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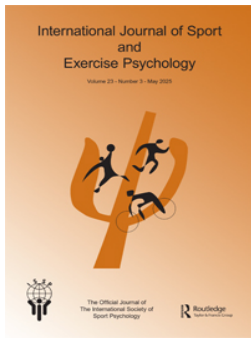
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Perceived and received social support functions among UEFA B licensed women football coaches

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ABSTRACT

Literature that focuses on women coaches indicates frequent experiences of difficult social environments in the coaching community. Individuals who are more socially integrated and satisfied with their social network are likely to overcome these demanding situations more effectively and have higher levels of well-being. Therefore, this study explored perceived and received social support functions among UEFA B licensed women football coaches. An exploratory, multiple case study approach was used to collect data from three white British women football coaches (M_{age} = 26.6, SD = 1.2 years, $M_{experience}$ = 7.6, SD = 3.7 years). Each coach engaged in two semi-structured interviews that were conducted three or four months apart. We analysed the interview data using abductive thematic analysis. The coaches reported receiving social support that they perceived as unhelpful such as a tutor giving them easier drills to coach on coaching courses. However, they also received positive exchanges of social support resources (e.g., emotional support or providing a lift to coaching), which predominantly came from friends and family. The women coaches generally felt supported by the social networks that they had access to. However, there was an overall perception that the coaches would like support to be more easily accessible (e.g., via formal coaching networks). Given the pertinence of social support functions for performance and psychological well-being, applied implications that aim to better support women coaches are discussed.

Sport has historically been a context of constraint for women as both athletes and coaches (Theberge & Birrell, 1994). However, sport can also be a site for transformation, particularly with increased opportunities for participation for women in various sports (Acosta & Linda, 2012). The growth of football (or soccer as it is known in the United States of America [USA]) participation by women worldwide has been considerable over the past decade. A report by UEFA highlighted that football is the number one team sport participated in by women across multiple countries including England,

Germany, and Norway (UEFA, 2017). However, whilst there has been an increased number of women playing football, this growth has not been mirrored in the number of women who are coaching football.

The absence of women coaches in the profession has historically been documented in sport coaching research, with scholars (e.g., Norman, 2010; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018) illuminating the ongoing underrepresentation of women. Indeed, women accounted for only 22.5% of the total sample of coaches in a systematic review on stressors, coping, and well-being among sports coaches (Norris et al., 2017). Particular attention needs to be directed toward high-performance coaching contexts (e.g., UEFA B qualified coaches) where it is known that women are significantly underrepresented: not only do such performance contexts historically favour men (Norris et al., 2017), they have also typically undermined opportunities for women to access social support (e.g., Didymus et al., 2021). Extant evidence suggests that an increase in diversity and inclusion in sporting contexts can increase the talent pool; promote creativity and problem-solving; improve decision making; and enhance relationships, satisfaction, and commitment within the workforce (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Such benefits can ultimately help to foster workplaces that function more effectively (Jowett et al., 2022). Researchers have started to recognise this and have aimed to address the gender imbalance by exploring the barriers and experiences of women coaches (e.g., Knoppers et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2018). Social environments have been consistently reported by women coaches as a barrier to their progression and development, and as a potentially negative influence on their psychological well-being (PWB; e.g., Didymus et al., 2021; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018).

Social support has been defined as the structure of an individual's social network, the explicit resources that one's interpersonal relationships may provide, and the social support functions of these interpersonal relationships (Freeman & Rees, 2008; Heaney & Israel, 2008). The social network can provide social support resources in the form of emotional (e.g., feeling loved), esteem (e.g., different point of view), informational (e.g., receiving advice), and tangible support (e.g., physical resources; Rees & Hardy, 2004). Social support functions can be divided into two categories: perceived and received support (Uchino, 2009). Perceived support refers to perceptions of access to and the availability of a social network, and satisfaction with the social support resources provided by that network (Haber et al., 2007). Received support, on the other hand, refers to specific behaviours or exchanges of social support resources (i.e., emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible) that are provided by members of a social network (Uchino, 2009). The relationship between received and perceived support, although significant, has been consistently found to be relatively weak (Melrose et al., 2015). For example, a meta-analysis of 23 studies found the average correlation between perceived and received support to be $r = .35$, $p < .001$ (Haber et al., 2007). Furthermore, whilst perceived support is consistently associated with positive health outcomes (e.g., Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Uchino, 2009), the relationship between received support and health is inconsistent (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Uchino, 2009). This suggests that it is the individual's perceptions of support, rather than support per se, that are important for health outcomes. However, both perceived and received support functions can influence individuals' well-being (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Uchino, 2009).

In the sport literature on social support functions, perceived support has been positively associated with performance outcomes in golf and tennis athletes (e.g., Freeman & Rees,

2008; Rees et al., 2007; Rees & Hardy, 2004), and with well-being in athletes from multiple sports (Melrose et al., 2015). Qualitative research with performance, professional, and national level women coaches from Germany, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom (UK) that explored their experiences as a women coach, emphasised links between social conditions, support, and engagement with coaching (e.g., Norman, 2014; Schlesinger & Weigelt-Schlesinger, 2012). The research in this area collectively highlights that women coaches frequently feel undervalued and isolated, and that they experience discrimination. For example, women coaches from a variety of levels (e.g., recreational, college, club, inter-national) and sports (e.g., cricket, squash, swimming) from the UK and the USA. reported perceived exclusion due to informal "closed" social networks within coaching communities (Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018). This created unpleasant coach-ing contexts and contributed to a lack of connectedness to the coaching community.

More recent research has explored social support more explicitly with men and women coaches from a variety of levels in the UK (Norris et al., 2020, 2022). The results of this work suggest that social networks encompassed support from peers, friends, family, and miscel-laneous avenues (e.g., the media; Norris et al., 2020). Furthermore, it was found that when using social support resources over an extended period of time, informational support for advice, ideas, and feedback on training sessions, new job roles, and player development was sought most regularly (Norris et al., 2022). The aforementioned findings reinforce the importance of social connection and support in increasing PWB (e.g., autonomy, posi-tive relations with others, and purpose in life) and performance of sport coaches. However, research explicitly exploring social support functions among sports coaches is limited. This is a noteworthy gap in the literature because understanding social support functions and how coaches, specifically women coaches, perceive their social networks (perceived support) and how satisfied they are with the social support resources available (received support) is imperative if coaches are to be effectively supported in the profession. Research of this nature with high-performance coaches, such as those who hold a UEFA B license, is particularly important for increasing the number of women coaches at the highest levels.

Despite increasing knowledge on social support with sports coaches (e.g., Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018; Norris et al., 2020, 2022), we know very little about the social support that women coaches perceive and receive and the potential influence this has on their performance and PWB. This highlights the need to further understand women coaches' social experiences to foster their engagement with the profession and to maxi-mise their opportunities in sport. Developing knowledge in this area will be useful to inform the design of effective social support interventions for women coaches that aims to optimise PWB among members of the profession and lead to a more diverse and inclusive coaching environment that maximises coach retention. The aim of this study was, therefore, to explore perceived and received social support functions among UEFA B licensed women football coaches.

Methodology and methods

Philosophical assumptions

My (the first named author's) ontological stance is best described as relativist and my epistemological approach is underpinned by constructionism. Therefore, I recognise

that my values and experiences influence my understanding of coaches' experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). These form my paradigmatic assumption of social constructionism (Burr, 2015). In line with this assumption, I believe that knowledge is constructed via interactions between people during the course of life (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I have over 15 years of football coaching experience across a variety of performance levels. The second and third named authors also align primarily with constructionist orientations. We choose to recognise our philosophical assumptions to highlight how they may have influenced the study design and implementation (e.g., collaboration using exploratory case study), our use of terminology (e.g., interviewees), and the development of this manuscript (e.g., use of thick, descriptive quotes).

Interviewees

We used opportunistic sampling (Suri, 2011) to capitalise on an unexpected opportunity to work with coaches who are typically hard to access. An opportunity arose through our relationship with The English Football Association (FA), which helped us to gain access to a sample of women football coaches who were being supported to complete the UEFA B coaching qualification. This coaching qualification is the third level of a five-level qualification scale developed by The English FA and is the highest grassroots qualification available to coaches. Three white British women football head coaches ($M_{age} = 26.6$, SD = 1.2 years, $M_{experience} = 7.6$, SD = 3.7 years) volunteered to take part in this study. At the completion of data collection, each participant had passed their UEFA B qualification.

Study design

We adopted an exploratory multiple case study approach to explore perceived and received social support functions with UEFA B qualified women football coaches. A multiple case study uses a number of cases to look at the same phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This design aligns with our social constructionist approach because it aims to build close collaborations between the researchers and the interviewees, whilst enabling interviewees to share their experiences (Yin, 2013). This approach had the potential to provide detailed insight (Baxter & Jack, 2008) to social support that is currently lacking with coaches (Norris et al., 2017). The capability of a multiple case study to holistically explore individuals' experiences of a phenomenon in a specific context (Yin, 2013) makes it suitable to explore women football coaches' experiences of social support. A common challenge of case study research is gaining access to suitable samples (Walsham, 2006). The opportunistic sampling that we employed during this study allowed us to work with an underrepresented and distinct sample of women coaches who were UEFA B qualified. The gender inequality of coaches at UEFA B level in England is noteworthy: there are approximately 301 UEFA B qualified women coaches and 10,033 UEFA B qualified male coaches (UEFA, 2017). This epitomises the lack of highly qualified women football coaches in the UK and undermines the need to specifically explore their social experiences to understand the factors that sustain or deter them from a career in coaching.

Data collection

Interview guide

We developed a semi-structured interview guide specifically for this study using previous literature on social support with coaches (Knights & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016) and athletes (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010). The first named author interviewed each coach twice on separate occasions to garner detailed insight to the coaches' perceived and received social support functions. Two coaches had interviews four months apart and one coach had three months between her interviews. The timing of the interviews was purposefully chosen to coincide with the second half of the football season in the UK, which can be particularly stressful (Faude et al., 2011), and so may provide useful insight to coaches' experiences of social support during an important part of the season. The dual interview design also meant that the coaches had more than one opportunity to discuss their experiences of social support, thus, enabling a thorough understanding of the cases.

The guide for the first round of interviews comprised two sections. The first section focused on the coaches' demographic information and coaching backgrounds (e.g., "How did you get into coaching?" and "Tell me about your experiences as a coach to date"). This section of the interview helped to build rapport and trust with the interviewee to help facilitate candid conversation (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The second section of the interview guide included questions about the coaches' social support functions (e.g., received support: "Tell me about your relationships with others" and "How have your relationships supported you?" Perceived support: "Do you feel fulfilled with your social support at the moment?" and "How satisfied are you with the support that you receive?"). These questions were designed to understand the received support that coaches experience, how coaches perceived their social support, and whether coaches were satisfied with their social support. We used probes (e.g., "please can you tell me more about that?") to elicit further information on both received and perceived support.

The second round of interviews followed a similar structure to the first round but included questions about changes since the previous interview. In the first section of the second interviews, questions were asked about the women's general coaching and their experiences since the first interview (e.g., "How has your coaching been going?" and "Has anything significant happened in your life since we last met?"). The second section focused on changes in perceived (e.g., "How happy are you with your relationships at the moment?") and received (e.g., "Have your relationships changed and, if so, how?") social support functions. Similar to the first round of interviews, we used probes (e.g., "can you share some examples of that with me?") to encourage additional information on received and perceived support. Of the six interviews conducted, five took place face-to-face and one was completed via telephone conversation due to the coach's availability and geographical location at the time of the interview. The interviews were recorded using a digital recording device and lasted between 56 and 146 min (M_{length} = 84, SD = 18.3 min).

Data analysis

The first named author transcribed each interview audio file verbatim and used NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2017) to analyse the transcripts. We took an abductive

approach to thematic analysis as described by Braun et al. (2016). The six steps of familiarising ourselves with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report ensure that a rich detailed analysis is offered that allows the experiences of the interviewee to be heard (Braun et al., 2016). After completion of each interview, an inductive phase of analyses was applied to each transcript separately to create original themes (Nowell et al., 2017). These inductive themes were then reviewed to explore perceived and received support, which constituted the deductive element of our analysis. Conducting data analysis in this way ensured a holistic approach to the multiple case study design by individually analysing each interviewee's data before looking for themes that resonated with the three interviewees (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Research quality

Researchers have debated how to assess quality in qualitative research (e.g., Smith & McGannon, 2018). These debates led to the development of the *letting go* approach (e.g., Creswell & Poth, 2016; Smith et al., 2014) whereby different criteria for judging the trustworthiness of qualitative research can be chosen based on their appropriateness for any given project. In line with social constructionism, we maintained a reflexive approach to maximise trustworthiness throughout this study (Berger, 2015). Reflexivity increases transparency in the researchers' subjective roles when conducting research and analysing data (Berger, 2015). Close collaborations between the first named author and the interviewees enhanced the quality of data (Creswell & Miller, 2000) by involving the coaches as co-creators of knowledge. We also enhanced quality by allowing coaches' experiences to come to the fore (Burr, 2015) using thick, descriptive quotes in the presentation of our results (Ponterotto, 2005). We evaluated the trustworthiness of this study by assessing the worthiness and significance of the research question. Specifically, we asked ourselves and critical friends (i.e., coaching peers and research colleagues who understood the context of the research) whether the phenomenon of interest was important for advancing knowledge and whether the research question addressed a significant gap in the literature (Nowell & Albrecht, 2019). The involvement of critical friends allowed us to discuss and identify the main research issue based on our collective knowledge and experiences. Our critical friends were able to ask questions of us as the researchers and probed us for further information when needed (Noor & Shafee, 2021). This study achieved worthiness by researching a phenomenon (i.e., social support) that has ramifications for PWB and by directing our attention to members of an underrepresented, hard to reach population.

Results

Our findings reflect perceived (i.e., availability of and satisfaction with social network and social support resources) and received (i.e., specific behaviours or exchanges of social support resources) social support functions of three women head football coaches who each held a UEFA B coaching license at the time of data collection. We present the results for each coach one at a time to foster in-depth understanding of each case. Due

to the underrepresentation of women in the UEFA B qualified coaching pool in the UK, pseudonyms are used to protect the coaches' identities and to maintain confidentiality.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth, a 28-year-old coach, had 12 years of coaching experience at the time of her first interview. She was a head coach for a university women's football first team and ran a local grassroots football and futsal club. Elizabeth was also employed by her county FA and, on the day of the first interview, had been accepted onto the FA coach tutor license course. The FA coach tutor license allows coaches to deliver coaching courses, provide coach development courses and events, and tutor individual coaches.

Perceived support

Elizabeth discussed her perceived social support (perceptions of access to and the availability of a social network, and satisfaction with the social support resources provided). She perceived a lack of access to available support when she was coaching (see Table 1). In particular, she provided insight to her perceptions of an insufficient and unavailable formal social network: "It's things like that [support from friends and players], that is kind of informal support. I don't really have a formal support network." This was reinforced by the following quote from the first interview where Elizabeth described a perceived lack of access to her network because she often coached alone in the university and club settings: "So [at the university] I'm pretty much on my own and, at my club, I've got other coaches around me, but they kind of dip in and out." So, it would be really good, I think, next, going into that [coaching] environment where I've got potentially people that can support me better.

Between the first and second interviews, Elizabeth perceived that she had access to support in the form of assistance from another coach: "So, in the beginning of the year we had, umm, I had a student shadowing me and part of the motivation for that was that she got put on a coaching course and she had to complete 15 h." However, prior to the second interview, that perceived availability of access to support had been removed as the assistant coach had already left: "After those 15 h were done, she dropped off. Even though she was doing well, and we were having loads of really good conversations and she was doing good stuff …" Whilst Elizabeth felt that there could be additional access to support within the coaching environment, she also frequently mentioned during both interviews how she felt satisfied and privileged with

Table 1. Elizabeth's Social Support Functions

Raw data themes		Lower-order themes	Higher-order theme
Interview one	Interview two		
Access to social network (23)	Access to social network (12)	Perceived support	Social support functions
Lack of social network (6)	Lack of social network (4)		
Additional opportunities	Additional opportunities (3)	Received support	
Coaching courses (8)	Coaching courses (6)		
Comments and questions (5)	-		
Work expectations (3)	-		

Notes: Numbers in parentheses demonstrate frequency counts of how often each raw data theme was discussed by the coach. The same approach to data representation has been applied in Tables 2–3.

the support network that she did have access to. This involved support from her close peers at her job within the county FA, which included tangible support for coaching sessions:

> I think it's a privilege, with the work that I do. I got a lot of contacts and people that I can ask, and people that ask me "can you come and do this coaching for us?", and stuff like that, so it's a good environment to be [in].

In the second interview, Elizabeth reiterated the support from her work colleagues by discussing how she perceived that her available social network fostered a good working environment:

> I am quite lucky in that in my office I have got like football people and quite a few other tutors, coach mentors. So that is a good environment, I think. If I do change job, that is something I will probably miss a little bit. But I will still have those people.

Elizabeth also discussed perceived satisfactory support from her network in relation to her family, despite wishing to see more of them:

> I think the only thing I'd change is being nearer my family. Because they all live within five miles of each other in [location] so I'm the one that moved away, so I don't . . . I see them probably once a month … (interview #1)

> … my family probably don't have a clue [about] half the stuff I like doing but I will always talk to them about, like my dad is really interested in football. My mum is interested, she doesn't really understand any of it but she is still really interested in it so that is really good. And the same with my grandparents. My grandparents have no idea on earth what I am talking about, but I ring my grandma after a coaching session and chat … (interview #2)

Overall, Elizabeth was satisfied with her perceived social support, which stemmed predominantly from work colleagues at the county FA and her family. However, she also perceived a lack of availability of support, especially within the university and grassroots club environments, where she often felt isolated.

Received support

During her two interviews, Elizabeth highlighted received support (i.e., emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible) that was provided by members of her social network (see Table 1). Elizabeth described receiving comments within her family. She shared an example of when she received a question from a family member about whether she was taken seriously as a women coach. While the intention of the family member may have been one of curiosity, the way it was received by Elizabeth was not supportive:

> I think . . . when was it? About two years ago, one of my family members asked me . . . she didn't have a clue what I do, I rarely see her, probably see her twice a year, and she knows I work in football, and she's like, do people take you seriously because you're a woman? And no joke, that's what she said to me. This is from a woman.

On the other hand, Elizabeth mentioned receiving positive social support behaviours in the form of tangible support via opportunities from the governing body. This may have been fostered because she is a woman: "I have probably had more opportunities for being

a woman to be honest." An example of this additional tangible support was financial provision that provided her with opportunities for development:

> I don't think I would have done my [UEFA] B [coaching] license if the bursary wasn't around, just because of the money factor. Because it's expensive. And this made it a lot cheaper. So instead of it being, what is it, £720? Because I am a licensed coach, it was 120 quid [£].

Elizabeth also mentioned in both interviews about positive social support resources that she received during her attendance at coaching courses. The following quote illuminates how receiving support from a course tutor during a football coaching course enthused Elizabeth to become a tutor herself:

> … even before I'd ever done a coaching session, I'd been put on my coaching course, and then I really enjoyed it, I loved it! And we had a really great tutor as well. And that's one thing I said at my tutor interview, they were like, "why do you want to be a tutor?" I said, "because my first experience of going on a football course made me coach for the last 12 years", so if I hadn't had that positive experience at 16, I definitely wouldn't be in my job that I'm in now, and I definitely wouldn't be coaching and killing myself through football!

In addition to receiving social support from the governing body and tutors, Elizabeth discussed that she received social support from family members. This is highlighted by an example from Elizabeth's first interview, which focuses on the early tangible support that she received from her father when she first started coaching:

> I coached pretty much . . . majority of the age-groups. I did all the tots and then they asked me to . . . because I was just dead keen, so I'd do everything. It was real "dad's taxi," taking me round to all these different sessions before I was old enough to drive.

Overall, Elizabeth discussed experiencing comments and questions from individuals (i.e., from family members) that she perceived as unsupportive. However, she felt that she received support from the governing body, tutors, and family, which presented opportunities for her to progress on the coaching pathway. This received support was largely tangible and emotional, support resources highlighting a potential lack of informational support in Elizabeth's experience.

Rachael

Twenty-five-year-old Rachael had eight years of coaching experience and was an assistant coach at an open age women's football team at the time of her interviews. At the time of the first interview, Rachael was head coach at a Regional Talent Club (RTC) U14s team but had moved to the role of assistant coach at a RTC U16s team by the time of her second interview. Alongside coaching, Rachael was engaged with postgraduate study when data collection took place.

Perceived support

Focusing on the perceived accessibility of the social network and satisfaction of social support offered (see Table 2), Rachael highlighted during her first interview that she perceived a lack of accessible social networks due to the male-dominated environments at football foundations (e.g., clubs, community trusts, county FA's). The following quote describes how Rachael felt uncomfortable and unsatisfied with the conversations that

Table 2. Rachael's Social Support Functions.

Raw data themes			
Interview one	Interview two	Lower-order themes	Higher-order theme
Access to social network (19)	Access to social network (14)	Perceived support	Social support functions
Lack of social network (3)	Lack of social network (5)		
-	Additional opportunities (2)	Received support	
Coaching courses (3)	-		
-	Lack of opportunities		
Proving herself (11)	Proving herself		
Comments and questions (10)	Comments and questions (2)		

members of the formal social network were having at the foundation in an office that was dominated by male staff:

> When I first started, I was the only woman coach that worked at the foundation, so I'd go to work every day and some of the conversations I didn't feel comfortable joining in because it was all about women and what the lads had got up to this weekend and lad culture.

However, Rachael also mentioned that she perceives a gradual change in football culture with the, albeit slow, growth of the number of women coaching. She stated that the environment is "… not so much [male dominated] anymore." Moreover, during the second interview, Rachael discussed the male-dominated social networks in her coaching role and the psychological impact that this had:

> Despite the fact that there is pretty much an equal men-to-women ratio in the centre [RTC], in general, women are far outnumbered in coaching so in that respect it has a negative impact because I feel like I am a minority . . . wherever you go that is not the centre you have people looking at you and it is like errrgh!

The unsatisfactory male dominated social networks were further epitomised when Rachael attended coach education courses. During the first interview, Rachael discussed that, when she attended mixed gender coaching courses, she was one of very few women and felt she needed to prove herself as a football player and a coach:

> Better environment [the women only course], I thought. I think it was more . . . inclusive isn't the right word, but I think welcoming. When I think of my Level 2 [coaching qualification], there was me and two others [women], so there were three women in a course of 25. There is definitely this air, and I don't know if it's just me, it could just be me, but when you go, you have to kind of prove yourself as a woman that you belong there. I always feel like I'm spending the first couple of days showing people that I can play football, even though it's a coaching course …

Despite her reports of male dominated social networks and coach education courses, Rachael perceived some elements of her social network as satisfactory. For example, during the second interview she discussed frequently seeing and using her close, informal network of friends:

> So, friends. I have kind of got a core group of six or seven friends that are really close and I live with a couple of them and I see the others all the time and I play sport with them and this, that, and the other, and like I see them and lean, not lean on them all the time but . . . like they are my best friends …

With reference to the more formal social network that was perceived as available to Rachael, she discussed during the first interview how she perceived that the set-up and support available (coaches, strength and conditioning coaches, physiotherapists) at the RTC she was coaching at was positive because it provided support that allowed her to focus more on coaching:

> … just in terms of the positive stuff, like the RTC now, that's a very good set up to help me, well, to help me as a coach, but also help me enjoy it and help the players develop, because I don't have to worry about injuries, or I don't have to worry about something [else other than coaching].

Whilst the perceived access to positive support from the RTC had not changed in interview two, Rachael was coaching a different age group and, therefore, her formal support network had changed. Nonetheless, Rachael was still satisfied with the support available:

> I was the lead coach and [coach one] would just look at me and go "what are we doing on Sundays?" . . . Whereas now, it is probably the other way round so [coach two] is the lead coach and more experienced coach that would have the lead role, obviously. So, I would input to him and to be fair he never just says no. He always takes things on board …

Overall, Rachael perceived some of the available social networks within the coaching environments to be unsatisfactory due to male domination, especially during mixed gender coaching courses. Rachael did, however, perceive satisfactory support from her friends and those at the RTC.

Received support

Rachael discussed during the two interviews the received support (i.e., emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible) that was provided by her social network (see Table 2). Similar to Elizabeth's experiences, Rachael provided an example of receiving a comment from an individual. For Rachael, when she was coaching at a school, one of the students made a comment about her being a women coach. The intention of the comment from the student may have been innocent but it was perceived by Rachael as unsupportive. This caused her frustration and fostered a sense of needing to prove herself as a coach:

> I was doing [coaching]; it was all boys . . . there were a couple of times where I'd go into schools and the old boys after-school club . . . they'd look at me and be like, "where's our football coach?" I'd be like "I'm your football coach." And they're like, "No! You're a girl." And I'm like, you're five years old, you don't even know the difference between a boy and a girl, but you know that a girl can't coach football. So that used to really piss me off but, again, you'd do a few kick-ups, they'd be fine.

Rachael emphasised during both interviews the psychological impact of receiving these comments, regardless of the intention:

> It's like psychologically, you think about doubting yourself, confidence, stressing about, I always used to hate going into the school for a first time because I knew I'd get the same reaction. So, the week leading up to going into a new school, I'd be really not looking forward to it. (interview #1)

> It is just something that is always there at the back of my mind, and it links, well it kind of links back to the [UEFA B License] bursary scheme in a way like some people have said, not to me, but I have heard some people suggest "well did she only pass because she is a women?" (interview #2)

Nevertheless, Rachael also mentioned receiving positive social support behaviours in the form of informational support from tutors when on coaching courses. The experience was particularly positive when she attended women only courses: "I really liked the women-only environment, I liked working with the tutors. They were quite high-profile tutors as well. So that was really good. Really quite cool to learn off them and learn from other women coaches." Rachael also received supportive behaviours from her friends. For example, in the second interview, she discussed the emotional support that her friends offered by facilitating opportunities away from coaching, which she felt had a positive impact on her well-being:

> Like it is nice on an evening or a weekend to have something else to do, something else to speak about whether it is something as simple as a chat about something over dinner or just "how has your week been?" . . . so, I think it is quite important for my well-being in terms of feeling, well like I have got friends and whatever else and that then obviously impacts on my coaching.

Overall, Rachael reported receiving a mixture of social support resources. A comment from people she coached was perceived as unsupportive, regardless of the intention of the comment. Nevertheless, Rachael also discussed the positive support she received from her friends and tutors during women only football coaching courses, which provided emotional and informational support respectively, which helped with her coaching development.

Helen

Helen was a 27-year-old football coach with three years of coaching experience at the time of her interviews. She was employed as a head coach at an RTC as well as a general manager at a Women's Super League (WSL) club.

Perceived support

With reference to perceived satisfaction with availability of and access to social networks (see Table 3), Helen perceived a lack of availability of support, so much so that she believed she had received minimal access to informational and tangible support, and had reached her current coaching position predominantly on her own:

> … I've not had an amazing amount of support from external people as such, like the FA. It's not like they've walked me through [coaching], I've had to do it on my own. Yeah, I don't think any coach would really feel that they've been walked through and had that support massively.

Table 3. Helen's Social Support Functions.

Raw data themes			
Interview one	Interview two	Lower-order themes	Higher-order theme
Access to social network (9)	Access to social network (3)	Perceived support	Social support functions
Lack of social network (3)	Lack of social network (2)		
Coaching courses (2)	Coaching courses (4)	Received support	
Lack of opportunities	-		
-	Personal issues (4)		
Comments and questions (5)	-		

Even when Helen did have more perceived access of a support network between interviews one and two, this did not last long:

> Not a lot has changed. I had an assistant coach who has now left as of about two weeks ago so that is just me with the U14s, but it has been pretty much me with the 14s since around December, late November anyway because he [coach] couldn't make sessions so I have just been taking them on my own.

However, Helen reported that there was perceived availability of a social network from other staff at the club and the RTC she was coaching at: "But internally, within [club] and the RTC, we've got a good support network . . . so it's more internally. Where we work is good." This is further highlighted by the following quote from the second interview about maintaining the relationships at the RTC between the two interviews:

> It is my third year at [RTC] now and 80% of us have been there for two or more years so obviously, yeah, you get to know how people work and get to enjoy that professional relationship as well. Yeah, I would say if none of us was happy with how each other works we probably would be pretty honest, or we just wouldn't be working with each other anymore so that obviously works in terms of how we all manage our relationships with each other.

Overall, Helen perceived a mix of available and unobtainable support within her coaching environments. She had a consistent feeling that she was coaching alone, and that this was unlikely to change moving forward. However, Helen did perceive some access to support in the club and the RTC that she was involved in but would have liked this support more consistently throughout her coaching journey.

Received support

Focusing on the exchanges of social support resources (i.e., emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible; see Table 3), Helen largely spoke positively about the social support resources that she received. For example, during interview two, Helen mentioned the tangible support she received from her male technical director at the RTC, which had helped her to gain a place on the UEFA B coaching course:

> … you have got to get a letter of recommendation [to get on the course]. I got a letter from the technical director at the time. Me and another coach who worked at the RTC together as well and we both got on and a couple of months later we were doing it.

In the second interview, Helen discussed how she sought informational support from her coaching peers by talking to them about coaching: " … the people I work with have now become friends who just happen to be coaches as well so obviously I talk to them about coaching." Turning to the context of coaching courses, Helen encountered mixed exchanges of social support resources during these developmental opportunities. During the first interview, she discussed how one of the tutors on her UEFA B license course treated her differently to the other male coaches. The intention of the tutor may have been to try and support Helen, but she perceived it negatively:

> So the tutors, one of them took to me a little differently, but in a good way, because I think he thought "oh, she's the only women here, I've got to be a bit nicer to her" and then as soon as I did a session on pressing, I think, within the first week, and he was just like "oh, OK, she

doesn't need my help." And I don't mean that in the big-headed way, it was just a . . . he sort of felt I . . . he had a daughter, and you can sense when older guys are like "oh, I feel it would protect her, she's the only girl." But then he saw that [my coaching session] and he was like "ah, OK, she doesn't need my help."

Overall, Helen discussed predominantly receiving positive exchanges of social support from peers, such as the technical director and other coaches, in the form of tangible and informational support. However, this was contradictory to Helen's perceived support where she perceived receiving minimal access to informational and tangible support from her support network. Moreover, Helen received mixed experiences of social support in the coach education environment where she perceived that she was treated differently by some of the tutors because of her gender.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore perceived and received social support functions with UEFA B licensed women football coaches, using a multiple case study design. The findings highlight that the women football coaches received unsupportive social behaviours such as comments, being asked questions about their suitability for the coaching roles, and being treated differently by tutors when attending mixed gender coach education courses. However, coaches perceived that they generally felt supported by the social networks that they did have access to. This predominantly included support from informal networks such as friends and family. Yet, there was a collective perception that coaches would like additional access to support, particularly formal support within their coaching environments. Some of the coaches felt that they had progressed to their current positions largely on their own and reported that they often coached in isolation within their current roles.

This study is one of the first to focus on perceived social support functions with coaches, specifically highly qualified women football coaches who represent a hard-to-reach sample. Feelings of being undervalued and isolated in the coaching community are similar to findings highlighted in previous research with women sports coaches from a wider variety of sports (e.g., field hockey, cricket, netball; see Allen & Shaw, 2013; Norman, 2014). Indeed, women senior national head coaches from the UK have previously discussed difficulties relating to the development and maintenance of coaching relationships because of the perceived hostile coaching environments created by men who were perceived to dominate social networks (Norman, 2014). This is important for women coaches who have reported that they prefer to acquire coaching knowledge from learning activities when social interactions are involved (e.g., during peer discussions or mentoring; Stoszkowski & Collins, 2016) and accounts of peer guidance being a valued source of learning in the workplace (Coetzer, 2007). This study adds to the literature by offering original insights to women football coaches in high-performance contexts (i.e., UEFA B license). This is noteworthy because a dearth of social support, particularly in the form of formal networks and perceived support, may have an influence on women coaches' progression to the high-performance contexts due to reduced opportunities and feelings of isolation (Allen & Shaw, 2013).

Understanding the perceived social support of women coaches and access, or lack of, to formal and informal networks provides original and significant insights into a minority

group of women coaches. However, we acknowledge that, while information was co-constructed with white women coaches, the study lacks representation from individuals in other marginalised minority groups (e.g., those who identify as Black, Asian, and minority ethnic [BAME]). Previous research has described how coaching can be a difficult profession for individuals from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) groups to progress in due to a lack of social and or professional networks to support their professional development (Fletcher et al., 2021; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018). This is reflected in a lack of mentoring or opportunities to develop their coaching expertise, as well as inaccessible, infrequent, and costly training courses (see Bradbury, 2016). The nature of the coaching appointment process, described by BAME coaches as informal, closed, and lacking transparency, excludes and marginalises many BAME coaches from new opportunities (Rankin-Wright et al., 2019). Football has the capacity to connect and improve social relations (Krustrup & Parnell, 2019). Yet, current football structures lack belonging for minority groups, which forces them to negotiate-resist existing football cultures (Lawrence & Davis, 2019). To address this issue, further exploration is needed to understand the social barriers that can negatively influence minority coaches' experiences of enjoyment and progression in the coaching profession.

This study provides novel insight to the positive exchanges of received support through social support resources (i.e., emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible) received by white women coaches in high-performance contexts (i.e., UEFA B license). The social support resources provided to women coaches by their network (e.g., family members, friends, and peers) is similar to that of male coaches (Norris et al., 2020), The current study develops on the published literature by highlighting received support that is different to that of male coaches. To expand, it was perceived that the coaches receive tangible social support resources (e.g., additional funding and training) from the National Governing Body (NGB) due to being a woman, and that they often had supportive tutors which helped them to develop. British women coaches in the current study, and those in previous research who was working at County FA or WSL levels (Lewis et al., 2018), described receiving social support (e.g., support from tutor) during coach education programmes. These findings are important because they expand on research that has predominantly focused on the negative support experiences of women coaches (e.g., Norman, 2010; Schlesinger & Weigelt-Schlesinger, 2012). Our report of positive social experiences (e.g., with tutors on a coach education course) advances understanding of the experiences that may increase women's intentions to be involved in coaching, to become leaders themselves, and to become role models for other women (Norman, 2012).

However, for women coaches, there is often a conflict between the support provided, its intention, and how it is perceived by the recipient. For example, women coaches in this study felt that they were treated differently on coach education courses. While the intention behind this from the tutors may have been positive, the way it was received by the women coaches was not. This highlights a complex interplay between the support offered and the perceivers perception of it (e.g., tutor may offer an easier drill with intention of helping but perceived as a form of sexism). This is consistent with previous findings relating to British women football coaches' experiences of coach education courses where tutors have called woman by different names on purpose or given them easier drills to coach (e.g., Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2011; Lewis et al., 2018). These micro-aggressions

experienced by women coaches can facilitate feelings of self-doubt, causing them to feel marginalised and isolated, therefore, making coaching a less attractive profession (Norman, 2010). This suggests that it is the individual's perceptions of support, rather than support per se, that are important for health outcomes. Collectively, the results from this study advance previous research by suggesting that white British women head coaches in high-performance contexts also receive negative exchanges regardless of the performance context (e.g., grassroots or national level; Norman, 2014). This is important because high-performance women coaches have previously highlighted that feeling connected to individuals (e.g., peers and athletes) is important for enhancing their working conditions and for creating opportunities to learn (Allen & Shaw, 2013).

As with any research, this study has several strengths and limitations. A strength of this study lies in the sampling strategy and the population sampled. The study provided an opportunity to work with a population that can be difficult to access and is currently underrepresented in the coaching literature. Thus, our findings offer original insights into women football coaches who hold a UEFA B coaching license in a sport that is currently profoundly populated by men. The research design employed was also a strength of this work. The explorative multiple case study approach generated in-depth stories relating to the coaches' social support functions. The dual interview design also helped to provide coaches with multiple opportunities to discuss their experiences of social support. Although this approach can be seen as a strength, the length of time between interviews could have been a limitation. Another limitation is that women who took part in this study each identified as white British. Whilst not purposefully sampled in this way, this sample mirrors the current representation of women coaches in football. Therefore, we acknowledge the need for involvement from coaches who represent diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds in future coaching research. Despite our unique and hard to access sample, we recognise that survivor bias may have been at play. Thus, and in line with our philosophical stance and our study design, our results are not intended to be indicative of experiences that all women coaches may encounter in football or wider contexts.

We recommend that future research includes qualitative longitudinal designs that explore social support functions with wider and more diverse representation from women coaches. This would help to develop knowledge about the ways in which women's access to and satisfaction with social networks changes or stays stable over time and would facilitate understanding of the reasons for changes to their social support. Researchers are also encouraged to continue exploring social support resources and the different types of support that are available to deeper probe how these can influence performance and PWB. Scholars should particularly be encouraged to study these ideas with coaches who represent minority groups. Receiving positive social support resources (e.g., during coaching courses) may facilitate the engagement and intentions of women in the profession (Vinson et al., 2016). A further avenue for researchers is to work with wider networks in coaching (e.g., males and families) to understand how they perceive their behaviour and communication towards women coaches. It might be that these populations do not perceive their comments or actions as unhelpful and, therefore, do not understand the impact they might have for women coaches. Insight in these areas could help to better understand the social barriers preventing women from entering and progressing as coaches and could inform the creation of

equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) programmes for people working with and supporting women.

Previous research with women professional coaches has reported that equity training is not always conducive (e.g., by only briefly touching on pertinent issues and by, at times, including inaccurate content) and often has limited impact on practice (Norman, 2016). Therefore, developing more effective coach education programmes that include segments on sexism, racism, and homophobia may be helpful for male coaches to better understand their behaviours and for women coaches to work together to resist and challenge these insidious experiences (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Safe environments should also be created by coach educators, organisations, and NGBs, particularly during coaching courses (e.g., by having more women tutors), to facilitate inclusion among the minority coaching community and reduce micro-aggressions towards women coaches. This is important to try and address the systemic issues and unconscious bias in football as Association football in England, characterised by its white, working-class, male origins, is an arena that has long been associated with racist and sexist language and behaviour (Clarkson et al., 2022). The coaches who took part in this study reported that single gender (i.e., women only) coaching courses were particularly valuable for their professional development and for developing beneficial social support networks. Thus, NGBs should consider such offerings if the aim is to work towards a more diverse, inclusive, and supported coaching workforce.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, L.A.N. The data are not publicly available due to restrictions (e.g., their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants).

Supplementary materials

Supplementary materials (e.g., interview guides) are available on request from the first named author.

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