). In other words, their resistance still relies on masculine-coded behaviours which results in women pushing back within the boundaries set by the dominant culture rather than removing the boundaries. To be accepted, they must embody masculinity, but by doing so they risk being judged as unfeminine. Conversely, if they perform femininity, they risk not being taken seriously as athletes. The boxing gym therefore emerges as a space where the boundaries of gender are actively performed and policed, with authenticity and therefore acceptance remaining contingent on how well participants conform to the masculine codes and ideologies that underpin the sport. Such regulation extends beyond bodily performance to emotion and affect. Showing emotional restraint by suppressing visible and audible markers of fear, pain, or vulnerability forms part of boxing's disciplinary regime (Foucault, 1977). However, this affective control is gendered. Women who express anger or assertiveness risk being labelled aggressive, while those who display empathy or

care may be seen as weak (Channon and Matthews, 2018b). This emotional policing underscores Butler's claim that gender norms govern not only how bodies move but how they feel and emote. Acts of affective self-regulation or performative intelligence become as critical as physical skill in attaining legitimacy and belonging within the boxing gym.

Performativity in the boxing gym is inherently relational. Gender is not enacted in isolation but through interaction with other gym users such as, coaches, sparring partners and spectators, whose responses shape what is recognised as legitimate. Recognition from these others is essential for achieving status and belonging within the gym. The space operates as a microcosm of the wider social field, where performances of gender are continually read, judged, and re-inscribed (Butler, 1990). This dynamic is intensified for women and racialised athletes whose presence disrupts the assumed neutrality of masculine spaces (Puwar, 2004). Their visibility ensures that every movement carries interpretive weight. A woman sparring confidently may be celebrated as exceptional or condemned as threatening, depending on who is watching and through what social lens. These dynamics reveal that the boxing gym is not merely a stage for gender performance but a site of ongoing iteration and citation, where dominant discourses of masculinity are both reiterated and destabilised through repetition (Butler, 1990). The authority of masculinity in boxing relies on its continual re-enactment by all participants, including women. In this way, every act of participation carries the potential for subversion. When a woman successfully embodies the boxer's stance, footwork, or punches, or commands respect in the ring, she exposes the performative nature of boxing's masculinity: if women can 'do it' its associations with maleness are undone. Resistance, therefore, is not external to the system but embedded within it, emerging through the very process of repetition that sustains the sport's gendered order.

By framing the boxing gym as a heterotopia, the space can be understood as simultaneously reflective of and subversive to broader social order (Foucault, 1986). When this concept is overlaid with Butler's lens of performativity (Butler, 1990), the mechanisms of such subversion become clearer. They operate through iterative bodily acts that both cite and rework dominant gendered scripts. The gym's heterotopic quality therefore depends on performativity, as it becomes a heterotopia, or 'other', only through the actions and movements of those who inhabit it. Women's participation embodies this duality as their performances sustain the gym's symbolic order while simultaneously displacing it, revealing that gendered power operates not through fixed attributes but through embodied practice. Performativity also offers a lens through which to understand wellbeing and identity in the boxing context. The act of 'doing' boxing can provide a sense of agency and coherence precisely because it involves mastering performances that result in recognition and a sense of belonging. However, the emotional labour of maintaining legitimacy in gendered sporting spaces can both empower

and exhaust participants (Caudwell, 2003). For women boxers, wellbeing may therefore hinge on the capacity to embrace contradiction, finding authenticity within the labour of performance.

Butler's framework ultimately positions the boxing gym as a site of 'becoming' rather than being. Gender is never resolved but continually negotiated through embodied repetition. Each training session, spar, and fight forms part of a broader choreography through which social norms are simultaneously reproduced and reimagined. Through these iterative performances, the gym emerges as a living space of gendered experimentation, still bound by power and hierarchy, yet rich with the potential to reconfigure them. Bringing the theories of Butler and Foucault together establishes a conceptual foundation for the Lefebvrian analysis that follows in the third paper. Where Foucault highlights the disciplinary organisation of bodies within sporting environments, Butler draws attention to how gender is reproduced through everyday practices within those spaces. Together, they prepare the ground for understanding Lefebvre's spatial triad by showing that boxing gyms are not neutral backdrops but spaces where gender, power, and identity are continuously performed, regulated, and contested.

4.4 Institutional Constraints and Conditional Inclusion

While the lived experiences of women in boxing gyms reveal the micro-level negotiations of gendered embodiment and spatial belonging, these practices are always situated within broader institutional frameworks that shape who can enter, participate, and succeed. As outlined in Chapter 1 of this thesis, boxing operates within complex governance structures that define legitimacy, regulate behaviour, and allocate resources. These institutional mechanisms, ranging from governing body policies to funding criteria and media representation, both reflect and reproduce societal power relations. Understanding the institutional dimensions of gender therefore requires examining how ostensibly inclusive systems continue to embed patriarchal assumptions at the level of governance, policy, and culture and how these policies impact women's experiences of boxing spaces. Institutional structures do not only frame participation, they actively produce the conditions under which inclusion, exclusion, and recognition occur. This aligns directly with the Lefebvrian analysis developed in the third paper, where institutional rules, regulations, and organisational logics form part of the conceived space of boxing. How the gym is imagined, organised, and controlled shapes the everyday spatial realities that women must navigate. Through this lens, institutional practices are central in producing the gendered spatial arrangements that influence who is granted legitimacy, who is marginalised, and how space itself is made meaningful.

Jeanes *et al*. (2020) offer a compelling feminist-informed spatial analysis that highlights how sport spaces, despite ostensibly inclusive policies, continue to privilege dominant forms

of masculinity. Their work exposes the persistent disconnect between policy rhetoric and material change. Inclusion strategies in sport often fail to interrogate the underlying power structures that determine access, visibility, and legitimacy (Dowling, 2020). Rather than dismantling patriarchal norms, such strategies frequently operate as surface-level interventions that permit limited access without challenging the deeply embedded gender hierarchies that underpin sporting culture (Spaaij *et al*., 2015).

This dynamic is particularly visible within boxing, a sport historically structured around ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005a; Messner, 2002). While the inclusion of women has expanded significantly, especially following boxing's reintroduction to the Olympic Games in 2012, these developments have often been framed in economic rather than ideological terms. Governing bodies and commercial promoters have used women's participation to access new funding opportunities, attract media attention, or satisfy diversity mandates rather than as part of a genuine commitment to gender equity (Woodward, 2008; Hargreaves, 1997). Female participation therefore becomes instrumentalised and celebrated as evidence of progress, whilst at the same time stripped of its transformative potential. Women's inclusion therefore operates as a public performance that maintains rather than challenges institutional norms. This form of inclusion risks reducing female boxers to visible markers of change used to legitimise existing power structures. England Boxing's governance reforms have foregrounded gender targets and diversity policies, yet such measures rarely address the cultural conditions that shape everyday practice in gyms. Institutional inclusion policies can reproduce inequality by focusing on representation over redistribution, valuing the presence of women rather than transforming the practices, values, and hierarchies that marginalise them (Dortants and Knoppers, 2016). The appearance of gender balance can therefore obscure the persistence of unequal power relations.

Initiatives which segregate, such as women-only classes, exemplify this paradox. While these spaces can provide safety and solidarity, they may also inadvertently reinforce the notion that the 'real' boxing remains male. The implicit message is that women's participation is acceptable, but only if it occurs within defined boundaries that do not disrupt the masculine core of the sport. When women occupy traditionally male spaces, their presence is often treated as exceptional, something to be managed, contained, or justified, rather than as a catalyst for cultural transformation (Woodward, 2008). This conditional inclusion mirrors broader societal patterns where women's access to male-dominated domains remains dependent on their ability to adapt to existing norms rather than redefine them.

Even in mixed-gender environments, masculine authority tends to remain the unspoken standard. Female coaches and officials often report that their expertise is questioned or undervalued, while men who exhibit care or emotional expressiveness may also be marginalised for deviating from hegemonic masculine ideals (Jeanes *et al*., 2020; van Ingen,

2004). These patterns underscore that inclusion in boxing is not a neutral or automatic process but one regulated through embodied expectations and institutional hierarchies. The gym and the governing structures surrounding it remain spaces where legitimacy must continually be performed and policed according to gendered codes of authenticity. Institutional practices further reinforce these dynamics through the uneven distribution of resources and recognition. Despite rising numbers of female participants, funding, sponsorship, and media visibility remain heavily skewed toward men's boxing (Woodward, 2014; Mennesson, 2000). Coverage of women's bouts often frames athletes through gendered tropes, emphasising appearance, emotionality, or novelty, rather than technical skill or sporting achievement (Kane *et al.*, 2013). The underrepresentation or trivialisation of women in sport media reinforces the perception of male sport as the norm. When women are visible, their representation often serves to affirm rather than contest gender hierarchy (Cooky *and* McDonald., 2005).

In boxing, these representational patterns intersect with broader institutional narratives about marketability and professionalism. Promoters and media outlets frequently highlight women's stories of perseverance and empowerment while downplaying their athletic legitimacy, framing them as inspirational novelties rather than competitors of equal standing. This commodified form of empowerment celebrates individual achievement while obscuring structural inequality (Banet-Weiser, 2018). The commercial success of boxers such as Katie Taylor and Claressa Shields demonstrates that women's boxing can draw significant audiences, yet their visibility has not translated into systemic parity. Their success is noted as exceptional, framed as proof that success can be achieved with enough effort whilst masking the structural conditions that make such success so rare. Institutional governance also plays a key role in shaping these contradictions. As recent events within international boxing governance illustrate (see Chapter 1), policy and leadership structures remain fraught with gendered and political tensions. The controversies surrounding the International Boxing Association (IBA) including its suspension by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the subsequent formation of World Boxing in 2023, reflect the instability of global boxing governance and its uneven commitment to equity. England Boxing's 2025 decision to align with World Boxing was framed as a move to safeguard athlete pathways and Olympic inclusion, however such governance shifts rarely foreground the gendered implications of institutional reform. Unless gender equity is embedded into the very logic of governance, organisational change risks reproducing existing hierarchies under the guise of progress (Shaw and Frisby, 2006). This tensions between policy and practice demonstrate how inclusion remains conditional on adherence to existing institutional logics. Women's increased visibility in boxing has not dismantled the sport's masculinist foundations but rather prompted their reconfiguration. Hegemonic masculinity adapts, absorbing women's participation without relinquishing its centrality, therefore persisting through transformation. Although it evolves to

accommodate challenges, it ultimately maintains male dominance (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Within boxing and other traditionally male domains, this adaptation often manifests as women being celebrated for competing 'like men', reinforcing the idea that legitimacy requires assimilation into masculine standards.

Intersectional analyses reveal further limitations of institutional inclusion. Race, class, and sexuality continue to shape who can access boxing spaces and how legitimacy is ascribed. Black and working-class women have long been central to the sport's grassroots culture, yet they are often excluded from leadership and media narratives that privilege whiteness and middle-class respectability (Hargreaves, 2000; van Ingen, 2011). Queer and trans boxers, meanwhile, face additional barriers due to rigid gender classifications in competition and the policing of bodies through eligibility regulations (Karkazis and Jordan-Young, 2018). These institutional practices demonstrate how gender inclusion policies often fail to account for the multiplicity of identities that shape sporting experience. The implications of these institutional constraints are both material and symbolic. At the everyday level, they influence who feels entitled to occupy space, who is represented as legitimate, and whose voices are heard in decision-making processes. At the broader cultural level, they shape the narratives of sport as a space that is progressive, meritocratic, and inclusive, whilst they evidently continue to reproduce inequality. As a result, the boxing gym becomes a site where institutional discourse and women's embodied participation meet and expose a disjuncture between inclusion as rhetoric and inclusion as practice.

Just as heterotopia and performativity frame the gym as a space of contradiction and negotiation, overlaying the institutional context exposes the limits of that negotiation. It highlights that the transformative potential of women's boxing, and indeed women in sport more broadly, can never be realised in isolation as it is mediated through organisational, economic, and cultural structures that constrain its reach. Genuine transformation requires moving beyond policy gestures toward an interrogation of the institutional logics that sustain exclusion. gender equity in sport will remain aspirational until governance, representation, and resource allocation are restructured in ways that address the asymmetrical relations of power that underpin the field (Hovden and Pfister, 2006). The institutional landscape of boxing reflects broader tensions in contemporary sport which could be described concisely as inclusion without redistribution, visibility without power, and progress without transformation. Women's increasing participation and visibility mark undeniable achievements, however the persistence of structural barriers reveals the enduring adaptability of masculine dominance. The challenge continues to be not only in expanding access but at the same time, reshaping the institutional and cultural conditions that define what and who boxing is for.

4.5 Microaggressions and the Everyday Politics of Belonging

While institutional structures and governance policies shape the formal boundaries of inclusion, the lived realities of women's participation in boxing are also negotiated through the subtle, routine interactions that occur in training spaces, changing rooms, and ringside. These everyday exchanges often appear minor or benign but collectively contribute to women's marginalisation and sense of 'otherness' within the sport. The concept of microaggressions provides a useful analytic lens for understanding how gendered power operates at this interpersonal level, reproducing structural inequalities through the accumulation of small acts and comments (Sue and Spanierman, 2020; Capodilupo *et al.,* 2010).

Originally emerging from the intellectual foundations of critical race theory, particularly its focus on the everyday, structural, and interpersonal operations of racism (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado and Stefancic, 2000), the concept of microaggressions refers to subtle, often unintentional behaviours or communications that convey hostility, exclusion, or derogation toward members of marginalised groups (Pierce, 1970; Sue and Spanierman, 2020). Feminist scholars have extended this framework to explore how gendered microaggressions shape women's everyday experiences across workplaces, education, and sport (Capodilupo *et al*., 2010; Norman and Simpson, 2023). These acts differ from overt discrimination as rather than explicit exclusion, they manifest as jokes, interruptions, assumptions of incompetence, or silences that cumulatively erode confidence and belonging. In the context of boxing, a sport whose culture remains deeply intertwined with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005b; Woodward, 2014), microaggressions represent one of the most persistent mechanisms through which gendered hierarchies are sustained. Research exploring high-performance sport coaching highlights how women who occupy minority positions often experience three recurring forms of gendered microaggression: invisibility, hypervisibility, and invalidity (Norman and Simpson, 2023). Invisibility refers to the erasure of women's contributions, where their expertise is overlooked or absorbed into collective efforts led by men. Hypervisibility occurs when being the 'only' woman in a space makes one's presence subject to constant observation and scrutiny with every gesture, comment, or decision becoming representative of 'all women', rather than of an individual. Lastly, invalidity arises when women's authority or competence is questioned purely on the basis of gender. Each of these dynamics contributes to an affective environment of conditional belonging where acceptance depends on continuous self-monitoring and the avoidance of being perceived as 'too emotional', 'too assertive' or 'too feminine' (Norman and Simpson, 2023).

This aligns with Puwar's (2004) concept of 'space invaders' where women and racialised individuals who enter historically male or white institutions become both hyper visible and subject to intensified regulation. In boxing gyms, female athletes often report that their bodies and movements are under constant watch, interpreted through gendered lenses that cast their

physicality as either excessive or insufficient. Even subtle cues such as a coach offering unsolicited technical advice, a male sparring partner pulling punches, or a passing comment on subjects unrelated to the sport, such as appearance, can reaffirm the perception that women are guests in a masculine domain. Women's presence in such spaces disrupts established bodily norms but also activates heightened surveillance mechanisms designed to reassert the spatial and social order (Puwar, 2004).

Extending this analysis, Capodilupo *et al.* (2010) conceptualise these experiences as forms of gendered microaggression. Within sporting contexts, this can be seen in the sexual objectification of women, where they are valued for appearance rather than athletic competence, and in persistent assumptions of inferiority that frame women as less capable or resilient. Gendered experiences are often minimised through the denial of sexism, positioning women's accounts as exaggerations or misunderstandings. Expectations of traditional gender roles further shape behaviour, where women are assumed to be passive, supportive, or responsible for emotional labour within sporting environments. At a wider level, environmental microaggressions are embedded in the material and symbolic organisation of spaces, such as the visual culture of gyms, unequal access to facilities, and everyday language, all of which routinely reproduce male dominance.

Within boxing gyms, such dynamics may manifest through men controlling sparring pairings, allocating less ring time to women, or using diminutive labels like 'girls' class' or 'ladies' session'. The environment itself often communicates exclusion with walls often adorned with images of male champions, changing rooms lacking adequate female facilities if they are present at all, or equipment tailored for male physiques (see chapter 3) all reinforcing the message that the sport's imagined participant remains male. These environmental cues are not neutral but materialise gendered hierarchies, reminding women that they occupy a space designed by and for others. These micro-level experiences have cumulative psychological and professional consequences. Research shows that women coaches and athletes described heightened self-surveillance, reduced confidence, and reluctance to challenge sexism for fear of being perceived as problematic or ungrateful (Norman and Simpson, 2023). In boxing, where emotional restraint and stoicism are prized, the pressure to remain composed in the face of exclusion can further normalise inequity. As the name suggests, the fact that each individual act is small can often mask the reality that the persistence of micro aggressions lead to a gradual erosion of belonging. This underscores how the power dynamics which play out in everyday interactions between men and women reflect and reinforce wider ideological structures.

The invisibility of women in boxing and sport more widely, also persists through discursive microaggressions. Terms such as 'women's boxing' imply boxing is by default male, rendering female participation as a secondary variant (Hargreaves, 1997). Similarly, media

representations often emphasise women's novelty or emotional narratives rather than athletic skill (Channon *et al.*, 2018b). These linguistic practices do not simply describe difference but actively reproduce it, legitimising men as the norm and women as deviation. Discourse produces the reality and as such, the repetition of such distinctions re-inscribes gender hierarchy at the level of everyday talk (Butler, 1990). The cumulative effect of these interpersonal and discursive dynamics is that many women internalise feelings of being an imposter including, self-doubt or hyper-responsibility. They are compelled to soften assertiveness to avoid being read as aggressive, performing humour to defuse tension, or over-preparing to prove competence (Ahmed, 2020). Within boxing's community structures, speaking up about sexism risks professional or social exclusion, ensuring that microaggressions remain normalised and largely unchallenged. The normalisation of microaggressions therefore functions as an informal governance system. It preserves the symbolic order of boxing without the need for overt exclusion. Institutional policies that claim to promote inclusion often fail precisely because they do not address these microstructures of everyday power (Jeanes *et al.*, 2020; Dowling, 2020). Gendered microaggressions bridge the gap between ideology and practice mirroring the everyday enactments of broader patriarchal arrangements.

Addressing microaggressions requires more than policy revision. It demands cultural reflexivity and critical pedagogy within boxing organisations. Recognising that inclusion is not achieved simply through representation but through the transformation of interpersonal relations and embodied practices will allow organisations to move towards a truly inclusive environment. Initiatives such as gender-sensitivity training, mentorship for and from women coaches, and participatory forums for reporting discrimination can create dialogical spaces that bring to light hidden dynamics. However, such interventions must move beyond tokenistic gestures to engage with the deeper cultural narratives that sustain exclusion (Norman and Simpson, 2023). Microaggressions illuminate how the power relations explored through heterotopic and performative frameworks materialise in the smallest gestures of everyday life. They reveal that exclusion does not only occur through structural barriers or overt hostility but through the accumulation of routine acts that make some bodies feel perpetually out of place. In boxing gyms, where discipline, hierarchy, and masculinity intersect, these microstructures of behaviour sustain the sport's gendered order, against prevailing rhetoric of equality. Recognising and challenging them is therefore central to moving beyond tokenistic inclusion of women in boxing to transforming the culture of the sport itself.

4.6 Rationale for Paper 3 – Making Space

The concept of ‘taking up space’ is heavily imbued with metaphorical gendered power struggles. The expression is often associated with resistance against societal pressures for women to be small or quiet employing body language that conveys confidence and a sense of belonging. With most British boxing gyms now accepting women either as part of the main training schedule or by way of dedicated classes specifically for women, and competitive tournaments now including women on their cards, it may be assumed that space has been made for women within boxing and therefore the work has been done to ensure that they are included. However, the data gathered during this research project suggested that instead of feeling welcomed and included by the boxing community as bona fide boxers, women often still felt on the periphery and given less attention and associated legitimacy than their male counterparts. This paper explores the women’s experiences of space in the boxing community using Lefebvre’s spatial triad.

4.7 Publication Status and Authorship

Title: Fighting for Space: Gendered Spatial Exclusions and Inclusions in Boxing

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● Elaine de Vos (80% contribution): conception of the research idea, data collection, data analysis, drafting the article, critical revisions of the paper, and final approval of the paper for submission.

● Prof. Louise Mansfield: advice with direction for paper, critical revisions of the paper, and final approval of the paper submission.

● Dr. Neil Stephens: support with critical revisions of the paper, and final approval of the paper for submission.

4.8 Paper 3: Fighting for Space: Gendered Spatial Exclusions and Inclusions in Boxing.

4.8.1 Abstract

This paper examines the gendered spatial dynamics within boxing gyms, focusing on how female boxers navigate, resist, and negotiate their presence in traditionally male-dominated environments. Drawing on Lefebvrian spatial theory and based on ethnographic observations and interviews with boxers, coaches, and officials in England, UK, the analysis explores the politics of space, the tensions between symbolic inclusion and material exclusion, the institutional motivations behind women's participation, and the normalisation strategies women employ to counter persistent gender stereotypes. The findings demonstrate that while women's participation is increasingly visible, unequal gender relations remain embedded within both the culture of boxing and the organisation of gym spaces, reinforced through everyday practices and regulatory frameworks. The paper concludes that meaningful gender equity in boxing cannot be achieved through increased participation alone, but requires a critical reconfiguration of the spatial, institutional, and policy structures that continue to privilege male bodies and masculinised practices.

4.8.2 Space In Sport

Sport is inherently spatial, functioning not only as a site of physical activity but also as a social arena where power, identity, and community are negotiated (Pavlidis and Fullagar, 2016). The boxing gym is a complex contested space. It juxtaposes masculine ideals of aggression and physicality with women's growing visibility and agency in the sport. It both mirrors societal expectations about gender and creates a space where alternative identities and power relations can emerge (Author A et al., 2025a). It is not just a physical training site, but a symbolic arena where identity, embodiment and power intersect, highlighting the tension between symbolic inclusion and material exclusion that female boxers experience. These spaces provide opportunities for reconstituting self-identity and resisting dominant discourses and ideologies that marginalize women and other subordinated groups.

Space in sport is not a neutral container but a political terrain where gender, power, and identity are continually reimagined (Massey, 1995). Feminist spatial theories suggest that everyday sporting spaces can serve as sites of both struggle and liberation, allowing women to explore alternative femininities and contest normative gender roles (Massey, 2011; Rose, 1993; van Ingen, 2003). However, the boxing gym remains a contested space where traditional masculinity predominates, often excluding or marginalising female athletes despite their growing presence. Research shows that although there has been an increase in participation in women's boxing since the 2012 Olympics (Woodward, 2014, p245) many

women still do not feel accepted or recognised as skilled athletes (Tjønndal, 2019) and feel that they are seen as “trespassing” (Wacquant, 1992). Studies of female bodybuilders and similar domains interrogate how spatial and corporeal practices challenge stereotypical gender norms, illustrating the potential for sport spaces to disrupt hegemonic masculinities (Johnston, 1996; van Ingen, 2004; Theberge, 1997). However, in boxing, gendered spatial inequalities persist, reflected in policy disparities, segregated training sessions, and institutional practices that prioritise male experiences and masculine norms (Jeanes *et al*., 2020). Even as women gain increasing access to these spaces, dominant forms of masculinity continue to be privileged, maintaining gender hierarchies within the sport and leaving women as anomalous within the masculinised spaces of boxing culture (Douglas, 2003; Halbert, 1997). Institutional changes it seems do not necessarily translate into changes in institutional culture (Tjønndal, 2019).

This paper contributes to the sociology of sport literature by applying Lefebvrian-informed spatial analysis to explore the complex negotiations female boxers undertake to claim space within boxing gyms (Mennesson, 2000). This paper positions the boxing gym not only as a physical environment, but as a socially produced space in which power, identity, and exclusion are continuously enacted. Central to this is Lefebvre’s spatial triad - spatial practice (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and representational space (lived space) - which highlights how space is not neutral but produced through social practice, ideology, and power. By analysing the interactions between these three dimensions of space, the paper demonstrates how boxing gyms are spaces shaped by gendered norms and practices, where inclusion is often conditional and incomplete. The paper first examines spatial inequalities in sport and then introduces Lefebvre’s spatial triad. It then examines how gendered spatial boundaries shape women’s access to, and treatment within boxing gyms. It then explores the representation of space within the boxing gym by examining the institutional motivations that structure women’s participation and the constraints these impose. Finally, it discusses representational space by examining the normalisation, resistance, and everyday negotiations that female boxers navigate whilst inhabiting these contested spaces. Finally, there is a concluding comment to bring together the theoretical strength of Lefebvrian analysis of sporting spaces. The paper highlights how spatial dynamics intersect with identity, power, and resistance in sport, and shows why a Lefebvrian framework is essential for revealing the everyday mechanisms through which gendered inequalities in boxing are reproduced but also where there is potential to transform them.

4.8.3 Spatial Inequality in Sport

Space should be understood as inherently political rather than neutral (Massey, 2011). Sporting spaces reflect and reproduce wider social inequalities, especially gendered ones. Such spaces are socially constructed and lived in ways that afford privilege to some bodies while excluding or marginalising others (van Ingen, 2003; Pavlidis and Fullagar, 2016; Ogunniyi, 2014). Van Ingen (2003) expands on this understanding by illustrating how the boxing gym is a deeply gendered and racialised site, where access to physical space and symbolic legitimacy is unevenly distributed. Gym spaces both enable and constrain bodies differently, often privileging hegemonic forms of masculinity while "othering" female, queer, or otherwise non-normative bodies. These dynamics are not only reproduced through formal policies but also through everyday practices and interactions such as who is allowed to lead warm-ups, who gets priority over ring time, and how authority and knowledge are distributed (Jeanes *et al*., 2020; Theberge, 1997). For women and gender-diverse boxers, the gym can offer possibilities for empowerment and identity reformation, while also demanding constant negotiation of inclusion within a culture where masculine norms still proliferate (Butler, 1990; Pavlidis and Fullagar, 2016). Female-only sessions, while framed as inclusive, may in practice reinforce segregation. These initiatives can institutionalise a form of controlled marginality rather than genuine integration (van Ingen, 2003).

In sporting contexts, inequality concerns not just physical presence but also recognition, legitimacy, and empowerment within the space (van Ingen, 2004). As a traditionally male-dominated space tied closely to ideals of physical dominance, aggression, and control (Schyfter, 2008), the boxing gym symbolically and materially reinforces normative masculinity (Author A *et al*., 2025b). Yet for female boxers, it also functions as a space of negotiation. Women's presence in these gyms disrupts the spatial order by challenging gendered expectations about who belongs and what kind of bodies are deemed legitimate in sporting contexts (Maclean, 2019; Ashbolt *et al*., 2018). This disruption can be both empowering and precarious. The female athletic body, when it resists conventional femininity, becomes a site of both transgression and surveillance (Johnston, 1996). Boxing gyms are both disciplinary, governed by strict training regimes, codes of conduct, and bodily discipline (Foucault, 1977), and sites of liberation, allowing women to push physical boundaries and rework embodied femininities (van Ingen, 2004). Such spaces are shaped not just by gender, but also by intersecting dynamics of class, race, age, and sexuality, which inform how inclusion and legitimacy are distributed (Jeanes *et al*., 2020). Some women may find the gym to be a space of transformative potential, while others experience it as another domain of exclusion, policed by hegemonic masculinity and spatial norms.

As Massey (2011) argues, space is inherently relational and open-ended. The boxing gym is not a static environment but one continually shaped by social interactions, institutional policies, and performances of gender. Female boxers navigate these possibilities by carving

out micro-spaces of empowerment, community, and resistance, whether through solidarity, coaching roles, or claiming physical presence. Interrogating space is part of what has been described as the “spatial turn” in the social sciences and humanities (Soja, 1989). The spatial turn represents a recognition that space is not a passive backdrop but an active dimension of social life, deeply implicated in power, identity, and cultural practices. Situating the boxing gym within this theoretical shift highlights why it must be understood not only as a meaningful place but also as a socially produced space, constituted through material practices, discourses, and lived experiences.

4.8.4 Lefebvre’s Spatial Triad: Perceived, Conceived and Lived Spaces in the Boxing gym

Lefebvre’s overarching theory of space offered an alternative and transformative way of understanding social life by rejecting the notion of space as a passive, neutral container for action, and instead conceptualising it as actively produced through ongoing through social relations, practices, and representations. In The Production of Space (1991), Lefebvre formalised this position through the development of the spatial triad, which theorises that space must be understood through the interrelation of three dimensions: spatial practice (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and representational spaces (lived space). These are not separate categories but form a “trialectic”, each shaping and being shaped by the others (Soja, 1998). Crucially, for Lefebvre, social space is not static but is continuously created and recreated through the embodied actions, interactions, emotions, and power relations of individuals and groups as they engage with one another and with material objects over time. Space is therefore always political as it reflects and reproduces social hierarchies while also offering potential sites for resistance and transformation. Power in Lefebvre’s framework is not exercised solely through top-down institutional control but is embedded in the routines, movements, rhythms, and affective practices of everyday life.

To further examine Lefebvre’s conceptualisation of space and how it may be useful in the study of sporting spaces, it is necessary to define the central tenets of the theory. Spatial practice in Lefebvrian terms refers to the “perceived spaces” of material and routine practices through which space is physically used and reproduced. Lefebvre describes it as the close association of “routes and networks” with “daily routine” (1991: 38), or the patterns of movement and bodily activity that make space function. Representations of space, by contrast, are the “conceptualised spaces” (p. 39) produced by planners, institutions, and experts. These are the dominant spaces of knowledge and power which define the rules, maps, classifications, and institutional logics that organise how space ought to be used. Finally, representational spaces or “lived spaces” are described by Lefebvre as “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols” (p. 39), or the embodied, and imaginative

dimensions through which people experience space. For Lefebvre, these three together are interrelated and constitute social space. As he tells us; “[i]tself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others” (p. 73). Social space, then, is continually made and remade through the interplay of materiality, power, and lived experience.

The spatial triad has been widely employed in geographical research (Lee, 2022; Halvorsen, 2017; Leary, 2009) and applied to a variety of non-urban “landscapes”, including toddler groups (Rutanen, 2014), classrooms (Mechlenborg and Neergaard, 2024), dementia care (Wang *et al*, 2023), and theatre organisations (Watkins, 2005). In sport, it was introduced in a special issue of International Review for the Sociology of Sport (Puig and Ingham, 1993), though subsequent critique highlighted underutilisation in some studies (van Ingen, 2003). More recent applications include physical cultural studies (Friedman and van Ingen, 2011), football coaching (Lee and Corsby, 2025), and netball in New Zealand, where gendered and heteronormative identities are produced and reinforced (Marfell, 2019). Together, these studies demonstrate the usefulness of Lefebvre’s spatial triad in examining power, control, and the social shaping of gendered sporting environments (Leary-Owhin and McCarthy, 2019; Pierce and Martin, 2015; van Ingen, 2003). Further, Lefebvre’s insistence on the inseparability of physical, social, and psychological dimensions of space has been particularly influential in feminist sport studies, where it has been used to interrogate the tension between surface-level inclusion and the persistence of gendered power relations. Sporting spaces may appear to be opening up to women through formal equality policies or increased participation, yet the deeper spatial organisation often continues to reproduce masculine privilege. For example, roller derby is frequently framed as a transformative and empowering space for women, yet it remains constrained by commercial imperatives and institutional pressures that reshape participation towards market logics rather than feminist politics (Pavlidis and Fullagar, 2016). Similarly, despite the presence of equity frameworks, men continue to dominate leadership roles and cultural authority across many sporting institutions, revealing the endurance of gendered power within conceived space (Jeanes *et al*., 2020). Even digitally mediated sporting environments such as eSport reproduce masculinised norms of aggression, competition, and harassment through both platform design and user practices, demonstrating how gendered power is constituted through spatial relations across virtual as well as physical arenas (Hayday and Collison, 2020). Taken together, these three studies illustrate the value of applying Lefebvre’s central argument - that space is a social product shaped by the ongoing interaction between bodies, objects, emotions, and institutional forces, and that power operates through these relations rather than residing solely in formal structures - to the context of women’s sport, to make explicit a range of processes through which patriarchal mechanisms are sustained.

Massey's (1995) assertion that space is always relational, open-ended, and constituted through ongoing social interactions, aligns with Lefebvrian spatial theory. The boxing gym exemplifies this dynamic as although it is a physically bounded place, its reach extends further through the networks, identities, and power relations it sustains. Taken together, Lefebvre and Massey help define space not as neutral backdrop but as actively produced and contested, and therefore deeply relevant for examining the ways inclusion and exclusion are lived in a sporting context. By looking at both the perceived and conceived aspects of gym space reveals how its apparent inclusivity may obscure enduring uneven geographies of power. For women, in particular, experiences of exclusion, resistance, and empowerment emerge through the interaction of these spatial dimensions. Lefebvre's spatial triad offers "a social theory that connects situated individual stories with wider socio-spatial changes" and a rich methodological approach to researching sporting spaces (Vaide, 2023).

4.8.5 Methods: Accessing Gendered Spaces

This paper draws on data from a doctoral research project exploring the lived experiences of female boxers through ethnographic methods. Data collection commenced in 2019 with participant observation conducted at two boxing gyms located in the Midlands region of the UK. One site primarily catered to recreational boxers, all of whom were officially 'carded' by England Boxing, thereby enabling them to spar and compete if they chose. At this location, Author 1 actively participated in training alongside the boxers but did not personally engage in sparring due to medical restrictions related to prior neck surgery. The second site focused predominantly on competitive boxers preparing for regional and national-level competitions. While Author 1 did not train at this gym, they accompanied boxers to external sparring sessions at other gyms. Both sites were mixed gender and Author 1 attended each gym twice weekly. However, the longitudinal nature of observations was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to temporary gym closures. To supplement observational data, semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom during pandemic-related restrictions, later complemented by 'kit bag encounters' which were informal material based interviews conducted in person once gyms reopened (Author A et al., 2025a). Participants for both interviews and kit bag encounters were recruited through a combination of social media outreach, contacts established at observation sites, and snowball sampling.

In total, 28 interviews were completed with participants aged between 12 and 53 years (mean age = 32; n = 25; three participants opted not to disclose age). Most interviewees were current or former boxers (n = 24), with twelve also involved in coaching or developmental roles, and three having professional boxing experience. Additional participants included two charity workers associated with boxing initiatives, two officials, and two support staff within the

GB boxing program. All but two participants identified as women. Interview schedules began by exploring participants' broader sporting involvement before focusing specifically on their boxing experiences. Conversation topics ranged from initial impressions of the gym environment to participants experiences of gender differences in coach interactions, and challenges encountered both physically and mentally during training, coaching, and competition. Interviews concluded with open-ended questions addressing the meaning of wellbeing and participants understanding of future challenges facing women's boxing.

Data collection resulted in over 36 hours of recorded interviews, nearly 9 hours of video encounters, approximately 80 pages of detailed field notes, and a collection of weekly boxing magazines spanning two years. Additional materials included coaching manuals and curated social media content (primarily Instagram and Twitter/X). Thematic analysis was applied to interview transcripts and kit bag encounters (Braun et al., 2016). Supplementary materials such as boxing magazines, social media posts, and policy documents were employed to provide contextual immersion in contemporary boxing culture, though they were not subjected to formal analysis.

All interview and video recordings were transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher. Transcripts were repeatedly reviewed alongside audio and video files to ensure accuracy and deepen familiarity with the data. Coding was then undertaken to identify salient features related to the research questions. These codes were subsequently grouped into themes through an iterative process of refinement, with irrelevant codes discarded. Representative excerpts were selected to comprehensively illustrate themes concerning the experiences of inclusion and exclusion in boxing spaces. Ethical approval for all aspects of data collection was granted by [Anonymised for peer review].

4.8.6 Gender in the Gym

Gendered Spatial Boundaries: Barriers to Entry and Acceptance in Boxing Gyms

Women boxers and those involved in boxing as coaches or officials frequently encounter spatial gatekeeping when entering male-dominated gym spaces which manifests as symbolic, institutional and material forms of exclusion. These sites are more than neutral venues for physical training, they are gendered spaces (van Ingen, 2003), where everyday routines, spatial arrangements, embodied interactions, and institutional expectations collectively regulate who is recognised as legitimate (Author A et al, 2025b). In Lefebvrian terms, these experiences of perceived space are not only physical, but enacted through the passive comments and actions of others, and unequal access to equipment, coaching expertise, and roles which determine legitimacy and a sense of who "belongs" within the space of the boxing gym. Women entering these environments must navigate a spatial order that marks their

bodies as out of place, producing experiences of alienation that shape their initial and ongoing sense of belonging. Author 1's experience of visiting another club to observe a sparring session exemplifies this form of spatial policing. This event was at a male only club and was arranged to give the boxers (both male and female) some variety in their sparring partners. This is a long-standing tradition in boxing culture, allowing boxers to be exposed to a range of fighting styles, body types, and tactical approaches. Training only with boxers from their own gym can create predictability, so visiting other gyms encourages adaptability and skill development under pressure, often simulating a competitive environment. At this point Author 1 was a qualified England Boxing coach, but was not actively involved in the coaching at this particular club or within this session. As the boxers began their warm-up, Author 1 was engaged in discussion with a fellow coach from the club they had travelled with, regarding the planned sparring matches. These were organised on the basis of age and weight, with gender not considered a limiting factor. Consequently, male and female boxers could be paired if their age and weight categories aligned. During this exchange, a coach from the host gym approached Author 1 directly, and without any form of introduction or pleasantry, asked Author 1 whether they were "looking for the toilets". This interaction functioned as a subtle yet forceful reminder that a woman's presence in this space was anomalous, if not inappropriate (Douglas, 2003; Ogunniyi, 2014).

Drawing on Lefebvre's (1991) theorisation of spatial production, this encounter can be understood as a disruption of both the gym as it is routinely organised and encountered in practice, and the institutional assumptions through which it is imagined, ordered, and governed. At the level of perceived space, the material setting of the gym, the presence of sparring bodies in the ring, and the gender mix of the sparring pairs all suggested a temporary suspension of conventional gender divisions. In contrast, the conceived space of the gym, the implicit rules about who belongs where, who holds authority, and how bodies should be interpreted within this environment, remained firmly anchored in androcentric assumptions. The inability of the host coach to recognise my presence as legitimate coaching labour, instead reassigning my body to a domestic function, reveals the power of these institutionalised spatial logics. As Woodward (2008) observes, women in male-dominated sporting environments are frequently positioned within supportive or maternal roles rather than recognised as authoritative practitioners or decision-makers.

The absence of women boxers, coaches, or governance figures within this particular gym, further reinforced these dominant conceptions of space, limiting the available frameworks through which a woman's presence could be interpreted. Although the visible practices of the session suggested a degree of gender integration, the underlying conceptual ordering of the gym remained resistant to that inclusion. In attempting to restore what he perceived to be the natural order of the space, the coach's intervention worked to realign

perceived practice with conceived expectation. Author 1's body was rendered out of place not because of any disruption to training itself, but because it unsettled the deeper institutional imaginings of who the boxing gym is for and how authority within it should be distributed.

The boundaries of belonging were similarly enforced during the same session, where female athletes faced direct resistance. After two rounds with a female opponent from our gym, a male boxer asked to spar with a male boxer instead, implying that sparring with a woman held less value. This kind of interaction reflects the embodied spatial hierarchies that circulate in boxing gyms where women must constantly prove that their presence is not a disruption but a valid enactment of the sport (Maclean, 2019; Ashbolt *et al*., 2018). Cultural and religious barriers were also cited by some young male boxers from the traveller community who refused to spar with female opponents, despite regulatory compatibility in terms of age and weight. Even when female boxers shared the same cultural background, resistance remained, suggesting that gender segregation is not simply cultural but spatially reproduced within the norms and rhythms of the gym. Social space is not static but it is produced and shaped by repetition, control, and access, and in this context, used to marginalise female athletes through informal gatekeeping (Lefebvre, 1991).

These spatial exclusions have tangible consequences for women's participation and development within the gym. Everyday spatial practices through which training is organised, and bodies encounter one another left several female athletes without sparring partners, directly undermining their training and competitive progression within the perceived space of the gym (Lefebvre, 1991). As we were leaving the gym after the sparring session had finished, the head coach commented, "Get used to it, girls", reinforcing how such inequities are sedimented into the routine organisation of the space. This remark worked to normalise exclusion as an ordinary feature of how the gym operates, placing the burden of adaptation onto female boxers rather than prompting any challenge to the underlying spatial order (Theberge, 1997; Messner, 2002; Woodward, 2008). Women's marginalisation becomes an expected and largely unquestioned outcome of accepted boxing practice at the level of conceived space (Lefebvre, 1991), where institutional logics, values, and assumptions shape how the gym is imagined and governed.

Rosa's experience further illuminates how these spatial dynamics are lived and negotiated across the interrelation of conceived, perceived, and lived space (Lefebvre, 1991). Initially rejected from a gym at age twelve with the declaration that "girls aren't trained here", she responded, "I'm not a girl then, I'm a boxer". This moment captures a clash between the conceived space of the gym, in which gender operated as a categorical boundary of exclusion, and Rosa's attempt to rework her position within that order through a reframing of identity (Butler, 1990). Her gender alone functioned as a barrier to entry, independent of any consideration of physical ability, demonstrating how institutionalised conceptions of who a

boxer is define who can legitimately occupy the space. To gain access to a domain where femininity is commonly treated as incongruent with the physical and symbolic boundaries of the ring required submission to an informal initiation ritual embedded within the perceived space of training practice. She recounts that on her first night,

> He [the head coach] threw me straight in the ring like he did with all the lads and I got absolutely battered…I went back the next week, and he went 'you came back when I treated you like a boy… I'll teach you now'.

Here, Rosa's inclusion was made conditional upon her capacity to endure a masculinised benchmark of toughness that operates as an unspoken criterion of legitimacy within the conceived space of boxing culture. The initiation functioned to align her body with the dominant spatial logic of the gym, where endurance, resilience, and the capacity to absorb punishment are central to being recognised as a 'proper' boxer. Such practices are widely recognised across women's boxing and other male-dominated sports, where access is often contingent upon women demonstrating that they can meet standards defined through masculinised norms of bodily conduct (Halbert, 1997; Mierzwinski *et al*., 2014). At the level of lived space (Lefebvre, 1991), this experience was not merely organisational but deeply affective, shaping how Rosa felt, understood, and embodied her position within the gym. Together, the interaction between the coach, the sparring partner, and Rosa's return to training, demonstrates how boxing space is continually produced and reproduced through the dialectic relationship between institutional expectations, everyday bodily practices, and subjective experience. Inclusion is therefore neither guaranteed nor stable but negotiated through ongoing spatial encounters that both reproduce and, at the same time, subtly rework the gendered ordering of the boxing gym.

These examples show that gendered gatekeeping is fundamentally a spatial practice. It regulates not only who can enter a space, but also how they move within that space and whether their presence is considered legitimate. Such practices reveal how the perceived spaces of boxing continue to prioritise masculine bodies and behaviours, often resulting in women's presence being conditional, under negotiation and precarious.

Conceived Space: Institutional Logics Shaping Women's Participation

While there has been progress in the inclusion of female boxers, evidence suggests that institutional support is often driven by external incentives, particularly funding opportunities, rather than a genuine commitment to gender equity. Both male and female interview participants highlighted how some clubs strategically use female boxing to access grants or sponsorship, often allowing women to train and compete only when it aligns with financial or

reputational gain. These notional social boundaries define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded. From a Lefebvrian perspective, these institutional decisions reflect conceived space, the abstract, planned, and administratively organized dimension of the gym. Clubs' strategies for inclusion are designed in managerial and bureaucratic terms, reflecting institutional logics rather than the lived realities of female athletes. This underscores what Massey (2012) refers to as the power-geometry of space, wherein access is unevenly distributed and contingent on institutional interests, not individual rights to participation.

This conditionality makes women's presence in boxing gyms fragile and dependent. Rather than being co-owners of the space, they remain visitors, occupying a space still imagined and structured for male bodies (Scott, 2020). Female boxers are welcomed only when their presence adds value to the club, whether through funding, optics, or quota fulfilment. This dynamic demonstrates how perceived space, the space as it is experienced and used day-to-day, remains gendered. Women are physically present in gyms, but their use of space is constrained by rules, expectations, and the informal allocation of access, creating a tangible sense of marginalisation even when inclusion appears to exist on paper (Messner, 2002). Lindsey (elite amateur, 20) recalled a recent competition in which a female bout was removed from the lineup after a sponsor threatened to withdraw support. This example demonstrates that within conceived space, sponsors and organisers exercise authority over which bodies legitimately occupy the ring by using their economic leverage to actively reshape the spatial order of the event, reinforcing Massey's (2012) argument that space is not neutral, but socially produced and laden with power relations. Within perceived space, the women originally programmed to fight were left without a competitive opportunity, materially limiting their ability to progress competitively and affirm their sporting identities. Finally, at the level of lived space, the withdrawal of the women's bout demonstrated that the presence of female boxers was precarious, negotiable, and ultimately less valued than their male counterparts. The decision emphasised the symbolic meaning of the competitive space, reaffirming it as a masculine-coded domain whose boundaries are vulnerable to and shaped by economic pressure. This is illustrative of how gendered power is embedded in the ongoing production of space. The spatial inclusion for female boxers remains conditional, contingent, and subject to removal when institutional interests shift. It also reinforces the wider argument that women's access to boxing spaces is constantly shaped and reshaped by the interplay of conceived, perceived, and lived spatial dynamics, revealing the deep structural instability underpinning their presence in the sport.

Institutional motivations also shape the experiences of female boxing officials. Andrea (referee and ex-white collar boxer, 53) described how she was promoted into a high-profile televised role, refereeing at a National Championship before meeting the full qualification criteria. While this created an opening into representational or lived space (Lefebvre, 1991),

the dimension of space shaped through personal experience and symbolic presence, it came without meaningful power, access, or structural change. Her visibility served a symbolic purpose, demonstrating that inclusion exists, while the underlying inequalities remained unchallenged (Fink, 2016). It also left her vulnerable to criticism and had the potential to jeopardise her career. She took the opportunity when it was assigned to her without consideration, until her mentor informed her afterwards, "if something had gone wrong, they would have thrown you to the wolves". She went on to say,

> a short time afterwards, I was … nominated for my upgrade from B which is Regional to A which is National…the guy that had assigned me the Championship at B grade said I wasn't ready for my upgrade.

Her opportunity, she realised afterwards, was not accompanied by meaningful structural support and was merely for, as she puts it "being pushed forward because they need the optics". Her case exemplifies the contradictions between conceived, perceived, and lived spaces - the abstract planning of inclusion (conceived) and her day-to-day experience of participation (perceived), were not matched by meaningful, self-determined embodiment and recognition of space (lived).

The internal spatial hierarchies within boxing gyms therefore reinforce broader gendered divisions of labour. Helen (retired elite amateur/active coach, 38) observed that female coaches are often delegated supportive roles, such as warm-ups, fitness drills, or administrative tasks, while men retain authority over tactical coaching and fight strategy (Jeanes *et al*., 2020; Woodward, 2008). Through these everyday interactions and spatial ordering, women are physically present but structurally subordinated, revealing the persistent gap between perceived space and lived space, where women's embodied experiences are limited by hierarchical control (Massey, 2011; Rose, 1993). These spatial inequities reflect and reproduce gendered ideologies about who belongs in certain zones of expertise and control. Sporting spaces are not passive, they actively shape and are shaped by gendered power relations (van Ingen, 2003). Lefebvre's triad highlights how the boxing gym remains a contested terrain where conceived spaces (administrative and institutional plans) and perceived spaces (everyday routines and interactions) often fail to align with women's lived experiences, leaving inclusion symbolic rather than substantive. Women's inclusion is therefore structured by organisational agendas rather than their needs, reinforcing unequal power relations embedded within an ostensibly neutral spatial design.

Lived Space: Normalisation, Resistance, and Everyday Negotiation

The normalisation of female boxing occurs within a spatial context shaped by persistent gender stereotypes. As Lefebvre (1991) argues, space is not a neutral container but is produced through social practices that reflect power relations. Boxing gyms, as hypermasculine spaces, often position female bodies as anomalies with their presence both hyper visible and out of place. One incident from a coaching course illustrates this. When a female participant arrived with a black eye sustained during training, a male attendee joked that she must have been assaulted by a partner. This “banter” reveals how the gym can act as a site where normative assumptions about women’s vulnerability are projected, even when their injuries are the result of sport participation, not victimhood. Here, women’s embodied presence in traditionally masculine space is not only questioned but reinterpreted through heteronormative and patriarchal logics (Halbert, 1997; Messner, 2002; Connell, 2005b).

Female boxers are often looked upon as trespassing into territory not designed for them, disrupting the expected configurations of gendered space (Wacquant, 1992; Puwar, 2004). For example, Helen describes being regularly ignored by male coaches who assumed female athletes lacked seriousness. Such passive exclusion effectively reasserts the symbolic boundaries of the gym as male space, marginalising women through omission rather than open hostility. The result is a gendered division of spatial attention and authority. Beyond such explicit interactions, gendered norms are reinforced through bodily expectations. Lindsey recalls being told by her school mates at around thirteen or fourteen that her athletic physique was “too masculine,” and that she would “never be a girl” unless she quit. These remarks represent attempts to discipline the female athletic body back into what is considered as socially acceptable from a visual perspective. The boxing gym therefore becomes a site that generates a body that is contrary to normative femininity. Such bodies are then policed both inside and outside of the gym, challenging the spatial legitimacy of female boxers (Theberge, 1997; Halbert, 1997).

This policing of belonging is also exemplified by the routine allocation of poor-quality coaching, training opportunities, ring time for sparring and competition schedules which favour the male competitive boxer over the women participants. Ruby, a thirty-nine-year-old coach and retired amateur boxer noted when discussing inclusion approaches, such as women only sessions and sessions for LGBTQ+ boxers, “it's fine having these… exclusionary ladies only type sessions, but don't give them the shit coach”. She also recounted that when she was asked to participate in a roundtable discussion on inclusion strategy in boxing, not only on the irony of being the only queer, and the only female included in an otherwise entirely white, heterosexual, male panel, but also how belittled she felt when one of the other participants asked “what club do you box for?”. She replied “Oh, actually, I don't box for a club” to which he replied, “Oh but you said you were a boxer”. When recounting this experience Ruby exclaimed,

you've gone straight into the woman to basically say, if you're not currently a competitive boxer, then you shouldn't call yourself a boxer. Whereas for me, you're a boxer if you fucking get into a gym, any gym, and you put on some boxing gloves, and you hit something or someone.

Mia, a thirty-year-old competitive boxer and qualified coach explained that in her experience, male coaches tended to favour the elite male competitors when it came to pad work because they "make you look good". As a coach as well as a boxer, she rationalised that this must be the primary reason for their desire to pad the best boxers because had they spent time with the boxers earlier in their training journey, the uplift in technique would be much higher. As she puts it "[a male]elite… might get 0.1% better" whereas less experienced boxers "might improve 10% because we're just at a different part of the journey". Further to this acknowledgment of differential consideration of pad time with the coaches, Mia noted that after she had her first competitive win, the coaches were more inclined towards spending time with her. She recounts feeling that "you didn't give a fuck about me when I was shit, now that I win a fight… you want to pad me". This reflects the findings of Dortants and Knoppers (2016) who note that coaches often show increased interest in women boxers when they show competitive potential as personal ambitions to produce a champion may be realised more quickly in the smaller pool of competitors in women's boxing but it also highlights the dynamic and interrelated aspects of space in Lefebvrian terms which saw a shift in perceived and lived space for Mia who now had access to "elite" coaching due to her success.

Despite these barriers, normalisation strategies have emerged to resist these gendered spatial codes. One key tactic is representational, consciously using language and coaching practices that normalise female inclusion. Helen, now a head coach, deliberately uses female pronouns when giving training instructions and incorporates examples of elite female boxers such as Claressa Shields or Katie Taylor when talking about exemplars for technique. This discursive technique helps reconfigure who belongs and who can be imagined as a legitimate occupant of boxing space with all participants in the gyms training sessions, both male and female (Theberge, 1997). This spatial practice of normalising the presence of women in coaching and leadership roles, as Helen notes, helps to legitimise the presence of other female athletes, altering the visual and organisational landscape of the gym. Having women in leadership roles actively shapes the environment, contesting the androcentrism that previously defined it and providing spatial affirmation of female presence not as an exception, but as a new norm (Massey, 2012). Female coaching staff visibly and institutionally affirm that women belong in the space not only as participants, but as authorities. This shifts both the spatial order and the power dynamics of the gym, reconfiguring it as a site of potential gender

inclusivity. Language plays a fundamental role in shaping both identity and reality, reconstructing the spatial imagination of who can be a boxer (Butler, 2021). Also, by invoking female champions like Claressa Shields or Katie Taylor as technical role models expands the symbolic repertoire of boxing expertise, ensuring that excellence is not always mapped onto male bodies (Tjønndal, 2019).

4.8.7 Conclusion

The struggle for women's equitable presence in boxing gyms must be understood not only as a fight for physical space but also for recognition, respect, and the right to define their own identities within the sport. This study underscores the contested nature of space within boxing gyms, where female boxers must continually negotiate both their physical and symbolic inclusion. Despite some progress toward gender inclusion, spatial inequalities remain deeply entrenched, shaped by a complex interplay of institutional policies, cultural norms, and embodied performances of gender. These inequalities manifest not only in access to physical spaces but also in the social dynamics that regulate who is seen, heard, and valued within these environments. Space as inherently social and political, and power relations are both produced and contested through everyday practices.

Using Lefebvre's framework (1991), this paper concludes that women's presence in the boxing gym may be considered as inclusion on a symbolic level. Although women's increased participation may suggest that the boxing gym is an open and inclusive space, the underlying spatial arrangements and discursive practices frequently undermine this supposition. By looking at both the perceived and conceived aspects of gym space reveals how its apparent inclusivity may obscure enduring uneven geographies of power. For women, in particular, experiences of exclusion, resistance, and empowerment emerge through the interaction of these spatial dimensions. The conceived space of boxing continues to be organised through masculine norms of toughness, discipline, and authority, while the perceived space remains structured around male bodies. The lived space for women is therefore full of contradiction. Women are physically included, but often only on the condition that they adapt themselves to existing spatial arrangements. True inclusion would require a critical reconfiguration of the spatial, institutional, and policy structures that continue to privilege male bodies and masculinised practices.

This research then, highlights the necessity of adopting a spatial and gendered analytical framework to fully grasp the ongoing challenges faced by female boxers. It calls for continued critical attention to the ways in which power operates spatially within sporting environments and advocates for policies and practices that move beyond mere inclusion toward genuine transformation and empowerment. It shows why we must continue to study

the everyday, and to do so with a particular focus on gendered spatial dynamics. At a governance level, this would require England Boxing to embed gendered spatial analysis into policy development, mandating equitable access to coaching, competition, and facilities. By further implementing governance structures that hold clubs accountable for delivering meaningful inclusion, moving beyond symbolic inclusion becomes more achievable. At the club level, rethinking daily practices to ensure fair ring-time allocation, diversifying coaching leadership, challenging gendered assumptions that shape training routines, and designing gym environments and timetables that actively support women's progression, structural and everyday reforms can see the sport move from conditional access towards genuinely equitable participation.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This thesis set out to explore the lived experiences of women participating in boxing in England through an ethnographic study conducted over six years. Through a combination of fieldwork observations, online interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the development of a novel "kit bag encounter" elicitation method, it offers a multi-layered account of how gender, embodiment, material culture, and spatial practices shape women's experiences of belonging and identity in a traditionally masculine sporting environment.

Women's participation in boxing is shown to be simultaneously enabling and constraining. Boxing offers women opportunities to inhabit powerful, skilled, and agentic sporting identities, yet these possibilities arise within, and are continually shaped by gendered material, spatial, and institutional conditions that have historically privileged men's presence, movement, and bodily legitimacy. The findings reveal a sport which is in a state of transition, increasingly welcoming women symbolically, yet continuing to reproduce structural and cultural conditions that render their inclusion partial, conditional, or precarious. This conclusion chapter draws together the methodological, empirical, and theoretical insights from across the three papers, consolidating their contribution to the sociology of sport and illuminating the wider significance of women's boxing as a site for examining gendered forms of belonging, resistance, and embodiment.

This final chapter of the thesis begins by presenting the key findings and significant contributions to knowledge. The chapter concludes by summarising the strengths and limitations, implications for policy and practice and possibilities for future research.

5.2 Key Findings and Contributions

The primary aim of the research presented in this thesis was to conduct an ethnographic exploration of the lived experience of women who participate in the sport of boxing in the Midlands region of the UK. This is relevant due to the increase in women who participate in boxing both in the UK and globally since the sport was introduced for women to compete for the first time after a to the Olympics in 2012 and the lack of current research in this area. This project is original in that it set out to explore the experiences of women who box in the UK by immersing myself in the environment where women train and compete, spending an extended period of time with them in these locations. By both experiencing the culture of boxing from a female perspective whilst taking on an observant participant role in boxing gyms and competitive environments and gaining first hand narratives from women and men who are

actively engaged in the world of women's boxing, this project had been conceived of as a traditional ethnographic endeavour. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the methods had to be creatively adjusted to maintain the essence of ethnographic research in the absence of access to field sites. This added to the originality of the contribution as it resulted in the development of a method which can be used to explore embodied experiences using material items as elicitation tools in situ. This research is original and fills the gap in knowledge using ethnographic methods to research the experiences of women who box in England, UK. The next section critically discusses how the research objectives were addressed throughout the thesis, and the key contributions of each paper from a methodological, conceptual and theoretical perspective.

5.2.1 Lived Experience of Women Boxers

The first research objective was to examine the lived experiences of women within the boxing community and to consider the relationship between boxing, identity and a sense of belonging. This theme has been present throughout the thesis, being touched on in all three papers. Overall, the use of ethnographic methods such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews and the development of an original elicitation method that accessed the embodied experiences of women as they interacted with the contents of their kit bags, all contributed to a deep understanding of the lived experiences of women in the boxing community. In addition, by also interviewing men and women who worked with women who boxed either from a coach, judge, development or medical support role gave deeper insight into the differences between men's and women's experiences from an outsider's perspective. Although there are few direct references to the contributions of these participants as they were not the focus of the research, the insights shared by these participants enriched the data gathered and offered an additional lens through which to examine the data.

The research findings from paper one demonstrated that boxing equipment does not only offer protection but they also act as artefacts deeply entangled with identity. Many objects signified transitions into and out of the boxer identity, embodied belonging and ritual. Paper one also revealed that women's relationships with their kit were shaped by gendered experiences of access. With kit often ill-fitting or hard to source, this affected their sense of belonging and legitimacy (Kay, 2014). Personalised items, equipment that had been adapted for fit, or discarded clothing such as their first unguided purchase that offered no practical protection but held emotional memories, along with items associated with a competitive success, helped women carve out emotional space in the gym, asserting ownership, knowledge and belonging (Entwistle, 2000; Woodward, 2019). This paper offered a methodological contribution which can be implemented across many fields where unique

equipment is required, specifically in sports and industries where an individual would carry their own equipment, to and from the usual place where it is used. The method was particularly rich in eliciting transitional experiences of the participants as they navigated from one identity to another.

Paper one makes a foundational contribution to understanding women's experiences within the boxing community by illuminating how identity and belonging are negotiated through intimate, material encounters with boxing kit. The innovative method presented in paper one enabled women to articulate forms of embodied knowledge that are difficult to capture through interviews alone, providing a direct window into the emotional, sensory, and symbolic dimensions of everyday boxing practice. By grounding analysis in the material objects women carry, choose, modify, and care for, the study foregrounds how belonging is not simply a cognitive or social orientation but is produced through habitual engagements with the tools of the sport. Through these artefacts, participants communicated narratives of "becoming" a boxer. This material lens revealed identity work undertaken by female boxers navigating cultural expectations in a male-coded environment, using the contents of their kit bags to negotiate and narrate their place within the boxing community. Objects symbolised transition from newcomer to competent fighter, but the kit bag and its contents also served as a boundary, demarcating their identities both inside and outside the gym. The method therefore allowed belonging to be explored as a deeply embodied, materially mediated phenomenon, offering an innovative perspective on how women come to embody a true sense of belonging in spaces where their presence historically, and to some extent still does, lack recognition. By capturing these lived, material experiences, paper one offers foundation to the first thesis objective by demonstrating that identity formation for female boxers occurs not only in social interactions or performances of competence but also in the sensory relationships they cultivate with the material objects of the sport. This methodological innovation provided the groundwork for the second paper's deeper empirical exploration of material culture and gender.

Building on the insight from paper one, paper two extends the analysis by examining how material culture actively shapes women's identities and experiences in mixed-gender boxing spaces. While the first paper foregrounded material objects as elicitation devices, paper two demonstrates the constitutive power of material culture, how specific material items and the broader material culture, mould bodily practices, mediate social recognition, and influence women's sense of belonging within the boxing community (Entwistle, 2000; Crane, 2001; Thorpe *et al*., 2023). The paper shows that the fit, form, and design of boxing kit are never neutral. Women frequently encounter equipment designed for male bodies, forcing bodily adaptations that mark their difference even as they seek to assert legitimacy. Such misalignment between body and object can undermine competence, comfort, and confidence, reminding women that the sport's normative user is not them. Conversely, when equipment

fits well or aligns with women's bodily needs, it can facilitate belonging and reinforce a coherent boxing identity (Channon and Matthews, 2018a). The paper further highlights that clothing choices, whether to adopt masculine-coded kit, modify male equipment, or embrace feminine-coded colours, become strategic decisions through which women negotiate authenticity, respectability, and visibility. These negotiations reveal the tension between expressing individuality and meeting the unspoken requirements of legitimacy in a historically masculine arena. Building on the insights from paper one, paper two extends the analysis by demonstrating that the material culture of boxing is not limited to physical objects but includes the broader institutional, ritual, and cultural systems through which boxing is organised and experienced. While paper one showed how material objects could elicit memories, emotions, and identities, paper two foregrounds how the entire material environment of boxing actively shapes women's identities and experiences in mixed-gender boxing spaces. In this sense, material culture is conceptualised not as a collection of objects but as a network of cultural and institutional practices that mediate belonging, legitimacy, and social recognition. Paper two therefore contributes to the first objective of this thesis by demonstrating that the material culture of boxing is central to how women navigate gendered power relations, construct identity, and position themselves within the community. Belonging is produced not only socially but materially. It depends on the capacity to inhabit equipment that supports bodily performance, affirms identity, and signals membership to others. The paper shows that women's lived experiences are profoundly shaped by these material interactions, making material culture a crucial axis of the identity–belonging relationship within the boxing community.

While the first two papers focus primarily on material objects, culture, and embodied practice, paper three addresses the spatial dimensions of belonging through a Lefebvrian analysis of boxing culture. It demonstrates that women's experiences and identities are inseparable from the spaces they occupy, revealing how boxing gyms are socially produced environments structured by historically masculine norms, rhythms, and spatial arrangements (Massey, 2011). Through Lefebvre's spatial triad - spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces - the paper shows how women navigate, contest, and reinterpret boxing's spatial organisation (Lefebvre, 1991). Spatial practices such as access to training spaces, equipment placement, sparring rotations, competition running order and coach attention are shown to be central to how women understand their position within the gym hierarchy. The paper reveals that belonging is both facilitated and restricted by these spatial dynamics. While women may feel included at a governance level and during structured training sessions, they often encounter exclusion or surveillance when attempting to inhabit informal or prestigious spaces, such as the boxing ring or the competitive side of the sport revealing symbolic rather than true inclusion. Gender-coded messages reinforce the gym's masculine

genealogy, shaping expectations about who belongs. The lived, emotional, and imagined spaces of boxing, or representational spaces in Lefebvrian terms, capture the internal negotiations women undertake to inhabit these environments, balancing confidence, ambition, and resistance. By situating women's identity formation within these spatial and symbolic structures, paper three demonstrates that belonging is not merely a matter of social acceptance but of spatial legitimacy. The right to occupy, move confidently within, and lay claim to boxing's physical and symbolic spaces. This analysis deepens the thesis objective by showing that identity and belonging are co-constructed through the material organisation of the gym, the symbolic meanings attached to space, and the everyday spatial practices that women must learn, negotiate, or challenge. Paper three therefore contributes a crucial spatial lens to the understanding of women's experiences, revealing the dynamic interplay between power, space, and identity in the boxing community.

Taken together, the three papers offer a multi-layered understanding of how women experience the boxing community and negotiate identity and belonging through material, embodied, and spatial practices. Paper one foregrounds the relationship between women and their equipment, demonstrating that belonging often begins at the level of personal objects that anchor the boxer's identity, carry emotional histories, and provide continuity across training spaces. Paper two extends this insight by showing that the material culture of boxing operates not only through equipment and clothing but through the institutional structures and ritual practices that organise everyday life in the gym. It demonstrates that material culture is an active force in shaping bodily practice and social recognition, revealing that women's belonging is mediated by more than the physical kit they use. Institutional decisions such as gender-specific safety regulations, competition rules, and training protocols constitute a material framework that configures whose bodies are imagined as normative and whose are positioned as exceptional. These policies encode gendered assumptions about risk, legitimacy, and capability, influencing how women move, train, and are evaluated by others. Paper three complements and deepens these findings by situating identity and belonging within the spatial logics of boxing gyms, illustrating how women navigate, resist, and reinterpret the masculine-coded landscapes that structure daily practice. Across all three papers, the boxing community emerges as a space where identity is constantly produced through interactions between bodies, objects, and spatial arrangements. By integrating material, embodied, and spatial analyses, the thesis provides a comprehensive account of how women's experiences of boxing are shaped not only by social relations but by the everyday material and spatial conditions that make belonging possible but also have the potential to prevent a sense of belonging developing.

5.2.2 Notions of Femininity in the Boxing Gym

The second objective of the thesis was to examine how notions of femininity are negotiated within the traditionally male spaces of the boxing environment. Paper one demonstrates that femininity is negotiated not only through visible performance in the boxing gym but also through sensory engagements with material objects. The “kit bag encounter” method revealed the ways women use equipment to manage, rework, or resist gendered expectations. Through objects women articulated how femininity is maintained, muted, or deliberately reconfigured. While women’s entry into boxing already constitutes a transgression of normative gendered boundaries, paper one shows that femininity does not disappear at the gym door or by virtue of the women being ensconced in the world of boxing. Instead, women maintain and reconfigure selective femininity within the gym, to remain legible as serious about the sport of boxing, whilst also embracing their muscular physique and using it to present a new type of femininity outside the gym (Krane *et al.*, 2004). These identity negotiations highlight that femininity is neither wholly rejected nor passively reproduced. It instead was shown to emerge through deliberate and often strategic engagements with material items that support women’s capacity to fit into a masculinised environment while holding onto aspects of gendered selfhood that matter to them. Paper one therefore positions the negotiation of femininity as a materially grounded process, enacted through everyday rituals of preparation and bodily maintenance.

Paper two extends these insights by situating femininity within the broader terrain of material culture, understood not merely as physical equipment but as the full constellation of rules, policies, institutional practices, and governance structures through which boxing is organised. This widened lens reveals that femininity is negotiated at multiple scales. For example, clothing and equipment are governed by organisational regulations specifying what is permitted, required, or prohibited, and these rules often reproduce gendered assumptions about women’s bodies. The stipulation that breast and groin protectors are not mandatory for women where male groin guards are, the historical imposition of headguards for women (but not men), and the androcentric sizing of kit items such as gloves all legitimise the notion that women’s bodies require different kinds of protection, surveillance, or modification. These governance practices constitute material culture as a normative system that positions femininity as fragile, needing oversight, or otherwise incompatible with the embodied demands of combat sport (Mennesson, 2000). Institutional governance therefore symbolically regulates women’s presence in boxing. Paper two demonstrates that while women may manipulate clothing and equipment to suit their needs, these acts occur within a material and institutional field that continues to routinely privilege masculine norms. The negotiation of femininity therefore occurs not only in how the body is physically presented but also in relation to the

gendered infrastructure that shapes boxing as a sport. Women continue to challenge these structures, demanding equity in weight classes and ring time, but are often forced to comply with existing structures to gain legitimacy and recognition. Paper two reveals the pervasive ways femininity is regulated, constrained, and contested through both physical artefacts and the governance systems that assign them meaning.

Paper three examines femininity through the spatial logics of the boxing gym, demonstrating how feminine identities are negotiated within the routines and architectures of spaces historically designed for men. Using Lefebvre's spatial triad, the paper shows how femininity is shaped by the interaction of perceived space (includes the material environment such as punch bags, boxing rings, and the moving bodies that interact with them), conceived space (encompasses the structuring rules, routines, and discourses that regulate the gym), and lived space (the subjective and affective experiences of participants, from exclusion to empowerment, depending on identity and positioning). Feminine presence offers the potential to disrupt the expected flows of masculine-coded spatial practice but instead often adapts to maintain the power structures which favour the androcentric norms.

Women are often forced to adjust their spatial behaviour to maintain legitimacy, adopting forms of spatial discipline such as avoiding peak male training times, modifying movement patterns to avoid intrusion, or managing bodily comportment to avoid appearing timid or overly assertive. These micro-negotiations reveal that femininity is not only performed through objects and bodies but is literally mapped into space. Paper three also shows that women's ongoing negotiation or reworking of space such as claiming ring time, creating micro-communities of support, or asking for senior coach support, demonstrates how femininity is renegotiated through practices of subtle spatial resistance. The boxing gym becomes a dynamic environment in which femininity is constantly reinterpreted in relation to spatial hierarchies, visibility, and the politics of belonging.

Across the three papers, a clear and coherent narrative emerges that suggests femininity in boxing is not a fixed identity but a fluid, negotiated, and materially situated practice shaped by bodily routines, the structuring logics of sport's material culture, and the spatial politics of an androcentric environment. Paper one illustrates how femininity is negotiated through personal material rituals, where equipment helps women articulate their identities in ways that both conform to and challenge the boundaries of boxing normativity. Paper two situates these negotiations within a wider material-cultural and institutional field, showing that femininity is not simply self-fashioned but shaped through governance systems, protective equipment rules, spatial policies, and organisational hierarchies that implicitly encode gender difference. Paper three reveals how femininity is negotiated spatially, as women navigate environments saturated with masculine histories and embodied hierarchies, producing femininity through practices of spatial adaptation, occupation, and resistance. Together, these

papers demonstrate that femininity in boxing is produced through the interplay between material objects, institutional-material structures, and spatial practices. Women's negotiations of femininity emerge as dynamic, everyday acts of boundary-work through which they assert belonging, legitimacy, and identity in a sport that has long been defined through masculinised ideals. The research shows that femininity is not erased in the boxing gym, it is actively reconfigured through complex interactions between bodies, spaces, and material cultures. This integrated understanding of femininity highlights the contribution of the thesis to broader feminist sport sociology, emphasising that gender in boxing is not merely performed but materially and spatially produced, contested, and continually reimagined.

5.2.3 Gendered Power Relations in Women's Boxing

The final research objective was to develop an understanding of the dynamics of power related to gender within the environment of the boxing gyms and explore how these may impact identity. Paper one contributes to the understanding of gendered power dynamics by revealing how material rituals become sites where power is both enacted and felt. The "kit bag encounter" method illuminated the everyday negotiations through which women manage gendered expectations and vulnerability within the boxing gym. Power in these accounts operated at the micro level in how women prepared their bodies, managed discomfort, or performed resilience through their interaction with equipment. The kit contained in the kit bags became tools through which women regulated their visibility and legitimacy. Women were aware that having the "right" kit signalled seriousness and capability and earned them legitimacy within the boxing community. This contributed to a feeling of confidence, and an embodied sense of identity as a boxer but also heightened their awareness that having the "wrong" kit risked judgement and positioned them as an outsider.

The material world thus acted as both a buffer against and a facilitator of gendered power. Women articulated the psychological weight of entering male-dominated spaces, where they felt like their movements were scrutinised and where equipment choices could signal belonging or difference. The need to present oneself as belonging in the boxing gym extends beyond the physical ownership of the correct equipment to the presentation of knowledge around the correct way to move, the language used and the awareness of the sports history and this was experienced as a form of emotional labour. This labour, while empowering for some, also carries mental health implications. Participants described anxiety about being taken seriously and not only held fear of being dismissed as "too girly" but became critical of others who they regarded as not respectful of the sport due to wearing makeup or matching gym wear to the gym. They also felt pressured to hide emotional reactions to pain or injury to maintain credibility and recounted occasions when they had been disappointed in

themselves for showing that they were upset in the gym setting. Paper one therefore situates women's sense of belonging within the rituals of sporting life, showing how gendered power circulates through material routines that shape emotional states, sense of belonging, and bodily confidence.

Paper two advances the analysis by examining power not only at the level of interpersonal dynamics but within the structural and institutional systems that constitute boxing's material culture. Power is visible in the policies, rules, organisational decisions, and governance practices that shape women's participation. Boxing's institutional architecture (competition regulations, equipment standards, safeguarding protocols, medical screening requirements, development pathways, and club policies) embeds gendered assumptions that have direct implications for both identity and belonging. Institutionally mandated equipment such as the requirement for headguards only for women and children reflect discourses of fragility and risk, positioning female bodies as inherently vulnerable. This can undermine confidence or reinforce the belief that women must be protected and that men do not require the same protection. Further, these policies often lack clear scientific justification, making them more reflective of cultural anxieties about femininity than evidence-based concerns. Similarly, unequal access to ring time, coaching expertise, sponsorship, and competitive opportunities constitutes a structural form of power that shapes women's development, self-worth, and sense of belonging. When women are denied equal access to sparring partners or relegated to lighter training, not only is their sense of legitimacy undermined but their physical progression is limited, further exacerbating the issue of belonging.

Paper two also demonstrates that institutional power can manifest as bureaucratic exclusion. Governance structures that privilege men through male-dominated boards, committees, coaching courses, and club leadership, can shape the everyday environment in ways that marginalise women's voices, concerns, and safety. These structural inequities have mental health implications leading to feelings of marginalisation, frustration, invisibility, and self-doubt which emerge when the system itself appears not to recognise women as full subjects. In contrast, paper two also shows that women can and do resist institutional power by forming informal support networks and pushing the established governance structure to reconfigure the established rules to not only meet their needs but get closer to an equitable environment for all participants. Nevertheless, the unequal terrain remains visible to all participants, affecting their sense of belonging and demonstrating the profound role of organisational power in shaping identity.

Paper three addresses power through a spatial lens, drawing on Lefebvre's spatial triad to show how the physical and symbolic architecture of the boxing gym shapes gendered power relations and its effect on identity and belonging. Prevailing masculine organisational priorities which embed power structurally into the environment such as informal rules about who spars

with whom or gets coaching priority reveals how these structures are enacted and policed. The emotional and psychological dimensions of training or lived space in Lefebvrian terms capture how women navigate feelings of anxiety, confidence, and belonging within an androcentric environment. Spatial power is exercised through visibility, surveillance, and movement. Participants described a sense of hypervisibility when training among men, feeling watched, judged, or assessed against male counterparts for legitimacy and skill. This surveillance can induce stress, self-monitoring, and a desire to prove oneself physically, sometimes pushing women to train through injury or suppress fear. Conversely, invisibility also operates as a form of power. Women may be overlooked for sparring opportunities, ignored during padwork rotations, or sidelined during coaching explanations. These spatial exclusions can erode confidence and reinforce inequities. The organisation of gym space also shapes women's bodily autonomy. The ring often functions as a symbolic centre of power with those who occupy it recognised as legitimate fighters. Therefore, when women have limited access to the ring, or are asked to make way for men's sparring, the denial of spatial centrality and legitimacy reinforces gender hierarchy and limits opportunities for skill development. This spatial marginalisation can have effects on both physical wellbeing (limited sparring reduces physiological adaptation and skill acquisition) and mental wellbeing (reinforcing feelings of inferiority or exclusion). Paper three therefore demonstrates that power within boxing is not only interpersonal or institutional but spatially encoded, and that negotiating this spatial order has tangible emotional and physical consequences.

Across the thesis, a multilayered analysis of power emerges, showing that gendered power within boxing gyms is enacted through material, institutional, and spatial arrangements that collectively shape women's sense of belonging. Paper one highlights micro-power and the emotional labour of material practices, showing how women internalise, negotiate, and sometimes resist gendered expectations through the intimate handling of equipment. Paper two expands the frame to examine structural and institutional power, demonstrating that governance systems and organisational cultures shape women's opportunities, risks, and emotional conditions within the sport. Paper three reveals how power is spatially organised, showing how visibility, movement, and spatial access produce feelings of legitimacy or marginalisation that directly influence identity and belonging. Together, the three papers demonstrate that gendered power in boxing is entangled across layers of everyday embodied practice, formal organisational structures, and the physical configuration of gym environments. These power relations affect women by shaping how safe, valued, confident, or anxious they feel, and by determining the extent to which their bodies can develop within the sport. Women's strategies of resistance such as forming supportive peer networks, claiming space, or strategically performing a new femininity reveal agency but also underscore the persistence of an unequal terrain. The thesis therefore contributes a nuanced understanding of how

gendered power circulates through boxing's material, spatial, and institutional worlds, and how these dynamics contour women's identity and sense of belonging in ways that are both subtle and profound.

Across all three papers, the thesis demonstrates that power operates simultaneously at institutional, interpersonal, material, and spatial levels. Women's experiences reveal a multi-layered system in which symbolic power defines who is considered a "real" boxer, material power determines whose bodies equipment fits, whose bodies belong and who must adapt, spatial power shapes where women stand, move, and feel legitimate, and institutional power governs who receives opportunities, coaching attention, and visibility. This multi-dimensional analysis advances the theoretical landscape by showing that gender inequality in sport is not a single phenomenon but a complex system within which there is much to be negotiated. It is reproduced and challenged through everyday interactions with objects, spaces, and routines. Women's acts of adaptation and resistance demonstrate how agency is enacted within constraint. This framework underscores that gender equity cannot be achieved through policy alone, it requires attention to the material and spatial infrastructures through which power circulates. The boxing gym is thus a microcosm that illuminates broader sociological questions about how gender is materially and spatially embedded in institutions.

5.3 Contributions to knowledge

A core contribution of this thesis lies in its methodological innovation. Conducted in the midst of unprecedented disruption to fieldwork, the study developed creative, robust, and theoretically grounded approaches to ethnography that have relevance well beyond the study of boxing thus advancing material culture methods in sport research. This research also demonstrates the value of sensory and object-elicitation approaches and introduces an embodied approach to interviewing with object elicitation and interaction.

One of the most significant methodological developments was the creation and application of the kit bag encounter, introduced in paper one. This method emerged not merely as a practical workaround in response to COVID-19 restrictions, but as a theoretically informed innovation grounded in material methods and embodied sociology. Although it was not an explicit objective at the inception of the project, its development demonstrates the agility of ethnographic research, allowing an ethnographic sensibility to be sustained when traditional in-person methods were unavailable. Presenting the central concept that the sport specific material objects that are selected, carried, used and cared for can serve as entry points into recounting embodied experience, proved particularly useful in opening conversations rarely elicited through conventional interviews. This method demonstrated that objects such as gloves, wraps, gumshields, skipping ropes, or boots hold personal, emotional, and symbolic

importance for boxers. They function not only as tools of practice but as artefacts that accumulate meaning over time. Asking participants to select items from their own bags reoriented the interview from abstract memory recall to immediate embodied responses to interaction with each item, enabling memories, sensory responses, and embodied histories to surface organically. By bridging sensory and narrative methods, it provided an opportunity for participants to express non-verbalised understandings of their sporting experiences. By foregrounding the material objects as elicitation devices, an embodied and emotional response to interview prompts was achieved. This destabilised the more traditional researcher led interview approach, allowing the objects to guide the trajectory of the encounter further providing a participatory and non-hierarchical structure which aligns with feminist commitments to reduce power imbalances in the interview encounter. In doing so, the thesis adds to the expanding repertoire of qualitative methods that seek to access lived experience, not only through words but through material interaction, extending the work of scholars such as Pink (2015), Allen-Collinson (2009), Brown (2024) and Woodward (2014). It demonstrates that material methods provide a methodological approach through which the researcher and participant co-produce knowledge.

The thesis contributes to ethnographic methodology by showing that creative flexibility grounded in ethnographic sensibility can access and recover forms of embodied knowledge even without physical co-presence in the research field. This innovative approach offers a transferable model for future research disrupted by crisis, distance, or inaccessibility. The resultant combination of object-elicitation conversations, online interviews, in-gym observations, and sensory fieldnotes produced a thick, multi-modal dataset. Strong rapport with participants contributed to candid, detailed accounts of their experiences. The reflexive positioning of the researcher as a practitioner in the sport further enhanced the depth of insight. This revealed the complexity of women's lived experiences which may not have been exposed using a less rigorous methods of data collection.

This thesis makes a distinct theoretical contribution by bringing Lefebvre's spatial theory into dialogue with Foucault and Butler to offer a multi-dimensional account of gendered identity and belonging in boxing. While each theorist offers a distinct analytical lens, their integration reveals the multi-layered nature of power operating across spatial, discursive, and embodied domains. Lefebvre's spatial triad provides the central framework through which the boxing gym is understood not as a neutral setting, but as a socially produced space in which gendered inequalities are materially and symbolically organised. By analysing the interplay between perceived, conceived, and lived space, this thesis demonstrates how gendered belonging is continuously negotiated through everyday practices, institutional structures, and embodied experiences, extending sociological work in sport by showing how inequalities are actively produced and stabilised through spatial organisation.

Foucault's conceptualisation of power deepens this analysis by illuminating how disciplinary practices operate within the gym environment. Power circulates through routine practices such as training regimes, surveillance, and the regulation of bodies, requiring female boxers to demonstrate discipline, resilience, and conformity to established norms in order to be recognised as legitimate participants. These processes reflect the uneven application of power, reinforcing gendered expectations about strength, toughness, and legitimacy. The boxing gym therefore operates as a site of both regulation and potential resistance, where bodies are shaped through power but not wholly determined by it.

Butler's theory of gender performativity further complements this analysis by foregrounding how gender is constituted through repeated acts rather than fixed attributes. Within the boxing gym, femininity and masculinity are actively produced through embodied practices and interactions. Female boxers must navigate a complex terrain in which performing competence in boxing can affirm their sporting legitimacy while simultaneously disrupting normative gender expectations. This tension reveals the instability of gender categories and highlights how belonging is contingent upon the successful negotiation of these performative demands, while also holding the potential for their reconfiguration.

Taken together, this analysis foregrounds the spatial production of gendered inequality and contributes to a growing body of work within the sociology of sport that positions sporting environments not as neutral settings, but as active sites of power. By bringing Lefebvre into dialogue with Foucault and Butler, this thesis advances understanding of how gendered identities and inequalities are produced, experienced, and contested across spatial, institutional, and embodied dimensions. It demonstrates the value of integrating spatial theory into analyses of gender in sport and calls for a shift beyond symbolic inclusion towards more substantive, structural transformation. Only by addressing the spatial, discursive, and embodied conditions under which participation occurs can more meaningful and enduring forms of gender equity in sport be realised.

The thesis brings together feminist theory, phenomenology, material methods, material culture studies, and spatial theory. This interdisciplinary synthesis offers a nuanced account of gender that connects macro power structures with micro bodily practices. Women's boxing remains comparatively under-examined. This project therefore provides an important empirical record of a moment of significant growth and transformation within the sport.

5.4 Limitations

The COVID-19 pandemic's disruption limited opportunities for long-term immersion in gyms. Although methodological adaptations produced rich data, certain embodied dynamics such as inter-athlete interactions, emotional atmospheres during competition, and coach–

athlete relations may have been less fully captured. There was also less opportunity to develop deep connections with participants which may have compromised the building of relationships and therefore trust although this did not manifest in the data gathered.

As an ethnographic project centred on two Midlands boxing gyms, the findings are contextually situated. While they offer theoretical insights applicable beyond the specific sites, they cannot claim representativeness of all women's boxing environments. The researcher's involvement as a practitioner provided depth but may have shaped participant responses or interpretations. Reflexive strategies mitigated this, yet the dual role remains a methodological tension. Similarly, on occasions where I was present in an observational capacity only, there were moments when I felt more visible as a researcher and consider that there may have been some "performance" elements from participants, but again, this was addressed by remaining reflexive in my research diary. The emphasis on women necessarily placed less attention on men's experiences in the research settings and beyond. Although men's presence shaped the social and material environment of gyms, their perspectives were not the primary focus of the study and were therefore not included in the analysis. A comparative gender analysis, while beyond the scope of this thesis, could yield further insight.

5.5 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this thesis have clear implications for those who shape the structures, cultures, and material conditions of boxing ranging from national governing bodies and regional associations to coaches, club owners, and boxing practitioners. Whilst women's boxing has advanced significantly in visibility and legitimacy since being recognised by the official governing body in 1996 and particularly since the 2012 London Olympics, this research demonstrates that inclusion remains uneven and deeply contingent on material, spatial, and cultural factors. Policies that seek growth in participation without addressing the embedded gendered dynamics of the sport risk reinforcing exclusion rather than alleviating it. Addressing these issues requires a shift from viewing inclusion as merely a matter of access to viewing it as requiring cultural transformation.

The research highlights that women's experiences in boxing gyms are shaped not only by interpersonal dynamics but by deep-seated spatial and institutional histories which remain centred on androcentric ideals. Reducing masculine territorial dominance by ensuring that women have equal access to rings, sparring opportunities, and coaching attention will reduce the sense of women being symbolically and spatially marginalised. By ensuring that women are neither over-protected nor unnecessarily excluded from mixed training spaces will create a more equitable culture, true inclusive practice and a sense of legitimacy which would help to encourage more women to partake in the sport at all levels. Additionally, by embedding

gender-awareness in coaching qualifications would equip them to recognise how micro-aggressions such as unequal ring time, lack of praise, gender comparisons, corrections, or dismissive comments accumulate into gendered hierarchies of legitimacy. Policies must move beyond creating separate women-only sessions, which can unintentionally reinforce difference, and instead address the structural roots of exclusion.

5.5.1 Material Barriers to Spatial Inclusion

Although there are now dedicated manufacturers producing equipment designed specifically for women without infantilising them through “feminised” colours, glitter, or sparkles, it remains essential that high-quality kit is accessible without a premium or “pink tax.” Affordable, functional equipment helps ensure that women feel confident that their kit will both protect them from injury and support their technical development. This is particularly important at the early stages of an amateur boxing career. When equipment is ill-fitting or inappropriate for women’s bodies, it can hinder progress and reinforce a sense of marginalisation. In these moments, material culture serves as a reminder that women still occupy a precarious position within many boxing spaces, both symbolically and spatially.

5.5.2 Governance and Leadership in Women’s boxing

Women’s inclusion in boxing extends beyond training spaces to the governance structures that shape the sport. The study highlights that female coaches and officials continue to experience microaggressions, invisibility, and lack of recognition, which diminish women’s leadership pathways. Policy rhetoric often outpaces cultural change, signalling inclusivity while retaining androcentric power structures within committees, selections, and reporting lines. Governing bodies therefore need to implement fully the gender-equity measures proposed at leadership level which as yet have not been fully integrated. By creating and maintaining transparent pathways for the recruitment, retention, and progression of women coaches, judges, and administrators a more stable and equitable governance environment can be created that represents the increasing number of women and girls who participate in the sport. This requires a shift from symbolic recognition to structural redistribution of power.

5.5.3 Boxing Gyms

Boxing gyms at every level should enhance inclusivity by avoiding gender-based segregation unless it is specifically requested by women themselves. Ensuring fair and equitable allocation of ring time, as well as access to senior coaching, would not only create

more opportunities for women to develop their skills but also foster more meaningful integration within the gym community. Such practices help normalise women's presence in the space, allowing their participation and achievements to be acknowledged by all who train and coach there. In addition to providing women with equal opportunities for technical and conditioning sparring, and equalising the ownership of training spaces, women should not be overprotected by assuming frailty either figuratively or literally. The governing body and gyms more broadly should work towards an increase in gender-awareness training for coaches, encouraging reflective coaching practice that supports diverse bodies, focussing on the prevalence and impact of microaggressions and gendered assumptions.

Continued attention should be invested in mentoring relationships, not only from a practitioners perspective, but across the entire boxing community from coaches to judges and other officials. Creating opportunities for collective training has proved popular between local clubs and across regions should be developed as the number of women participants increases to allow for a variety in training partners and coaching input which has long been a stable for the male participants in the sport. Further attention to the importance of well-fitting kit would not only improve the embodied experiences for women boxers who currently risk injury and diminished sense of belonging by wearing ill-fitting kit designed for the male frame, but it would also enhance the legitimacy of women in the boxing space. The normalisation of female specific kit in the boxing gym would recognise the importance of personal equipment as part of identity formation and offer the potential to minimise the trivialisation of feminine-coded colours.

5.6 Directions for Future Research

Although this study contributes significantly to the sociology of women's boxing, it also opens further avenues for inquiry. Future research could explore similarities and differences in material culture, embodiment, and spatial experience across other historically masculine martial arts such as mixed martial arts (MMA), Muay Thai, wrestling, or Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. Comparisons across these sports may highlight sport-specific dynamics or confirm broader gendered logics that structure women's participation across combat disciplines.

A longitudinal study following women from novice to competitive boxer and/or transitioning into coaching or officiating roles could illuminate how gendered identities evolve over time. Additionally, as an individual becomes less reliant on borrowed or ill-fitting kit and transitions to owning and personalising quality, gender appropriate equipment, how this impacts on an individual's identity as a boxer and their sense of belonging could be studied. Examining such transitions may deepen understanding of how belonging becomes

sedimented through repeated bodily practices and object use, particularly as women in the boxing space becomes more normalised.

Further to the study of gender within boxing, intersectional analysis which also examines how race, class, sexuality, disability and age shape women's experiences of identity formation and belonging in boxing. Intersectionality offers not only an analytic of difference but also a method for revealing how overlapping identities mediate access, legitimacy, and the emotional labour required to inhabit sporting spaces. Research might explore, how black women, queer women, or disabled women navigate boxing's hypermasculine norms differently from their white, heterosexual, or able-bodied peers. Such work would extend the findings of this thesis by showing how spatial inclusion and exclusion are organised not simply by gender, but through interlocking systems of power.

An additional area of future research and one which is politically relevant due to the current legislative and governance changes that are taking place in many sports is trans inclusion in boxing. While this thesis focused on cisgender women, the broader question of how gender-diverse athletes navigate combat sport spaces remains under-examined and politically fraught. Boxing's regulatory frameworks such as weight categories, medical requirements, and competition licensing, are all forms of institutional material culture that shape who is permitted to compete and under what conditions. Further study informed by trans studies could illuminate how boxing's sex-segregated structures reproduce particular norms of embodiment, how trans and non-binary boxers negotiate belonging, and how safety discourses are mobilised in ways that both include and exclude. This offers fertile ground for linking feminist, queer, and trans theoretical perspectives to Lefebvrian understandings of space as continually produced and contested.

This thesis set out to explore the lived experiences of women who box, combining ethnographic methods, material culture analysis, and feminist theory to analyse how gender is produced, challenged, and embodied in the boxing gym. Across the three papers, the thesis found that material culture is central to how boxers become boxers. Equipment is not just functional, it fundamentally shapes identity, legitimacy, and belonging. Gendered power structures persist, even in a landscape of growing visibility and recognition for women in the sport. Boxing gyms have the potential to both reproduce and interrupt the gendered organisation of space. Women's agency is expressed through bodies, objects, routines, and creative acts of resistance, not only through discourse.

5.7 Concluding Remarks

This thesis concludes that women's boxing is neither a site of empowerment nor one of oppression. It is a dynamic interplay between constraint and possibility which is enacted

through bodies, spaces, and material objects that both reproduce and transform gendered power. Women are neither outsiders nor fully integrated subjects, but they are practitioners actively reshaping boxing's cultural terrain. The thesis therefore demonstrates that sport is a critical site for examining broader social relations. The gym is not merely a training facility, it is a site of gendered power, identity production, and embodied resistance.

This thesis also advances theoretical understanding within the sociology of sport by demonstrating that gendered inequality in boxing is produced through the interaction of spatial organisation, disciplinary practices, and performative norms. By bringing Lefebvre's spatial triad into dialogue with Foucault and Butler, the research shows that women's belonging is not simply determined by access, but is continuously negotiated through embodied practice, institutional regulation, and the repeated performance of gender. In doing so, it highlights that boxing gyms are not neutral environments, but active sites where power operates across multiple dimensions. This integrated approach provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding how gendered identities are both constrained and reconfigured within sporting spaces, and underscores the need for structural, cultural, and spatial transformation to achieve meaningful inclusion.

This thesis contributes to the sociology of sport by revealing that women's boxing is a space where gender and femininity is continually being made and remade, through the everyday practices of wrapping hands, occupying space, and continually negotiating belonging.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Previous Combat Experience

Combat Sport	Conversion (other combat sport contest = EB contest) *After multiplication, round up to nearest whole number
White Collar Boxing	1 contest = 1 contest
Muay Thai	1 contest = 0.75 contest
Kickboxing (Full Contact)	1 contest = 0.75 contest
Kickboxing (Semi Contact)	1 contest = 0.5 contest
Karate (Full Contact)	1 contest = 0.75 contest
Karate (Semi Contact)	1 contest = 0.5 contest
Karate (Light/Points)	1 contest = 0.25 contest
Taekwondo	1 contest = 0.25 contest
MMA	1 contest = 0.75 contest
Judo	1-10 = 1, 11-20 = 2, 21-30 = 3, 31-40 = 4, 41-50 = 5, 50+ = 6
Wrestling	1-10 = 1, 11-20 = 2, 21-30 = 3, 31-40 = 4, 41-50 = 5, 50+ = 6
Boxing Skills bouts	1 contest = 0.5 contest

Appendix 2: Abridged Age Specific Rules for England Boxing

- The categories of Boxers are determined by the year that the Boxer is born and not date of birth, except for Minors where the category entry date is determined by date of birth.
- All Boxers under the age of 18 must have permission to compete from a parent or guardian. It is the responsibility of the coach to obtain parental or guardian permission before obtaining a Digital BCR1 for their Boxer.
- All Boxers under the age of 16 may take part in both competitive contests and skills bouts. All Skills Bouts are to be recorded in the Digital BCR1 and will equal ½ of an England Boxing bout.

Minors

- A Boxer is classed as a Minor from their 10th birthday until the end of the calendar year in which the Boxer celebrates their 11th birthday. A child under 10 years old may join a boxing club and participate in classes but is not permitted to box competitively, participate in a skills bout or spar.
- Minors may only be matched against other Boxers with an age gap of less than 12 months, this may include Schools Boxers.
- Bouts involving Minors are to adhere to the following round durations; Any bout involving a 10yr old Boxer = 3 x 1 minute rounds with a 1 minute rest interval. - Both Boxers are 11 years old = 3 x 1.5 minute rounds with a 1 minute rest interval.
- Boxers in the Minors category may not be matched with a weight difference in excess of 2kg, except in Championships.
- It is recommended that Minors shall be restricted to 10 contests per season including skills bouts but excluding England Boxing National Championships.

Schools

- The term Schools Boxer is an age category classifying Boxers by their year of birth, see Club Boxing Matrix.
- A Schools Boxer may only be matched against other Boxers with an age gap of less than 12 months, this may include matches against Minors Boxers and Junior Boxers.
- Bouts involving Schools Boxers are to adhere to the following round durations;
    - 10yr old v Schools Boxer are to be 3 x 1 minute rounds with a 1 minute rest interval.
    - Schools Boxer v Schools Boxer are to be 3 x 1.5 minute rounds with a 1 minute rest interval.
    - Schools Boxer v Junior Boxer are to be 3 x 1.5 minute rounds with a 1 minute rest interval.

- Schools Boxers may not be matched with a weight difference in excess of 2kg, except in Championships.
- It is recommended that Schools Boxer shall be restricted to 14 contests per season including skills bouts but excluding England Boxing National Championships.

Juniors

- The term Junior Boxer is an age category classifying Boxers by their year of birth, see Club Boxing Matrix.
- Junior Boxers may be matched against other Junior Boxers with an age gap of less than 24months; extra caution must be taken when matching Boxers with more than a 12-month age gap.
- Junior Boxers may be matched against Schools Boxers, with an age gap of less than 12 months.
- Junior Boxers may be matched against Youth Boxers, with an age gap of less than 12 months.
- Boxers must be matched at no greater weight difference than the smaller weight category of the 2 matched Boxers, for example: Red sits in the 65-68kg weight category (a 3kg span) and Blue sits in the 68-72kg weight category (a 4kg span) so the Boxers must be matched at no more than 3kg apart.
- It is recommended that Junior Boxers shall be restricted to 14 contests per season including skills bouts but excluding championships.

Youths

- The term Youth Boxer is an age category classifying Boxers by their year of birth, see Club Boxing Matrix.
- Youth Boxers may be matched against other Youth Boxers with an age gap of less than 24months; extra caution must be taken when matching Boxers with more than a 12-month age gap.
- Youth Boxers may be matched against Junior Boxers with an age gap of less than 12-months.
- Youth Boxers may be matched against Senior Boxers with an age gap of less than 12 months. In all such cases both Boxers are to wear head guards.
- Youth bouts may consist of 3 x 2 minute rounds or 3 x 3 minute rounds, all with a 1-minute rest interval between rounds.
- Boxers must be matched at no greater weight difference than the smaller weight category of the 2 matched Boxers, for example: Red is a Middleweight and Blue is a Light

Heavyweight, the Middleweight category spans from 71-75kg (4kg) and the Light Heavyweight category spans from 75-80kg (5kg) so the Boxers must be matched at no more than 4kg apart. 2.6.7 It is recommended that Youth Boxers shall be restricted to 18 contests per season excluding England Boxing National Championships.

Seniors

- There are two classes of Senior Boxer – Development and Elite.
- The term Senior Boxer is an age category classifying Boxers by their year of birth, see Club Boxing Matrix.
- A Senior Boxer becomes an Elite Boxer if they enter, or have entered, the England Boxing National Amateur Championships (entry means entering the championships and being placed in the draw)
- A Senior Boxer may be matched against a Youth Boxer with an age gap of less than 12 months. In all such cases both Boxers are to wear head guards.
- A Senior Development Boxer can compete against both Development and Elite Boxers. However, if they compete against an Elite Boxer, they must compete over 3 x 3 minute rounds.
- Development bouts can be boxed over 3 x 2 or 3 x 3 minute rounds.
- Elite bouts are to be 3 x 3-minute rounds with 1 minute interval between rounds.
- Boxers are to be matched on experience and weight. Boxers must be matched at no greater weight difference than the smaller weight category of the 2 matched Boxers, for example: Red is a Middleweight and Blue is a Light Heavyweight, the Middleweight category spans from 71–75kg (4kg) and the Light Heavy weight category spans from 75–80kg (5kg) so the Boxers must be matched at no more than 4kg apart.
- It is recommended that Senior Boxers shall be restricted to 18 contests per season excluding England Boxing National Championships

Appendix 3: 2025 Club Boxing Matrix

2025 Club Boxing Matrix

	Skills	Minors	Schools	Junior Female	Junior Male	Youth Female	Youth Male	Senior Female	Senior Male
Year of Birth	Age 10 – to 15 years 364 days	Age 10 Years & Year of Birth 2014	2011 - 2013	2009 & 2010	2009 & 2010	2007 & 2008	2007 & 2008	1985 - 2006	1985 - 2006
Rounds & Duration (minutes).	Any bout with a 10yr old = 3 x 1 11 years to 15 years = 3 x 1.5	Any bout with a 10yr old = 3 x 1 11yrs v 11yrs = 3 x 1.5	3 x 1.5	3 x 2	3 x 2	3 x 2	3 x 2 3 x 3	3 x 2 3 x 3 (Elite)	3 x 2 3 x 3 (Elite)
Maximum Count Limits per Boxer	N/A	2 counts in a single round or 3 in a contest.	2 counts in a single round or 3 in a contest.	3 counts in a single round or 4 in a contest.	3 counts in a single round or 4 in a contest.	3 counts in a single round or 4 in a contest.	3 counts in a single round or 4 in a contest.	3 counts in a single round or 4 in a contest.	3 counts in a single round or 4 in a contest
Glove Sizes	10oz up to 67kg 12oz over 67kg	10oz up to 67kg 12oz over 67kg	10oz up to 67kg 12oz over 67kg	10oz up to 67kg 12oz over 67kg	10oz up to 67kg 12oz over 67kg	10oz up to 67kg 12oz over 67kg	10oz up to 67kg 12oz over 67kg	10oz up to 67kg 12oz over 67kg	10oz up to 67kg 12oz over 67kg
Headguard	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Senior	Senior Elite and Development Boxers should be matched on Weight and Experience. Round duration is to be determined by Coaches and the Supervisor. A Senior Boxer may be matched against a Youth Boxer, but the age difference must be less than 12 months – Both Boxers must wear headguards. Elite Boxers must always compete over 3 x 3 minute rounds.								
Youth	A Youth Boxer may be matched against another Youth Boxer, but the age difference must be less than 24 months. Caution must be taken when matching two Youth Boxers with an age difference greater than 12 months. A Youth Boxer may be matched against a Senior Boxer, but the age difference must be less than 12 months – Both Boxers must then wear headguards. A Youth Boxer may be matched against a Junior Boxer, but the age difference must be less than 12 months - The round durations must then be 3 x 2 minutes.								
Junior	A Junior Boxer may be matched against another Junior Boxer, but the age difference must be less than 24 months. Caution must be taken when matching two Junior Boxers with an age difference greater than 12 months. A Junior Boxer may be matched against a Schools boxer, but the age difference must be less than 12 months - The round durations must be 3 x 1.5 minutes.								
School	A Schools Boxer may be matched against another Schools boxer, but the age difference must be less than 12 months. A Schools Boxer may be matched against a Junior boxer, but the age difference must be less than 12 months - The round durations must be 3 x 1.5 minutes. A Schools Boxer may be matched against a Minors Boxer, but the age difference must be less than 12 months.								
Minor	A Minors Boxer may only be matched against another boxer with an age difference of less than 12 months. A Boxer must have had their 10th birthday to take part in a Minors bout. If either one or both Boxers are 10 year old, the round durations must be 3 x 1 minutes.								
Skills	A Boxer must have had their 10th birthday to take part in a skills bout. A Boxer cannot have a skills bout once they have reached their 16th Birthday. There must be an age difference of less than 12 months between two boxers having a skills bout. A boxer cannot have a skills bout once they have had a competitive bout. A boxer can have a maximum of 6 skills bouts.								

Appendix 4: WBO Weight Categories

Elite Men's weight categories ***from 1 January, 2025:***

#	Over (Min limit)	Under (Max limit)	Category Name
1	47kg	50kg	Flyweight / M50kg
2	50kg	55kg	Bantamweight / M55kg
3	55kg	60kg	Lightweight / M60kg
4	60kg	65kg	Welterweight / M65kg
5	65kg	70kg	Light Middleweight / M70kg
6	70kg	75kg	Middleweight / M75kg
7	75kg	80kg	Light Heavyweight / M80kg
8	80kg	85kg	Cruiserweight / M85kg
9	85kg	90kg	Heavyweight / M90kg
10	90kg	-	Super Heavyweight / M90+kg
			Potential Olympic Weight Categories

Elite Women's weight categories ***from 1 January, 2025:***

#	Over (Min limit)	Under (Max limit)	Category Name
1	45kg	48kg	Light Flyweight / W48kg
2	48kg	51kg	Flyweight / W51kg
3	51kg	54kg	Bantamweight / W54kg
4	54kg	57kg	Featherweight / W57kg
5	57kg	60kg	Lightweight / W60kg
6	60kg	65kg	Welterweight / W65kg
7	65kg	70kg	Light Middleweight / W70kg
8	70kg	75kg	Middleweight / W75kg
9	75kg	80kg	Light Heavyweight / W80kg
10	80kg	-	Heavyweight / W81+kg
			Potential Olympic Weight Categories

Appendix 5: Example of Data Coding and Analysis Process

Raw data extract (Participant 27)

So I went to this gym, and the coach just went, 'We don't take girls, I don't know what you think you've read'. Like, 'This isn't something we do'. And I said 'fine, I'm a boxer then.' And he treats me like a boxer. And he taught me everything. He threw me straight in the ring like he did with all the lads. And I got absolutely battered. And then I went back the next week, and he went 'That's okay, you came back, when I treated you like a boy. And you came back so I'll teach you now'. And he taught me everything. But now when the new lads come into the gym, he uses me to kind of initiate them and if you like, because no boy i- has an instinct to just be like, 'Okay, I'm gonna hit a girl', not unless they're young. Erm, so I get a good 30 seconds grace when I'm sparring a boy and you've got that 30 seconds, it sounds awful, you've got 30 seconds to hurt them so that they switched from what my morals are, to protecting pride. And as soon as they're protecting pride, you've got about 30 seconds to like, get them going. And everyone really liked the fact that that not only did they leave the gym getting battered, they got battered by a girl that was smaller than them. They didn't know who I was or what I'd achieved and they were like, 'Oh god!' (L195-207).

Thematic Framework Table Extract (Sample to illustrate sub-them coding from raw data)

ID	Sub-theme: Institutional Exclusion	Sub-theme: Neglect and Marginalisatio	Sub-theme: Masculine Baseline	Sub-theme: Subverting Stereotypes	Sub-theme: Sensory
P27	**Refusal of entry**: Coach explicit about gender barrier (L195-197) **Biological governance** Used laxatives (L513-614); suffered delayed puberty (L468-471)	**Conditional Exclusion** only one from gym not in whatsapp group chats as she refused to send nudes(L891 - 898) Treated as "outsider" despite success (L914-915) **Performative Inclusion** Criticised "ponytail medals" (L945-949) **Favoured status** - Accused of being coach's favourite to explain success (L900-903) **Social erasure / identity suppression** Lost friendship groups; felt she "lost herself" (L627-637)	**Initiation:** Coach treats her "like a boy" to test her. Physical battering is test. **Gained respect** by returning after "battering" (L198) Describes "toughening up" new recruits (L200-201) **Devaluation** Peers claim her 4 national titles are worth less because she "boxed nobody" (L874-878)	**Gender stereotype** Uses opponent's "moral" hesitation to gain advantage (L201-205) **Gained Respect** small "girl" initiating new boys (L206-207)	**Functional reality** Describes the bin bag weight cuts and physical battering, bruises and cuts as a baseline.(L1169-1174) **Psychological tactics** never cleans gloves unless slippy - wipe gloves on oppenent when bloody (L1466-1470) **Smell** not sweaty just hot (L1490-1493) **Ritual** swirl squash around mouth as dont like "dry" gumshield (L935-938) (38:20)
P28	**Biological governance** - Pressured by GB to drop to 57kg despite medical risk (L574-585) **Financial control** - sponsor pulling uot of show due to single female bout on card (L327-329)	**Systemic Neglect:** 13-year-old "pushed to the corner" for 5 years. She is physically present but given no coaching expertise. (L317-322) **Social erasure / Identity supression** Never had a "proper night out" at age 20 (L883-887)	**Hostile sparring** Boys in other gyms either refused to hit her or laid it on too thick to "teach her a lesson" (L286-291) **Unexpected capability** Surprising male peers by being better then they expected (P293 - 295)	**Gender stereotype** Constantly asks if she looks "girly" in dresses (L366-375)	No data - was not kit bag participant
P29	**Biological governance / Control** Pathologising body via tracking apps (L1065 - 1088)	**Gender expectations** Coaches avoid "outspoken" women (L880-886)	**Asserting dominance** heavier male sparring partner "loaded up" on her becasue she was outboxing (L490-500) **Earning coaching attention** coahes won't pad you until youce earned their respect (L876-878)	**counter stereotype** Girly girls who talk about toxic masculinity and the patriarchy are avoided "like the plague" (L841-843)	**Equate smell/sweat with hard work** The smell is a visceral reminder of the intensity of the workout. (L189) (06:52) **Indicators for kit replacement** Consistency of glove "beanbag" (L976-978) (37:35) **Boxer identity** Clark Kent (L1511-1512)(59:37)
P30		**Material exclusion** Standing on the side, feeling "intimidated" and "nervous" because she didn't know how to wrap hands (L451-454) **Weight Ignorance:** Had no understanding of boxing as a "weight sport"; sparred a woman 25kg heavier without realising (L493-505)	**Gained respect / Initiation** Took a "beating" from a 13-year-old boy; Coach used it to test if she would quit **Performative Inclusion** Chooses "raggedy" clothes for the gym to avoid looking like she is not "serious" (L286)	**Counter Stereotype** Consciously avoids talking in the gym so coaches don't think she's "not serious" or just "talking about nail polish" (L1202-1208)	**Remnents of previous workout** - feel they're still a bit moist (L574 - 575) (25:34) **Visceral aftermath** Focuses on the visceral aftermath: the "fat lip", "bleeding nose" and the "long train journey home" feeling like "absolute crap" (L584-589) **Kit on "properly"** glove tight around wrist OCD (883-886) (35:21)

Participant 28 – images related to sensory moments from Kit bag encounter – see matrix

(38:20)

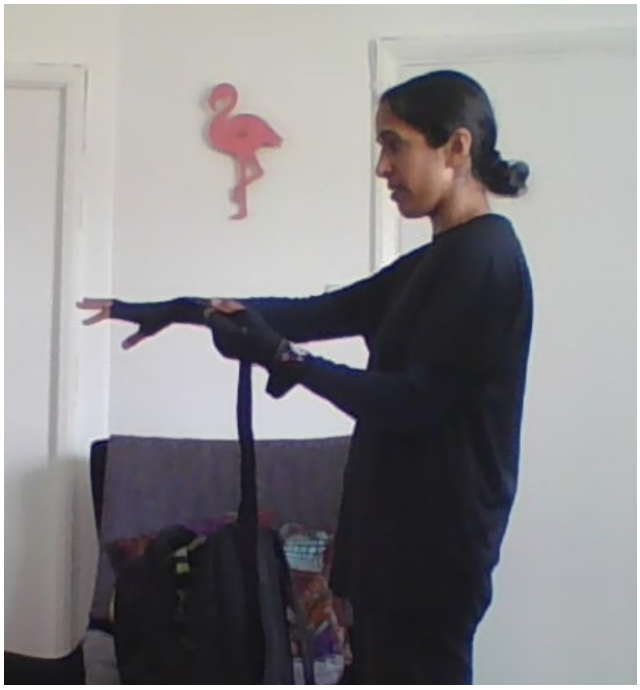
Participant 29 – images related to sensory moments from Kit bag encounter – see matrix

(06:52)

(37:35)

(59:37)

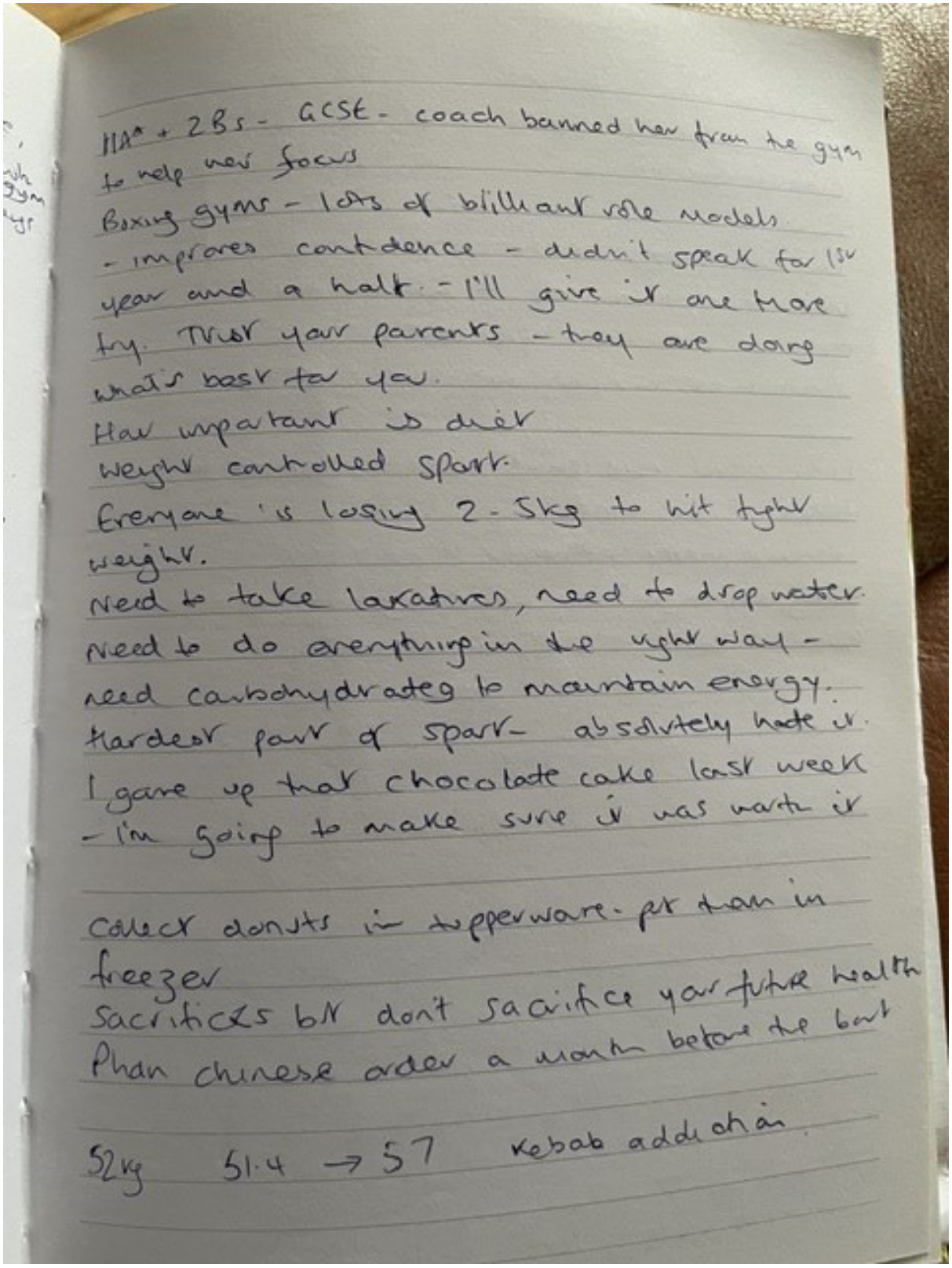
Participant 30 – images related to sensory moments from Kit bag encounter – see matrix

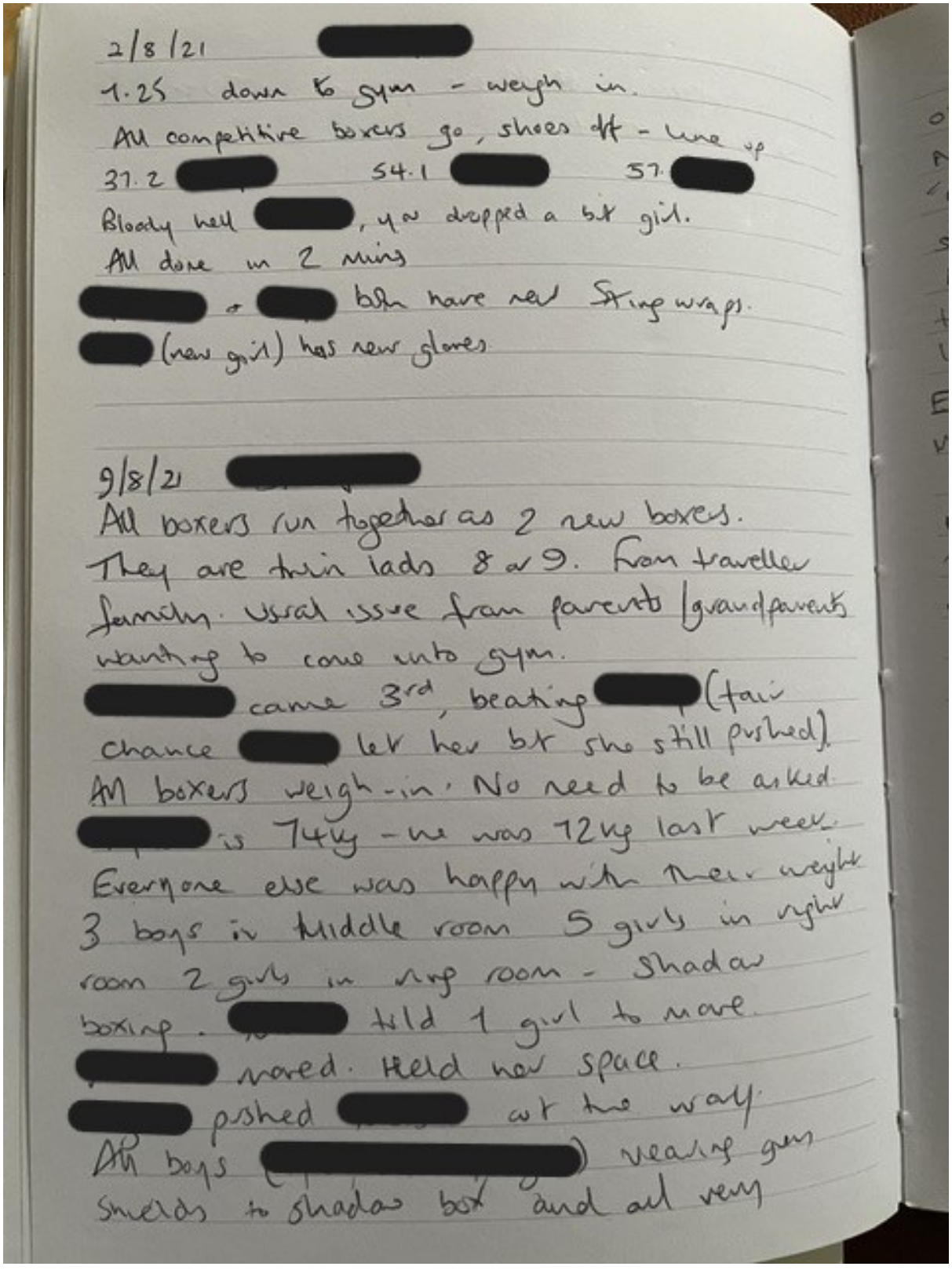


(25:34)

(35:21)

Sample field notes





2/8/21 [redacted]

1.25 down to gym - weigh in.

All competitive boxers go, shoes off - line up

37.2 [redacted] 54.1 [redacted] 57. [redacted]

Bloody hell [redacted], you dropped a bit girl.

All done in 2 mins

[redacted] & [redacted] both have new String wraps.

[redacted] (new girl) has new gloves

9/8/21 [redacted]

All boxers run together as 2 new boxes.

They are twin lads 8 or 9. From traveller family. Usual issue from parents/grandparents wanting to come into gym.

[redacted] came 3rd, beating [redacted] (fair chance [redacted] let her bit she still pushed)

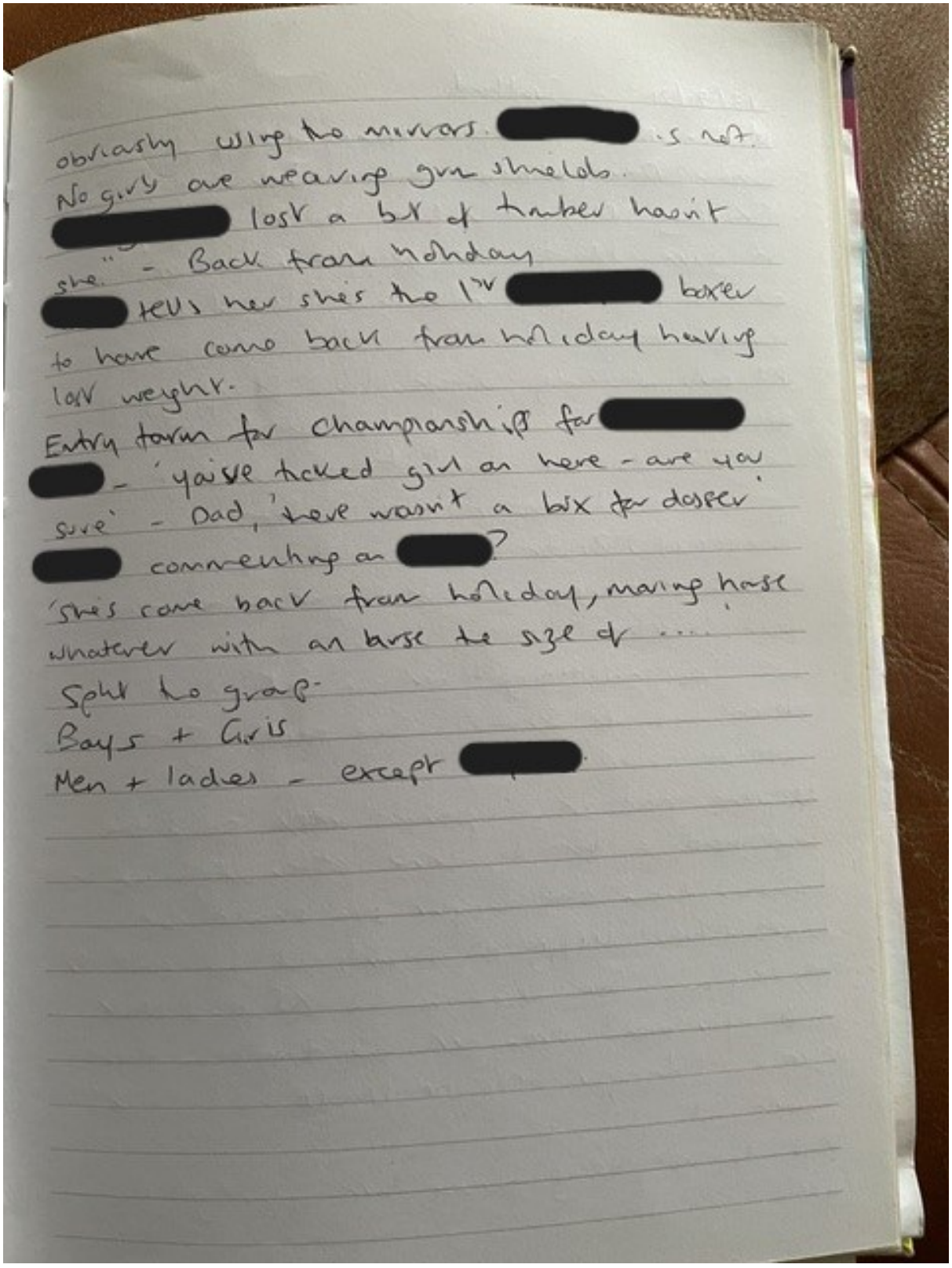
All boxers weigh-in. No need to be asked.

[redacted] is 74kg - he was 72kg last week.

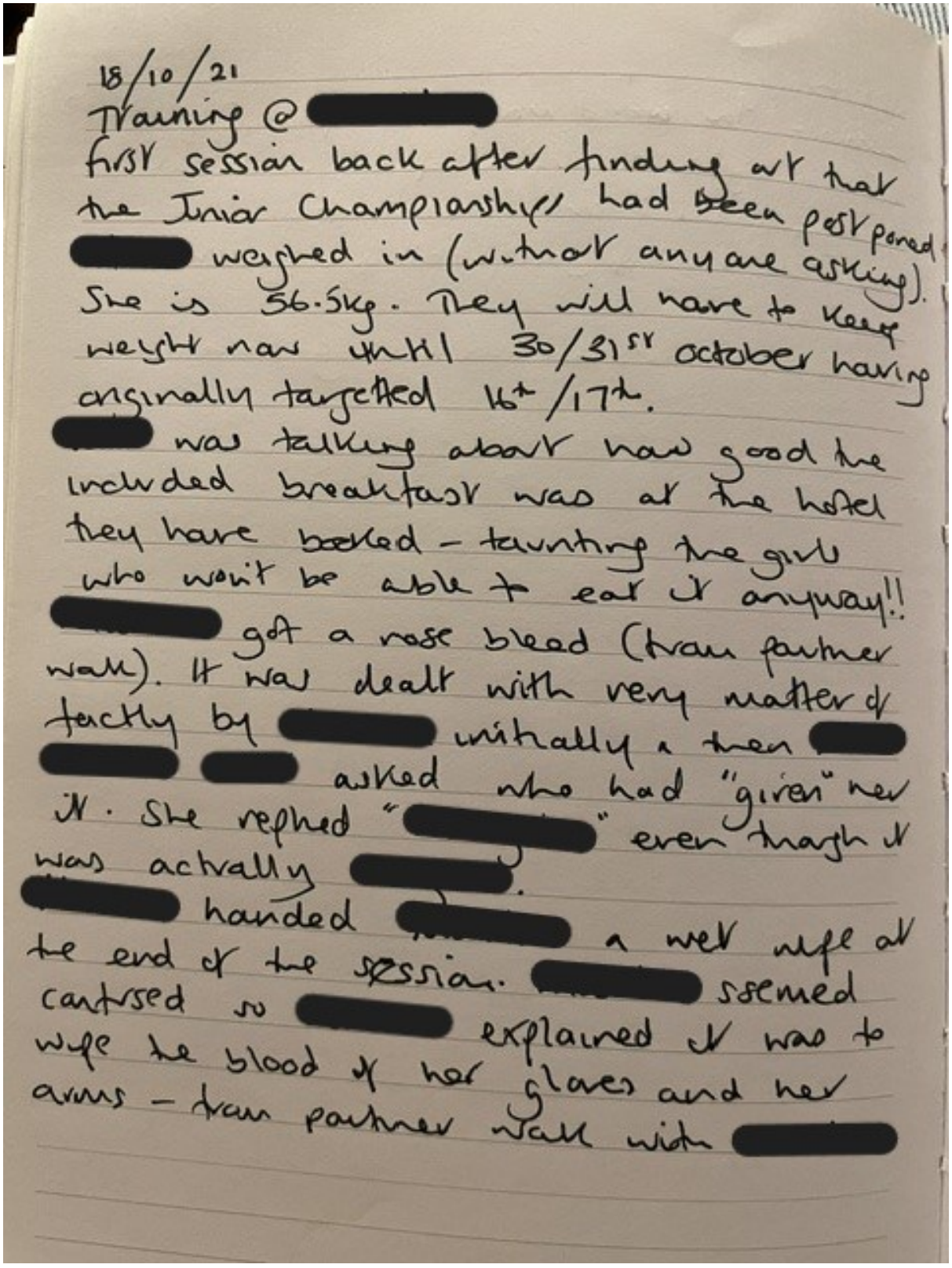
Everyone else was happy with their weight

3 boys in middle room 5 girls in right room 2 girls in ring room - Shadow boxing. [redacted] told 1 girl to move. [redacted] moved. Held her space. [redacted] pushed [redacted] out the way.

All boys [redacted] wearing gum shields to shadow box and all very



obviously using the mirrors [redacted] is not.
No girls are wearing gum shields.
[redacted] lost a bit of timber hasn't she." - Back from holiday
[redacted] tells her she's the 1st [redacted] boxer to have come back from holiday having lost weight.
Entry form for championship for [redacted] - 'you've ticked girl on here - are you sure' - Dad, 'there wasn't a box for dopers'
[redacted] commenting on [redacted]?
'She's come back from holiday, making horse whatever with an horse the size of ...
Split to group:
Boys + Girls
Men + ladies - except [redacted]



18/10/21
Training @ [redacted]
first session back after finding out that the Junior Championships had been postponed
[redacted] weighed in (without anyone asking). She is 56.5kg. They will have to keep weight now until 30/31st October having originally targetted 16th/17th.
[redacted] was talking about how good the included breakfast was at the hotel they have booked - taunting the girls who won't be able to eat it anyway!!
[redacted] got a nose bleed (from partner work). It was dealt with very matter of factly by [redacted] initially & then [redacted] asked who had "given" her it. She replied "[redacted]" even though it was actually [redacted].
[redacted] handed [redacted] a wet wipe at the end of the session. [redacted] seemed confused so [redacted] explained it was to wipe the blood off her gloves and her arms - from partner work with [redacted]

Appendix 6: Parent Guardian Consent Form U18

CONSENT FORM

College of Health and Life Sciences
Department of Life Sciences

A study of female boxing health and wellbeing

Elaine de Vos

APPROVAL HAS BEEN GRANTED FOR THIS STUDY TO BE CARRIED OUT BETWEEN 04/05/2020 AND 30/04/2022

The participant (or their legal representative) should complete the whole of this sheet.		
	YES	NO
Have you read the Parent/Guardian Participant Information Sheet?	☐	☐
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	☐	☐
Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions?	☐	☐
Do you understand that your child will not be referred to by name in any report concerning this study?	☐	☐
Do you understand that: • Your child is free to withdraw from this study at any time • They don't have to give any reason for withdrawing • Choosing not to participate or withdrawing will not affect their rights? • They can withdraw their data any time up to 30/04/2022	☐	☐
I agree to my child's interview being audio and video recorded	☐	☐
I give the researcher permission to: - use my video and/or photograph(s) in presentations (e.g., at conferences, seminars or public engagement events) - use my photograph(s) in printed or online material (e.g., reports, leaflets, university news releases, and academic papers) Note – you will be shown images/video prior to their use	☐	☐
I agree to the use of unnamed quotes and visual images when the study is written up or published	☐	☐
Do you consent to me using your child's publicly available social media posts in the research?	☐	☐
The procedures regarding confidentiality have been explained to me	☐	☐
I agree that my child's anonymised data can be stored and shared with other researchers for use in future projects.	☐	☐

I am aware that if issues of poor safety, misconduct or abuse which cause concern are raised during the research, Elaine De Vos will deal with this professionally according to the England Boxing safeguarding policy.	☐	☐
I agree to my child taking part in this study.	☐	☐

Child's Name	
Signature of research participants parent/guardian:	
Print name:	Relationship to child: Parent/Guardian
Date:	
Signature of researcher:	
Print name:	
Date:	

Appendix 7: Consent Form O18

CONSENT FORM

College of Health and Life Sciences
Department of Life Sciences

A study of female boxing health and wellbeing

Elaine de Vos

APPROVAL HAS BEEN GRANTED FOR THIS STUDY TO BE CARRIED OUT BETWEEN 04/05/2020 AND 30/04/2022

The participant (or their legal representative) should complete the whole of this sheet.		
	YES	NO
Have you read the Participant Information Sheet?	☐	☐
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	☐	☐
Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions?	☐	☐
Do you understand that you will not be referred to by name in any report concerning this study?	☐	☐
Do you understand that: • You are free to withdraw from this study at any time • You don't have to give any reason for withdrawing • Choosing not to participate or withdrawing will not affect your rights? • You can withdraw your data any time up to 30/04/2022	☐	☐
I agree to my interview being audio and video recorded	☐	☐
I give the researcher permission to: - use my video and/or photograph(s) in presentations (e.g., at conferences, seminars or public engagement events) - use my photograph(s) in printed or online material (e.g., reports, leaflets, university news releases, and academic papers) Note – you will be shown images/video prior to their use	☐ ☐	☐ ☐
I agree to the use of unnamed quotes and visual images when the study is written up or published	☐	☐
Do you consent to me using your publicly available social media posts in the research?	☐	☐
The procedures regarding confidentiality have been explained to me	☐	☐
I agree that my anonymised data can be stored and shared with other researchers for use in future projects.	☐	☐

I am aware that if issues of poor safety, misconduct or abuse which cause concern are raised during the research, Elaine De Vos will deal with this professionally according to the England Boxing safeguarding policy.	☐	☐
I agree to take part in this study.	☐	☐

Signature of research participant:
Print name:
Date:
Signature of researcher:
Print name:
Date:

Appendix 8: Participant Consent Form for Use of Images

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM FOR USE OF IMAGES
College of Health and Life Sciences
Department of Life Sciences

A study of female boxing health and wellbeing
Elaine de Vos

APPROVAL HAS BEEN GRANTED FOR THIS STUDY TO BE CARRIED OUT BETWEEN 04/05/2020 AND 30/04/2022

Photographs taken of you would be used to add interest and exemplify the research findings. For example, they may be used as illustrations in website summaries, research reports, summary leaflets, newspapers articles and/or conference presentations. They will not be used in any way that would show you in a bad light.

To be completed by the participant:

		YES	NO
1.	I agree to being videoed and having my photograph taken.	☐	☐
2.	I understand that my interview responses will not be linked to the photograph(s).	☐	☐
3.	I understand that my name will not be linked to the photograph(s).	☐	☐
4.	I understand that I will not be given credit for my appearance in photograph(s).	☐	☐
5.	I give the researcher permission to:		
	- use my video and/or photograph(s) in presentations (e.g. at conferences or seminars)	☐	☐
	- use my photograph(s) in printed material (e.g. reports, leaflets, newspaper articles, news releases)	☐	☐
	- use my video and/or photograph(s) in other dissemination which may be viewed by the public	☐	☐

Signature of participant: _____ **Date:** _____

Name of participant (block letters): _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix 9: Application to Recommence In-person Observations

Dear Louise,

I write to you as Vice Dean for Research, with a request for you to consider allowing my research to recommence in light of the changes to the Government guidelines regarding Covid-19 with specific reference to changes made on 19th July regarding grass roots sport.

I received ethics approval (18161) for my study on 4th May 2020 after COVID restrictions were put in place by the government. This approval allowed for observations to take place at my research sites with the condition that I must "monitor and adhere to all up-to-date Government advice". I have been following all government advice and more specifically adhering to England Boxing restrictions which mitigate against risk of spreading the virus in the research setting, however I have not been in a position to collect data due to the University guidelines which prevented in-person data collection.

Given recent and ongoing changes in community sport including lifting of restrictions I wanted to emphasise how my project is still adhering to University and Government Guidelines for community sport and research. I do this with specific reference to the criteria outlined in the "Guidance for researchers during the Covid-19 pandemic V3" document.

This document stated that no exemption would be required if "the in-person work will take place after 17 May 2021 and (If participants are not members of the University) the 'rule of six' and all other guidelines can be adhered to.

My participants are not members of the University but I believe that the guidance stipulating that I adhere to the 'rule of six' is outdated based on the latest amendments made to the Governments guidance for grass roots sports which took effect on 19th July 2021.
(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-on-coronavirus-covid-19-measures-for-grassroots-sport-participants-providers-and-facility-operators#participation).

I am registered with England Boxing as a member of coaching staff at one setting and was attending both settings prior to lock down. I have continued to travel to both settings as restrictions have allowed to ensure that I maintained good relationships with the participants. I have always adhered to both Government and England Boxing COVID-19 guidelines including travelling in my own car, temperature checking on arrival, not sharing equipment and maintaining social distancing where possible and practical.

To reiterate, my involvement at both settings remains in line with the original ethics application which was submitted after the COVID lockdown. This took into account the changing restrictions imposed by the government and governing body.

In addition to this request to recommence my original research, I am submitting an ethics amendment to provide details of a change to planned methods to include interviews using material methods interviews. Although these are possible remotely, I believe they would be far more effective in person. This request, if authorized, will also apply to this new amendment.

I look forward to your response regarding this request.

Kind regards,
Elaine de Vos

Appendix 10: Interview Schedule – amended for each participant to reflect background research on individual

Introduction

Thanks for taking the time to talk to me today, I really appreciate it.

Firstly, I just wanted to explain what the format of the discussion today will be, but also to tell you about my research and also a remind you of the consent agreement that you signed.

I am a doctoral researcher at Brunel University London and my PhD research is looking into the world of female boxers. It's an under researched field but is growing both in popularity and visibility in the UK, particularly since the professional sport has returned post COVID. I am conducting research at boxing clubs in and around the area I live in the Midlands, but also want to speak to people who are involved in the sport in different ways and at different levels to understand how boxing has featured in their lives and how it has affected them both positively and negatively. It's a very relaxed interview, there are obviously no right or wrong answers, it's your story I want. You are in charge of what you want to tell me but I will give you some prompts and questions to guide us through the process.

To reiterate what was in the consent document that you signed, none of the information we share today will be attributable to you directly as all data will be anonymised and confidential. I am recording the interview and will store the data on a secure device. If at any point either during the interview or afterwards, you wish to remove some or all of your data from the research, you just have to let me know. You are free to pause or stop the interview at any time.

Is there anything you want to ask me before we start the interview?

- General information / scene setting
    - Tell me a bit about yourself – where you were born, where you grew up, your family, school life (education), sports you were involved in as you grew up
    - Do you come from a "boxing family"?

      Are your family boxers/boxing fans?

- What is your earliest memory of boxing?

  Watching on television/meeting other boxers/being around the gym.
- How long have you been boxing/involved in boxing?
- What is your involvement in boxing currently?

  At what level do you box/coach/judge?
- Were you involved in other sports growing up?

  At what level

- Why boxing?
  - What made you pick up the gloves for the first time?
  - What does it bring that other sports don't?

- Specific information regarding the gym
  - Do you remember the first time you went to a boxing gym?
  - How would you describe your boxing gym to someone who had never been?
  - What do you remember about your first experiences of being in a boxing gym?
  - Describe for me a typical day in the gym
  - What do you like most about the gym?
  - What do you like least about the gym?
  - What would you change if you could?

- Physical health
  - How has boxing changed you physically?

    Do you like the physical changes?

    Anything you don't like? Injuries, bruises, cuts, muscles
  - How does boxing compare to other physical activities you have been involved in?
  - Have you suffered any major injuries?

    How did you cope with being away from the gym
  - Have you ever cut weight for competition?

    How do you find making weight?

    Do you think that there are issues around weight cuts that affect women

more than men?

How do you think things could be improved for females?

- Mental health
    - Have you ever feel discriminated against because you box?

      Within the gym

      Outside the gym
    - Have you ever been embarrassed to tell someone that you are a boxer?
    - Have you ever felt judged because you are a boxer?

      Assumptions made about you
        - Identity formation
        - Explore issues of gendered expectation

          - too pretty to box

          - questions of sexuality

          - physical changes (muscular physique, smaller bust)

          - visible injuries (bruising/cuts) – abuse assumptions?
        - Transition from gym to 'real life'
        - Acceptance in the gym (coaches/other athletes)
- Wellbeing
    - How does boxing help with your overall wellbeing?
    - Are there any negative outcomes with regards wellbeing?

PROMPTS

[How] did that affect you / make you feel / change how you presented yourself?
Interesting, can you explain what that means?
You mentioned earlier that …….. can you tell me a bit more about that?

College of Health and Life Sciences
Department of Life Sciences

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Study title

A study of female boxing health and wellbeing

Invitation Paragraph

Your child is being asked to take part in a research study. Before you decide if you are happy for them to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish for your child to take part. Thank you for your interest in my research.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of my study is to understand the lived experience of female boxers. I would like to understand how boxing impacts both physical health and mental health and wellbeing. There will be things that participants feel are positive about involvement with the sport, but there may also be some down sides which I would also like to understand. I hope this study will help to understand some of the hurdles that women face when taking part in boxing and also to get a clearer picture of the things that make female boxers keep coming back.

Why has my child been invited to participate?

Your child has been invited to take part in my study because they are involved in female boxing.

The project will involve the observations of around 100 female boxers and their coaches in three boxing gyms and around 20 participants will be invited to take part in interviews.

Does my child have to take part?

Your child's participation in this research project is entirely voluntary. They do not have to take part. If you and your child do decide you are happy for them to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and you will also be asked to sign a consent form on their behalf. If you initially decide your child can take part but later wish to change your mind, you can tell me you do not want your child to carry on without giving a reason and I will respect this. You are free to withdraw your child at any time up until my data collection phase finishes (April 2022). Your child also has the right to withdraw if they wish to do so without giving a reason and will have this explained to them.

What will happen to my child if they take part?

The project will last around 24 months, but if you chose for your child to take part in the study they are not necessarily committed to be involved for the entire duration if you don't want them to be.

If you have been given this form, either your club has given me authority to conduct observations or you have agreed for your child to be interviewed about their life history with a particular focus on their boxing journey.

<u>Interviews</u>

I may ask your child to spare me some of their free time for in-depth interviews to find out more about their experiences of boxing. There may be multiple interviews over the duration of the study but each of these interviews should take no longer than an hour and are voluntary. Interviews will be audio recorded and notes will be taken. Interviews may be face-to-face or conducted remotely online. All discussion and information provided will be anonymised and remain confidential. You retain the right to remove any of your child's data from the study until April 2022.

Social Media

I may ask if your child has a social media presence and if so, if you are happy for me to use publicly available posts in my research. Even if publicly available, all information used in my study will be anonymised before publication and remain confidential. You retain the right to remove any of your child's social media data from the study until April 2022.

Participant Diary

Your child may be asked if they could begin to keep a diary for the purposes of the research. A research diary should be used to capture thoughts and emotions relating to your child's boxing experiences. This may take a traditional written paper form or may be sent to the researcher by way of a regular voice note, blog or video.

Observations

I will observe people taking part in boxing activities including training, coaching and competing. During some of my observations, I will also be participating in the training sessions. You will not need to change the frequency with which your child attends the gym or how they behave whilst they are there.

If you do not want me to use observations of your child in my research, you or they can ask for their data to be removed from the study any time until April 2022.

If you do not wish your child to take part in all or any aspect of my research (observations/interviews/social media/participant diary) you have the right to exclude them from the study completely or in part.

Are there any lifestyle restrictions?

Your child does not need to change anything about their life to take part in this study. I wish to observe their normal boxing routines within the gym and if they are selected to be interviewed, I will encourage them to share how boxing has impacted their life by talking to them about their experiences of boxing.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no anticipated disadvantages or risks associated with taking part in this study. We may discuss topics connected to boxing, health and wellbeing which cause distress to your child when reflecting upon their past. If this occurs, we can take a break, reschedule or stop the interview altogether if this is their preference.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There is no intentional benefit to be gained by taking part in this study. This research aims to build knowledge about female boxing that can support development of the sport through local clubs, national governing bodies and national associations. Your child will be an important part of the research project as without them, it cannot take place.

What if something goes wrong?

There is no reason why taking part in this study should cause your child harm but if you feel there is a cause to complain about how the research was conducted or how your child was affected by it, please contact the Chair of Brunel University London Research Ethics Committee, whose details you can find below.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information which is collected about your child during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. However, in the event that issues of poor safety, misconduct or abuse which cause concern are revealed during my research, I will be required to deal with this professionally according to the England Boxing safeguarding policy.

Any information about your child that is publicly reported will have all their identifying information removed. With your permission, anonymised data will be stored and may be used in my future research including publications in academic and practice outlets – you can indicate whether or not you give permission for this by way of the Consent Form.

Will my child be recorded, and how will the recording be used?

With your permission, I will record any interviews, if your child is selected for this part of the study. I will only use the recording to make sure I have an accurate version of the interview. You can indicate whether or not you give permission for this by way of the consent form.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of this research study will form the basis of my doctoral thesis and

may also be used in other academic publications and presentations relevant to the subject area. Your child will not be identifiable as the data is anonymised.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is being funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) through the Grand Union Doctoral Training Partnership (GUDTP). The research is being organised by Elaine de Vos in conjunction with Brunel University London.

What are the indemnity arrangements?

Brunel University London provides appropriate insurance cover for research which has received ethical approval.

Who has reviewed the study?

The College of Health and Life Sciences Research Ethics Committee have reviewed this study.

Research Integrity

Brunel University London is committed to compliance with the Universities UK Research Integrity Concordat. You are entitled to expect the highest level of integrity from the researchers during the course of this research

Contact for further information and complaints

Researcher name and details:
Researcher: Elaine.devos@brunel.ac.uk
Supervisor : Louise.Mansfield@Brunel.ac.uk

For complaints, Chair of the Research Ethics Committee:
College of Health and Life Sciences Research Ethics Committee Chair – Professor Christina Victor (Christina.Victor@brunel.ac.uk)

College of Health and Life Sciences
Department of Life Sciences

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Study title

A study of female boxing health and wellbeing

Invitation Paragraph

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Before you decide if you are happy to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for your interest in my research.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of my study is to understand the lived experience of female boxers. I would like to understand how boxing impacts both physical health and mental health and wellbeing. There will be things that you feel are positive about involvement with the sport, but there may also be some down sides which I would also like to understand. I hope this study will help to understand some of the hurdles that women face when taking part in boxing and also to get a clearer picture of the things that make female boxers keep coming back.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been invited to take part in my study because you are involved in female boxing.

The project will involve the observations of around 100 female boxers and their coaches in three boxing gyms and around 20 participants will be selected to take part in interviews.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary. You do not have to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and you will also be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part but later wish to change your mind, you can tell me you do not want to carry on without giving a reason and I will respect this. You are free to withdraw at any time up until my data collection phase finishes (April 2022).

What will happen to me if I take part?

The project will last around 24 months, but if you chose to take part in the study you are not necessarily committed to be involved for the entire duration if you don't want to be.

If you have been given this form, either your club has given me authority to conduct observations or you have agreed to be interviewed about your life history with a particular focus on your boxing journey.

<u>Interviews</u>

I may ask you to spare me some of your free time for in-depth interviews to find out more about your life with particular focus on your experiences of boxing.

There may be multiple interviews over the duration of the study but each of these interviews should take no longer than an hour and are voluntary. Interviews will be audio recorded and notes will be taken. Interviews may be face-to-face or conducted remotely online. All discussion and information provided will be anonymised and remain confidential. You retain the right to remove any data from the study until April 2022.

Social Media

I may ask if you have a social media presence and if so, if you are happy for me to use publicly available posts in my research. Even if publicly available, all information used in my study will be anonymised before publication and remain confidential. You retain the right to remove any social media data from the study until April 2022.

Participant Diary

You may be asked if you could begin to keep a diary for the purposes of the research. A research diary should be used to capture thoughts and emotions relating to your boxing experiences. This may take a traditional written paper form or may be sent to the researcher by way of a regular voice note, blog or video.

Observations

I will observe people taking part in boxing activities including training, coaching and competing. During some of my observations, I will also be participating in the training sessions. You will not need to change the frequency with which you attend the gym or how you behave whilst you are there.

All data obtained during observation will be anonymised, meaning any identifying information both for the individual and the club will not be used in outputs from the project.

If you do not want me to use observations of you in my research, you can ask for your data to be removed from the study any time until April 2022.

If you do not wish to take part in all or any aspect of my research (observations/interviews/social media/participant diary) you have the right to exclude yourself from the study completely or in part.

Are there any lifestyle restrictions?

You do not need to change anything about your life to take part in this study. I wish to observe your normal boxing routines within the gym and if you are selected to be interviewed, I will encourage you to share how boxing has impacted your life by talking to you about your experiences of boxing.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no anticipated disadvantages or risks associated with taking part in this study. We may discuss topics connected to boxing, health and wellbeing which cause distress to you when reflecting upon your past. If this occurs, we can take a break, reschedule or stop the interview altogether if this is your preference.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There is no intentional benefit to be gained by taking part in this study. You may however find that reflecting on your boxing journey gives you a clearer picture of the benefits that you gain from the sport. This research aims to build knowledge about female boxing that can support development of the sport through local

clubs, national governing bodies and national associations. You will be an important part of the research project as without you, it cannot take place.

What if something goes wrong?

There is no reason why taking part in this study should cause you harm but if you feel there is a cause to complain about how the research was conducted or how you were affected by it, please contact the Chair of Brunel University London Research Ethics Committee, whose details you can find below.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. However, in the event that issues of poor safety, misconduct or abuse which cause concern are revealed during my research, I will be required to deal with this professionally according to the England Boxing safeguarding policy.

Any information about you that is publicly reported will have all your identifying information removed. With your permission, anonymised data will be stored and may be used in my future research including publications in academic and practice outlets – you can indicate whether or not you give permission for this by way of the Consent Form.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recording be used?

With your permission, I will record any interviews, if you are selected for this part of the study. I will only use the recording to make sure I have an accurate version of the interview. You can indicate whether or not you give permission for this by way of the consent form.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of this research study will form the basis of my doctoral thesis and may also be used in other academic publications and presentations relevant to the subject area. You will not be identifiable as the data is anonymised.

Who is organising and funding the research?

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Contact for further information and complaints

Researcher name and details:
Researcher: Elaine.devos@brunel.ac.uk
Supervisor : Louise.Mansfield@Brunel.ac.uk

For complaints, Chair of the Research Ethics Committee:
College of Health and Life Sciences Research Ethics Committee Chair – Professor Christina Victor (Christina.Victor@brunel.ac.uk)

Appendix 13: Kit Bag Instructions for Researcher

A study of female boxing health and wellbeing

Kit Bag interview instructions for researcher

Interviews will begin with the discussing the photographs that the participant has taken of the kit bag at home and in the gym.
Explore why the bag/s are kept where they are and if there is any kit that is removed from the bag/s when stored. Discuss if the bag/s (or where they are kept) has any smells, or other sensory experiences associated with it. Discuss its suitability to the job of containing the kit and if there are any issues with the bag (size/weight/compartments).

- Ask participant to kit up as if preparing for an event.
- As each item is taken from the kit bag and the participant puts it on, I will ask them to talk me through not only the practicalities of the item but how it feels, smells etc and also any emotional responses such as nerves, apprehension, confidence. By discussing the items in turn, the participants will have to think about the items in a way that they may never have done before. I will also ask questions about why the item was selected (colour/brand/advice/replicate etc) and how and why items are cleaned/replaced.
- Once fully kitted up, I will discuss how the boxer feels and if it is different to how they felt at the start to explore the boxer identity.
- I will then ask the participant to take any remaining items out of the bag (medicine/food/toiletries/spare kit) and discuss the relevance with them.
- I will then explore with the participants any items that aren't in the bag – items that someone else provides/are kept at gym/have been forgotten/lost/broken.
- Finally, I will ask them to consider how the kit would be put back in the bag/s and if anything would not be put back in or stored differently after event than before.

Appendix 14: Kit Bag Instructions for Participant

A study of female boxing health and wellbeing

Kit bag Interview Instructions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research.

To ensure that the interview goes to plan, I have attached some instructions which will enable you to prepare.

Arranging the interview

Ideally, interviews will be conducted in person and the researcher will contact you to discuss a suitable time and location for the interview to take place. The ideal location for interviews is your usual training facility but can also be arranged to take place at your home if this is more convenient. If it is not possible to arrange a convenient time for interviews to be conducted in person, you can still take part remotely by using online conferencing software such as Zoom or Skype.

Photographs

Before the interview, can you please take 2 photographs as follows and send these to the researcher before the interview for discussion on the day.

1. A photo of your kit bag/s where you normally keep it/them at home between training sessions
2. A photo of your kit bag/s where you would normally keep it/them at the gym.

Photographs should be sent to Elaine.devos@Brunel.ac.uk

Packing your bag

We will agree together which *event* the 'kit bag' is to be packed for. This could be a standard training session, a sparring session at another club or a competitive event. You will then be required to pack your bag/s as you would normally do for such an *event*.

- If you normally carry everything you require for an *event* in a single bag, then that is what you should prepare for the interview. If, however you usually have several bags with you, each containing different elements of your kit, please pack and bring all of your bags.
- If there are items that you always bring, even if they are not directly related to your boxing kit such as medicines, refreshments or lucky mascots, please ensure these items are packed too. The interview aims to replicate and talk about the process of preparing for an *event* so it is important that you try to stick as closely as possible to the preparation required for such an event.
- The interview itself will involve you 'kitting up' ready for the agreed *event* and we will talk about each item of kit in turn. Therefore, if you would normally travel to the *event* in your club tracksuit but would be in shorts and vest just before 'kitting up', please could you wear your shorts and vest for the interview but have your tracksuit with you so we can talk about it too. Of course, if you would wear your vest and shorts under your tracksuit, please feel free to arrive to the interview this way.

Consent

You will be required to sign a consent form which explains how we ensure confidentiality, data protection and anonymity. Interviews will be audio and video recorded to aid with subsequent analysis and handwritten notes may be also taken. If you consent to video recording of the interview and there are likely to be other members of the facility in the vicinity that may be captured on film during the interview, it will be necessary to obtain consent from them too

If you have any queries or are unsure what you are being asked to do, please do not hesitate to contact me to discuss.