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Peng, Qi , Scelles, Nicolas , Chen, Zhisheng, Ai, Kun and Wang, Pu (2025) 'We exist because of them': understanding the integration mechanisms and process of men's and women's football in China. *Sport Management Review*. pp. 1-26. ISSN 1441-3523

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2025.2573546>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

Version: Published Version

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To cite this article: Qi Peng, Nicolas Scelles, Zhisheng Chen, Kun Ai & Pu Wang (16 Oct 2025): 'We exist because of them': understanding the integration mechanisms and process of men's and women's football in China, Sport Management Review, DOI: [10.1080/14413523.2025.2573546](https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2025.2573546)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2025.2573546>



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'We exist because of them': understanding the integration mechanisms and process of men's and women's football in China

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ABSTRACT

In 2019, the Chinese Football Association (CFA) released a policy mandating all men's clubs qualifying for the Chinese Super League (CSL) to integrate a women's football team within their structure. Against this backdrop, this study aims to answer the research questions: What are the integration mechanisms and socialisation tactics adopted by men's clubs to integrate women's teams? What are the barriers and enablers of an effective integration process and positive integration experience for women players? Underpinned by a social constructionism philosophical position, we conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with the club directors ($n = 4$) responsible for women's football development and women football players ($n = 14$) impacted by the integration policy. All data were analysed using the thematic analysis method. The findings highlighted a superficial integration process as most clubs resorted to partnering with an existing external football team, with little evidence of resource-sharing in physical assets, personnel, and knowledge and information during the integration process. Additionally, barriers such as inadequate organisational support for women players, as well as the perceived inequality and job insecurity associated with their affiliation status to the men's team have further contributed to an ineffective integration process. Meanwhile, women players' proactive tactics such as sense-making and positive framing have enhanced their integration experience into their club. This study highlights the understudied negative impact associated with integration from women players' perspectives. Policymakers are encouraged to create more financial incentives for clubs to support women's teams; clubs should implement their integration strategies with careful consideration of the broader gendered, socio-cultural, and political context.

KEYWORDS

Women's football; integration; organisational socialisation; sensemaking; positive framing

Introduction

Since the last decade, international and national football-governing bodies have been making attempts to increase participation, professionalisation, visibility and resources in women's football (Culvin, 2023; Culvin & Bowes, 2023; Valenti et al., 2020). One way that

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has been explored is through the integration of women's teams by men's clubs (Hadwiger et al., 2025; Valenti et al., 2021, 2025; Woodhouse et al., 2019). In the present paper, such an integration is investigated in the context of China, against the backdrop of a nationwide football reform since 2015 (Peng et al., 2023). The reform aimed to develop football in China from the grassroots level to the elite level and tackle the continual corruption and integrity issues (Gündoğan, 2024; Wang & Ren, 2022), whilst separating the Chinese Football Association (CFA) from direct government control (Peng et al., 2019). While this separation has not fully taken place due to several barriers linked to the historical, political, and institutional contexts (Peng et al., 2024), the reform led to a series of policy and governance changes within the Chinese football system in its entirety, which subsequently affected women's football. In 2019, the CFA released a policy mandating all clubs qualifying for the Chinese Super League (CSL) – the men's football first tier in China – to integrate (that is, build or partner with) a women's team with a minimum annual investment of 15 million Chinese Yuan (£1.6 m) for each club (Chinese Football Association, 2019). By integrating men's and women's football clubs, the CFA aimed to provide a platform for resource-sharing and enhancing visibility and professionalisation of the women's game, which ultimately could contribute to the development of women's football and the reduction of gender inequality in football in China.

The development of women's sport and gender equality in sport are two important topics in the growing research on women's sport and women in sport in general (Scelles & Pfister, 2021; Taylor et al., 2024; Thomson et al., 2023), as well as specifically on women's football (AlKhalifa & Farello, 2021; François et al., 2022; Valenti et al., 2025). These studies have highlighted the sociocultural constraints faced by women's football historically that have hindered its development compared to men's football (Clarkson et al., 2022; Valenti et al., 2025; Woodhouse et al., 2019). This development is still constrained in women's football and more generally women's sports by a "vicious circle" fuelled by a "self-fulfilling prophecy" that refers to underinvestment, lack of opportunities and lack of coverage which in turn further hinder growth (Guyot et al., 2024; Lebel et al., 2021). The integration of women's football teams by men's clubs is one of the responses to this constrained development that has been implemented internationally. Several studies have examined such integration practices in various countries mandating men's football clubs to integrate a women's team as means to improve the women's game. For instance, Valenti et al. (2021) analysed and compared the factors which contributed to the formulation and implementation of the integration policy in three different countries. Similarly, Hadwiger et al. (2025) focused on the impact of integrated women's football teams on stadium attendance, suggesting that integration, for example, through hosting the women's team in the men's stadium for special games, can attract more fans. This result is consistent with Valenti et al. (2025) who found a positive impact on the stadium attendance of double-headers, that is, games of men's and women's teams of the same club played in temporal succession in the same stadium.

While contributing useful knowledge on integration in football, the existing studies specific to this sport did not account for the actual experience and perspective of women players and other relevant stakeholders (e.g., club directors responsible for women's football development) during the integration process. By contrast, some literature outside football has considered these dimensions (Taylor et al., 2022,

2024). For example, Taylor et al. (2022) examined women rugby league player's personal, organisational and societal barriers and supportive practices in their integration process to existing men's clubs. The authors evidenced that adoption of existing, traditionally male-based, organisational norms and practices acted to legitimise the new women's competition but also placed considerable stress on players. Most of the players had two or more employment commitments simultaneously and yet had limited job security. The challenges identified in Taylor et al. (2022) echo broader gender issues (Allison 2016; Cooky 2009; Messner 1988, 2002) and problems with sex integration in sport (Dashper, 2012; Themen, 2020; Winiarska et al., 2016), which are potentially relevant to the present paper.

In line with Taylor et al. (2022) and other recent publications (Harris & Trussell, 2024; Hoeber et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2024), it is crucial for research that aims to promote women's sport development to place women at the centre of inquiry and pay attention to the specificity and uniqueness of women's experiences. Yet, women have been largely marginalised by the dominant football culture. In addition, sports organisations are still places reproducing traditional gender roles and discourse (Bowes et al., 2021). In light of a growing number of women's and men's sports organisations merging into single entities internationally, we answer the calls from scholars, e.g., (Shaw and Dickson 2024; Taylor et al. 2022) for more research focusing on better understanding gender relations and gendered negotiations during the integration processes of contemporary sport organisations across sports and regional and/or culturally specific contexts. By examining how gendered, cultural, and organisational factors intersect and impact the experiences of women players during the integration process, this study underscores the necessity for sports organisations to go beyond merely implementing integration policies, prompting them to critically examine underlying structures and cultural norms that may limit the effectiveness of integration efforts.

An important consideration that applies to the integration of women's teams by men's clubs in Chinese football is that it represents a top-down policy, with the national governing body (the CFA) making it mandatory for men's clubs to integrate a women's team. This case serves a contrasting example with the case of rugby league in Australia and New Zealand where a bottom-up policy approach was introduced, leading to six men's clubs applied for women's team licences, indicating a strong desire among existing franchises to support women's rugby league development (Taylor et al., 2022). A mandatory policy may not be necessarily associated with a similar desire to participate. Therefore, to what extent such a policy can structurally and culturally shift the masculine narratives inside sports organisations to benefit the women's game is worth exploring. Theories of organisational integration (Angwin & Meadows, 2015; Haspeslagh & Jemison, 1991; Kroon et al., 2022) and socialisation (Adil et al., 2023; Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) may provide invaluable insights for understanding the integration of a women's team into a men's football club, shedding light on both the process and the outcomes tied to different integration mechanisms and socialisation tactics, both at the organisational and individual levels. To this end, this study aims to answer two research questions:

RQ1: What are the integration mechanisms and socialisation tactics adopted by men's clubs to integrate women's teams?

RQ2: What are the barriers and enablers of an effective integration process and positive integration experience for women players?

Literature Review and theoretical background

Gender¹ issues in sport

The barriers of an effective integration process and positive integration experience for women players in Chinese football can be informed by broader gender issues in sport (Allison, 2016; Cooky, 2009; Messner, 1988, 2002). These issues not only concern participation but also professionalisation in a broad sense (that is, not only for players but also other sports' stakeholders, for example, in leadership/managerial positions), with limited women's representation at the professional level (Anderson, 2009) and women's team sport leagues having yet to find a lasting toehold at that level (Allison, 2016; Culvin & Bowes, 2021, 2023). In her study of US women's professional football, Allison (2016) highlighted how league owners and employees were dually influenced by the hyper-commercialised model of success presented by men's professional sports ("business" logic) and an institutionalised, depoliticised feminist model of sport promoting empowerment and role modelling for girls and women ("cause" logic). The integration of women's football teams by men's clubs may be seen as responding to a "cause" logic related to the development of women's football, although in the Chinese case it may differ from the "cause" logic identified in Allison (2016) as it is about providing a platform for resource-sharing and enhancing visibility and professionalisation of the women's game rather than promoting empowerment and role modelling for girls and women

Sex integration in sport

While sex segregation is deeply ingrained in the organisation, practice, and culture of sport (Anderson, 2008), the integration of women's football teams by men's clubs is far from being unique or even precursor in terms of sex integration in sport. Therefore, previous cases may further inform the barriers and enablers of an effective integration process and positive integration experience for women players in Chinese football. For example, from the mid-20th century, women were allowed to compete against men in equestrian sport (Bryant, 2008). However, Dashper (2012) suggested that, without accompanying wider changes in gender norms and expectations, sex integration alone was not enough to achieve greater gender equality in equestrian sport. The same applies to "alternative" or action sports. While they are frequently not organised around formal sex segregation and were identified as offering the opportunity for women and men participants to cross over the dividing lines of sexual differences (Midol & Broyer, 1995), they often have the same male-dominated, heterosexist culture evident in sex-segregated sports (Dashper, 2012; Olive & Thorpe, 2011). These cases are only a few examples of the "promises and pitfalls of sex integration in sport" (Channon et al., 2016). Nevertheless,

¹In this paper, the term "sex" refers to the biological and physiological characteristics, whereas "gender" is considered a social and cultural construct that relates to identity, roles, and behaviors associated with being male, women, or non-binary, among other gender identities.

they do not mean that sex integration cannot be beneficial. As an illustration (Anderson, 2008), showed that when men who initially held orthodox, that is, sexist, misogynistic, and antifeminine views regarding women compete in the gender-integrated sport of cheer-leading, they positively reformulate their attitudes toward women.

Sex integration in sport is not only concerned with sports participation but also organisational (re)structuration. Relatedly, Meyler et al. (2024) recently reviewed research on mergers of male and female national sporting organisations (NSOs). Based on a starting return of 3,315 studies published between 1980 and 2023, the authors only identified four publications relevant to their scope (Nicholson, 2022; Shaw & Dickson, 2024; Stronach & Adair, 2009; Velija et al., 2014). Specifically, Stronach and Adair (2009) showed that the 2003 merger of cricket NSOs in Australia to form Cricket Australia served the interests of women well in several key areas (junior development, coaching of talented youth, financial support and scholarships), with also modest improvements to the publicity and profile of the women's game. However, the authors argued that these benefits were compromised by women having little decision-making voice in the state organisations and being absent from the board of Cricket Australia. These issues echo the results in Velija et al. (2014). Focusing on the 1998 merger of cricket NSOs in England and Wales, the authors found that, while the women's game benefited from increased financial support that boosted its elite development, women had more limited power over the organisation and development of both elite and grassroots levels of play. Access to funding and other key resources coming at the cost of women pushed out of leadership and governance in the UK following "merger-takeovers" of women's sport. This was confirmed by Nicholson (2022) not only in cricket but also squash (merger in 1989), football, athletics (1992), lacrosse and hockey (1996). Examining the 2005 merger of golf NSOs in New Zealand to form NZ Golf, Shaw and Dickson (2024) found that gendered merger negotiations continually presented a view of the men's organisation as stronger and more viable, with the men's approach appearing to be domineering. This in turn had implications for power relations, which align with other studies.

Football has been identified as a sport where efforts to realise sex integration encountered barriers and normative conceptions of gender were reaffirmed (Winiarska et al., 2016). Nevertheless, mixed-sex football in amateur and informal leisure contexts in England has shown to be a positive environment for developing women football players (Themen, 2020). This example corresponds to a specific context. Whether the positive environment identified apply to the integration of women's football teams by men's clubs remains to be seen. More generally, less sport research has focused on integration from an organisational perspective (Meyler et al., 2024; Shaw & Dickson, 2024), especially in terms of the nature and influence of gender relations during the integration process and their implications on organisational and players' performance. These gender relations may be influenced by the specific integration mechanism favoured between the two merging organisations or teams, which suggests the relevance of relying on an appropriate integration framework to help identify the mechanism selected for the integration of women's teams by men's clubs in Chinese football.

Integration mechanisms

Haspeslagh and Jemison (1991) propose a two-dimensional integration framework which focuses on "strategic interdependence" and "level of autonomy". While produced in the

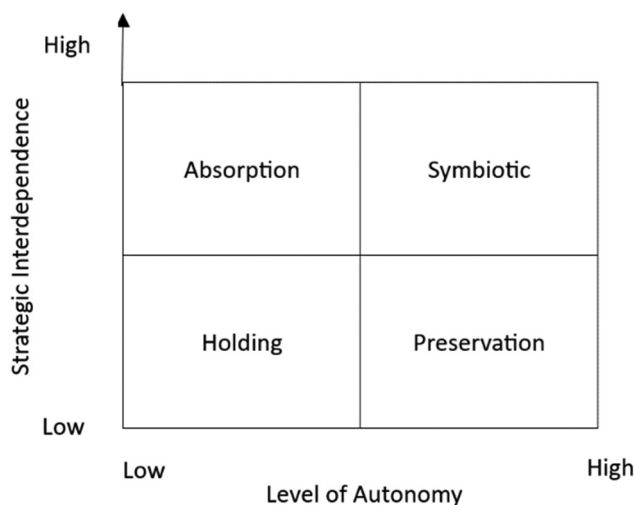


Figure 1. Integration framework by Haspeslagh and Jemison (1991).

early 1990s, this pioneering framework is still highly relevant and influential in management studies (Kroon et al., 2022). Strategic interdependence examines the level of interdependence between integrated entities in terms of capability transfer and resource sharing (Haspeslagh & Jemison, 1991). Strategic interdependence can be assessed by the extent of transfer or sharing of (a) physical assets; (b) personnel; and (c) knowledge or information between two organisations (Angwin & Meadows, 2015). Organisational autonomy, on the other hand, is concerned with the extent to which an organisation's culture is maintained or dissolved. The two dimensions of "strategic interdependence" and "level of autonomy" then create a 2×2 framework. From this, Haspeslagh and Jemison (1991) indicate four integration mechanisms depending on whether strategic interdependence and level of autonomy are both high (symbiotic integration), or both low (holding), or interdependence is high and autonomy low (absorption), or autonomy is high and interdependence low (preservation) (see Figure 1).

Haspeslagh and Jemison (1991) has some limitations, including not offering insights into the integration process and the consequences of each of these four mechanisms not only at an organisational but also at an individual level. The ways in which newcomers are integrated into a new organisation or team may have broad consequences for both sides (Benson & Eys, 2017; Taylor et al., 2025). Organisational socialisation theory (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) potentially provides a useful lens for understanding the integration process and its associated consequences both at organisational and individual integration levels, therefore helping identify the barriers and enablers of an effective integration process and positive integration experience for women players when a women's team is integrated into a men's club.

Organisational socialisation and Newcomer Behaviour

As part of the integration process, newcomers are expected to learn the culture, norms, and expectations associated with the existing organisation, this learning process is what Van Maanen and Schein (1979) termed as *organisational socialisation*. Through learning

organisational history, culture, traditions, languages and responsibilities, newcomers strive to become contributing “insiders” and integrate themselves into the new work environment (Adil et al., 2023). These insights from mainstream socialisation theory have been applied to the study of newcomers in sport. For example, Leo et al. (2020) find that different socialisation tactics can impact individual athlete’s perception of role clarity, cohesion, and intention to return to football teams, which results in (in)effective sports team functioning. Pot et al. (2016) in their study of young adolescents’ socialisation into organised sport identify that contextual factors such as family and peers are indispensable when considering sport socialisation process.

Taylor et al. (2025), based on the work of Feldman (1976), summarise the three basic stages in the organisational socialisation process: (1) anticipatory socialisation; (2) encounter socialisation; and (3) role management. As a result of anticipatory socialisation, newcomers may develop preconceived ideas or expectations about the new role or organisation. Encounter socialisation then takes place following entry into the new organisation and individuals begin to gain deeper insight into the reality of the role. This is also where discrepancies between expectations and reality and consequently, negotiation start to emerge. The final stage of role management is a process of adaptation where individuals tune their expectations about the organisation and adjust themselves to task mastery, role clarity, or group integration. Despite the usefulness of the processual model, it does not clarify which socialisation tactics from both organisation and individual perspectives ensure an effective socialisation process. Van Maanen and Schein (1979), Jones (1986) and Adil et al. (2023) offer a detailed understanding in this regard.

Van Maanen and Schein (1979) propose six organisational socialisation tactics: collective-individual, formal-informal, sequential-fixed, variable-random, serial-disjunctive, and investiture-divestiture. Jones (1986) further develops this typology and argues that the collective, formal, sequential, fixed, serial, and investiture tactics form a category of “institutionalised socialisation” which represents a relatively formalised developmental programme for newcomers. This type of socialisation may facilitate the adjustment process for the newcomers through supporting their learning (Ashforth et al., 2007; Farh et al., 2024). On the other side of the continuum, Jones (1986) names the individual, informal, random, variable, disjunctive, and divestiture tactics as “individualised socialisation”. This type of socialisation represents an absence of structure such that newcomers are left to “sink or swim” (Ashforth et al., 2007). At the same time, it encourages exploration and innovation (Farh et al., 2024). Socialisation efforts exerted by organisations alone may not suffice in ensuring a successful integration process.

The literature suggests newcomers’ proactive behaviours also play a key role in the effective integration process (Gilmore & Harding, 2022). Newcomers’ proactive behaviour is associated with their positive adjustment to the new environment to accelerate successful role transition (Ashforth et al., 2007). Four particular newcomer’s proactive behaviours have been identified in the literature (Adil et al., 2023): (a) Sensemaking, which focuses on reducing uncertainty, constructing meaning and understanding the new situation, for example, through tactics such as information seeking (actively searching for and acquiring job and organisational information) and feedback seeking (soliciting work- and performance-related feedback); (b) Relationship Building, targeting on establishing social relationships with one’s manager, teammates and other social agents in and outside the organisation; (c) Positive Framing, entailing individuals attempting to see

things in an optimistic or constructive way through finding benefits associated with the situation, regardless of objective circumstances; and (d) Job Change Negotiation, which refers to newcomers' efforts to change or modify their assigned tasks.

By examining integration at both organisational level (i.e., the selected organisational integration mechanisms and socialisation tactics) and individual level (i.e., newcomers' proactivity), the literature reviewed provides a useful theoretical background to reveal the integration process of women's football teams within men's clubs in China, via the form of Club–University partnership.

Research context: Women's football development in China

China has a long history of developing women's football with the first recorded women's football match dating back to 1920s (Valenti et al., 2021). Historically, the women's game is more successful in terms of international achievements in comparison with the men's game (Zhao et al., 2012). However, the commercialisation and professionalisation of the women's football has been lagging behind the men's game. Previous research may offer explanations for this. According to Valenti et al. (2021), the men's game has been prioritised by the government, and the professionalisation of the women's game did not commence officially until 2005 when the Women's Super League was established. In addition, a lack of commercial investment and public interest in the women's football have further contributed to its slow development (Fan & Mangan, 2003).

In China, professional women footballers are traditionally paid by local governments as athletes, who take on missions to play in national or international games on behalf of their government. These athletes are entitled with what is called "*Bianzhi*" in Chinese, which refers to people on the state payroll or people who "have an iron rice bowl" (*tie fanwan*), that is, a bowl that never breaks, implying a stable financial income and employment status (Brødsgaard, 2002). Whilst having a *Bianzhi* has been considered an achievement in general, it imposes a challenge in the actual professionalisation process within the women's football development. This is because athletes with *Bianzhi* status are technically employed by the government. As a result, when they consider signing contracts with commercial clubs, they face the difficult choice of relinquishing their previous entitlements in exchange for an uncertain future.

As part of the 2015 national football reform agenda, the integration policy issued by the CFA aimed to further support women's football development. Upon the announcement, however, there was only one CSL club (out of 16) which already had a women's team, the rest would have to build or partner with a women's team in order to meet the club entry regulations (People.cn, 2019). This presented a challenge not only for clubs but also for women footballers who are in the aforementioned *Bianzhi* system. Moreover, there are continuous challenges in building professional men's football in China due to the match-fixing and corruption scandals (Gündoğan, 2024) and weak governance in relation to these issues (Wang & Ren, 2022). These challenges are likely to have impacted the women's game by leading to the attention and resources focused on improving the men's game at the expense of women's football. It also casts a doubt on the potential impact of integrating women's teams to men's clubs, some of which have been struggling to sustain financially and gone into disbandment in recent years (Peng et al., 2022).

Research methods

Philosophical position, data collection and sampling

This study is underpinned by a social constructionism philosophical position, which asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being created and revised by social actors (Clark et al., 2021). In this case, we argue that the integration process and experiences are created and shaped by social actors such as club directors and football players. A qualitative approach was applied through 18 semi-structured interviews with club directors responsible for women’s football development, and football players impacted by the integration policy between June and July 2022. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling within the existing network of the research team. A total of eight clubs playing in the Chinese Super League participated in this study, representing North (4) and South (4) regions, respectively. Table 1 presents a summary of the participants based on clubs. For confidentiality, participants are identified using codes: D1–D4 represent club directors, and P1–P14 represent women players. Consistent with ethics approval, no additional identifying information (e.g., specific clubs) is disclosed.

Instrument development, data analysis and Researcher positionality and reflexivity

The interview guide was informed by the literature on integration, socialisation strategies and tactics, organisational culture, and gender in sports. Directors and players were first asked about their perception of the integration policy. With directors, interviews were then focused on the policy implementation process and what clubs have done to integrate women players. Questions included “What were your thoughts about the integration policy?” and “what did your club do in response to the policy and why?” Interviews with players were directed towards their perception of and experience during the integration process. Questions included “What has been changed since joining the club?”, “How do you feel about being part of the men’s club?”, “what did the club do to support your integration process?”, and “What are your perceptions about the current status?” Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were conducted using telephone. A digital recorder was used to record the conversations. The data collection process was terminated at the point in data collection and analysis when new information produced little or no change to the codebook, that is, when data saturation was reached (Guest et al., 2017). Interviews were audio recorded with participants permission then transcribed. All transcripts were translated to English from Chinese by the leading author and double-checked for linguistic accuracy by the co-authors.

Table 1. Summary of clubs and interviewee profiles.

Club	Region	Role	Number of Participants	Gender	Age (years old)
1	North	Director	1	M	45
2	North	Director	1	M	52
3	South	Director	1	M	48
4	South	Director	1	M	58
5	North	Player	4	F	19–25
6	North	Player	4	F	19–30
7	South	Player	3	F	19–28
8	South	Player	3	F	19–29

Thematic analysis was then applied using the NVIVO software. Two researchers first independently analysed the data following Braun et al.'s (2016) six phases of thematic analysis: a) data familiarisation, which involved researchers immersing themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and taking informal notes; b) deductive coding using a priori codes derived from the literature (e.g., physical assets sharing; personnel sharing; knowledge sharing; organisational culture; perception of integration; institutionalised socialisation; individualised socialisation) and inductive coding allowing new codes to emerge. The inductive coding process has yielded codes such as players' perceptions of equality and job security. The two researchers compared and reflected on their inductive codes before moving on the third step: c) developing themes by organising the codes into sub-themes. By the end of the third step, eight sub-themes were developed, namely, high strategic alliance; low strategic interdependence; insufficient socialisation tactics from clubs to support the integration; male-dominant club culture; inequality status between men's and women's teams; job insecurity amongst women players; sensemaking of the integration by women players; and positive framing. The two researchers then met to discuss their sub-themes to make sure that there were no instances of disagreement as they continue to perform the fourth, fifth and sixth steps, i.e., refining the grouped themes; naming each theme; and producing the report. Three grouped themes were created from the data: high strategic alliance but low strategic interdependence, barriers and enablers of an effective integration process and positive integration experience for women's players.

The researchers maintained an active practice of reflexivity (Berger, 2015), acknowledging the qualitative nature of the study, which involves participants from the researchers' personal networks and more importantly, their own social positions (e.g., gender, age, race, being a native of the investigated country) as researchers. Critical reflection on the potential influence of bias and positionality was undertaken throughout the research process and thus reflexivity was employed as a strategy to ensure the quality and trustworthiness of the study. For example, during the data collection, being self-reflective helped the leading researcher to alert themselves to content that are "all positive" "conflict-free" interactions, knowing the general intention of people in the country to be politically correct and, thus, enabled fuller engagement with the conversation by asking questions from different perspectives. Later, in the data analysis phase, via reflectivity, the research team ensured that more comprehensive analysis and reporting of the data was executed.

Findings

Table 2 summarises our key findings around the three grouped themes and sub-themes with illustrations. First, "high strategic alliance but low strategic interdependence", addressing RQ1, depicts a mechanical integration process, which shows an alliance in the strategic direction between clubs and their partner organisations; however, due to the lack of internal motivation to build a women's team, there is little evidence of resource-sharing in physical assets, personnel, and knowledge and information during the integration process. The second and third themes address RQ2, entailing the barriers (e.g., insufficient socialisation tactics from clubs to support the integration, male-dominant club culture, inequality between men's and women's teams and job insecurity for women

Table 2. Summary of findings with illustrations and exemplar quotes.

Themes	Sub-themes	Illustrations	Exemplar quotes
High Strategic Alliance but Low Strategic Interdependence	An alliance in strategic direction between clubs and universities	As a result of strategic alliance, both clubs and universities aim to reach their respective organisational goals – namely, clubs acquiring a women's team to meet CFA regulations and university teams gaining access to more and improved professional training resources.	<i>"The president of our partner university was very grateful that we chose to work with their women's team because this alliance could provide more competition opportunities for these girls and train their skills at a higher and more professional level, which can lead to more career options in the future". (D3)</i>
	Limited resource-sharing between clubs and universities in terms of:	Participants pointed out that there was little change in their training facilities since the integration, that is, they continue to use the same pitches or gyms and joining the club did not provide them with different or improved training facilities.	<i>"We still use the pitches from the university. It is understandable because in the end of the day, we are still students at the university, and we have to attend classes during the day. It would be a lot of trouble to travel to the clubs' training ground. Also, we don't have time to take such long travel". (P2)</i>
	● physical assets ● personnel sharing ● knowledge and information	Most women's football teams continue to have the same staff as before, i.e., the same coaches from their universities or schools to manage the teams. The findings indicated very limited exchange of knowledge and information sharing between the men's and women's teams Women players were not offered any formal socialisation programme into their clubs.	<i>"Our coach is still the same [coach] from the school team. We have very limited interaction with our partnering club" (P14).</i> <i>"We don't really communicate between us and the men's side. We simply play our own separate games". (P7)</i> <i>"We were not offered any formal opportunities to learn about the clubs" culture. There was no requirement from the club neither that we should know about their regulations or culture'. (P8)</i>
Barriers of Effective Integration and Positive Integration Experience	Insufficient socialisation tactics from clubs to support women footballers' integration	The male-dominant culture was serving as a barrier for the women players to enjoy the integration experience.	<i>"My previous club was very experienced with managing a women's team and all our coaches were well-equipped with knowledge and skills when it comes to women's football on and off the pitch, whereas in my current club, everything very much revolves around the men's football team". (P9)</i>
	Male-dominant club culture further prevents the integration	Women's team existence feels conditional and unequal, which makes the integration experience less positive.	<i>"We are not equals. We are affiliated to the men's football team. If they don't exist anymore, then we [the women's team] will also be gone. We exist because of them" (P7)</i>
	Inequality between men's and women's team	Most interviewees have emphasised the importance of job security, and their feeling the job insecurity had resulted from their negative experience, such as reduced salary because of men's side performance.	<i>"For example, last year the men's team [of my club] was relegated and so their salaries have been reduced by a certain percentage. Then the club decided that we [the women's team] should follow the same procedure to reduce our salaries, even though we have been performing very well, ranking top three in the league table for several years". (P9)</i>
Job insecurity for women players	Job insecurity for women players		

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Themes	Sub-themes	Illustrations	Exemplar quotes
Enablers of Effective Integration and Positive Integration Experience	Players' sensemaking of the integration	It was evident that women players gradually developed an attachment towards their clubs and found meaning associated with their club identity.	<i>I like my new identity associated with the club. In the past, we didn't really attract many fans to watch our games, like maximum 100 fans per match and half of them were families or friends. But now, not only more fans come to watch us playing, but they also chant for us, which made us feel like home. (P9)</i>
	Players' positive framing of the integration	The behaviour of positive framing exhibited by the women players who have benefited from the integration in terms of professional status, skills development, and financial support.	<i>"I believe this [integration] policy has been very beneficial for us women footballers. Integrated with a men's club means we have more chances to enhance our tactics and skills, which will likely benefit the women's football performance overall in the future". (P11)</i>

players) and enablers (e.g., women players' sensemaking and positive framing of the integration) of an effective integration process and positive integration experience for women's players.

High strategic alliance but low strategic interdependence

An alliance in strategic direction between clubs and universities

The data revealed that as a response to the CFA policy (Chinese Football Association, 2019), most clubs chose to partner with existing women's football teams owned by local universities and sports schools. By signing contracts with clubs, the players with their teammates became "double agents", who not only represented their universities (or schools) in student (youth) football matches but also their respective clubs in professional league matches (e.g., Women's Super League). One club director (D1) explained the rationale behind this type of partnership:

When the policy was released, the reality was that the majority of the CSL clubs did not have a women's team. We had to build a team out of scratch, which was difficult because in my province, there was not enough professional women footballers to recruit [...] I had to find a team from a local university or sports school.

Another CSL club director (D3) echoed this rationale and pointed out the high alliance in their strategic direction with a local university:

The president of our partner university was very grateful that we chose to work with their women's team because this alliance could provide more competition opportunities for these girls and train their skills at a higher and more professional level, which can lead to more career options in the future.

A similar comment was made by a club director, further stressing the mutual benefits: This is a matter of resource integration, for instance, clubs generally have better coaches than universities, whereas universities provide talent pools. A combination of both would make a more sustainable development approach for women's football. (D2)

As a result of the strategic alliance, both clubs and universities are committed to collaborating toward their respective organisational goals – namely, clubs acquiring a women's team to meet CFA regulations and university teams gaining access to more professional training. However, the voice of women players remain largely absent in this partnership. For example, when asked about contract agreements, some players mentioned that they did not sign an individual contract; instead, their university signed on behalf of the entire team (P9). Additionally, one player noted that she was not even asked to be present at the contract signing ceremony (P11). Evidence suggested that there was a lack of internal motivation for clubs to build a women's team. The main reason for clubs committing to invest in a women's football team was merely to comply with the CFA policy, as one director (D4) commented:

To be completely honest, we partner with the local university team only to meet the CSL Entry Code. Had the CFA not made it compulsory, we would not have pursued such partnership. In fact, I believe the majority of the CSL clubs simply "created" their women's teams as a formality.

The lack of motivation mainly stemmed from the financial situation inside these men's clubs as D4 continued to explain that since Covid-19, a lot of clubs were facing financial crisis; therefore, investors were more interested in return on investment, as they argued: "let's face it, what can we get out of women's football?" D4's comment echoed a common sentiment among club directors, who generally view women's football as having limited economic and social value. As a result, they see it as an unworthy investment, particularly when it competes financially with men's football. D2 further pointed out that due to the economic downturn since the pandemic, many CSL clubs were caught in debt and could not even pay their men's team and staff; hence, under such circumstance, "who would have the time or capacity to invest in women's football?"

Limited resource-sharing between clubs and universities

Physical assets

The policy-compliance mindset trickled down the integration process, with some evidence showing a superficial integration with limited resource-sharing in physical assets, personnel, and knowledge and information, i.e., low strategic interdependence, between clubs and the integrated women's teams. For instance, when asked about any shared training facilities since the integration, a majority of players mentioned that there was little change in this regard, that is, they continue to use the same pitches or gyms and joining the club did not provide them with different or better training facilities, as suggested by P2:

We still use the pitches from the university. It is understandable because in the end of the day, we are still students at the university, and we have to attend classes during the day. It would be a lot of trouble to travel to the clubs' training ground. Also, we don't have time to take such long travel.

P12 made a similar comment, further insisting on the lack of actual integration by saying that "the university provides our daily training facilities; we have very limited contact with the clubs".

Personnel sharing

In terms of personnel sharing between clubs and the integrated teams, most teams continue to have the same staff as before, i.e., the same coaches from their universities or schools to manage the teams. For example, P14 highlighted:

Our coach is still the same [coach] from the school team. We have very limited interaction with our partnering club.

However, some clubs have offered to share their supporting staff with their women's team, as a player (P2) mentioned:

As a university team, we used to have only one coach and that was it. But now, we have a whole set of staff including the same head coach from the university, two assistant coaches, one masseur, one team doctor, and one strength and conditioning coach, all supported by the club.

In spite of the additional supporting staff, some players did mention that these personnel are very male-dominant, which can be problematic in their daily practices. For instance,

P14 highlighted that “girls can be emotional and especially with our physical conditions, the monthly cycle, it can be a little inconvenient to talk to an all-men staff team”.

Knowledge and information sharing

One of the rationales for the integration policy was to allow knowledge and information sharing between the men’s and women’s teams (Valenti et al., 2021). Therefore, questions were also asked about the communication and relationships between the men’s and women’s teams of the same club, Answers indicated very limited exchange of knowledge in this regard, as P7 commented: “we don’t really communicate between us and the men’s side. We simply play our own separate games”. A similar comment was made by P8 who noted that “There was little chance to communicate with them. We may see them at the training ground, but we don’t really train or talk together”. Nonetheless, some players mentioned that certain arrangements were made by their clubs to allow the women’s team to train and compete with their reserve (boys’) team, for example, P10 informed that “there was a few times that we competed with their youth team, but it was very limited and ad hoc”.

Barriers of effective integration and positive integration experience

Insufficient socialisation tactics from clubs to support women footballers’ integration

When it comes to newcomers settling into the host organisation, it is important that newcomers are aware of their organisational identity and culture. Hence, we asked the women footballers’ perception of their club culture, values and/or regulations, and whether their clubs had offered any formal introduction to the club and its culture. In most cases, the answer was no, that is, none of these players had any induction towards their host clubs, as expressed by P8:

We were not offered any formal opportunities to learn about the clubs’ culture. There was no requirement from the club neither that we should know about their regulations or culture.

However, players mentioned that they felt it was important that they acquire this information, as such they tended to do so by self-learning, such as “going through the history of the club on the Internet” (P4), “reading about their club culture and values on their supporters’ page’ (P12), and “following their news on social media” (P13).

Male-dominant club culture further prevents the integration

There was not only insufficient organisational tactics in place to help the women footballers settling into the club’s structure but it was also the male-dominant culture, i.e., the lack of women supporting culture that was serving as a barrier for the women players to go through this transition.

P9 was a professional footballer who used to play for a women’s team which was operated differently, in an independent form, i.e., not a result of the integration policy. She reflected on the two different management systems and argued that this was a completely different experience:

My previous club was very experienced with managing a women’s team and all our coaches were well-equipped with knowledge and skills when it comes to women’s football on and off

the pitch, whereas in my current club, everything very much revolves around the men's football team.

When asked if she felt it was an unfair decision, P9 said: "well, this is the normality, I may have felt this to be unfair when I was younger, but now, I understand how things work".

Inequality between men's and women's team

Another barrier of effective integration was the lack of equality between the men's and women's teams, as P7 described in her perception of the integration process:

We are not equals. We are affiliated to the men's football team. If they don't exist anymore, then we [the women's team] will also be gone. We exist because of them. It's like we have handed out our own fate to other people, which is really worrying.

P8 resonated with this comment, expressing that:

We are practically the beneficiaries of the CFA policy which mandates CSL clubs to be equipped with a women's team. If it weren't for the policy, our team won't even exist. We are an affiliation to the men's team.

The lack of equality fosters a sense of dependency and subordination among the women's teams. As P7 and P8 highlighted, their very existence feels conditional, which can erode team morale and hinder the development of a strong, independent identity for women players.

Job insecurity for women players

P9 further illustrated a lack of job security and equality for the women's team with the current management structure:

For example, last year the men's team [of my club] was relegated and so their salaries have been reduced by a certain percentage. Then the club decided that we [the women's team] should follow the same procedure to reduce our salaries, even though we have been performing very well, ranking top three in the league table for several years.

P6 also mentioned that the lack of job security lied in the policy itself, which further put the sustainability of the women's game under scrutiny:

The policy only mandates the CSL clubs to have a women's team, if our men's team was relegated to League One, then the club will not be forced to have a women's team anymore, in which case, we would have been dismissed.

Noteworthy, most interviewees have emphasised the importance of job security, which was perceived to be, surprisingly, in an adverse relationship with the progression of professionalisation of the game. That is, the more professionalised the game, the less secured their job (as a player) was perceived to be. One club director (D3) felt particularly strongly about this, favouring women players to stay within the government-system route, i.e., with *Bianzhi*, rather than within the clubs' contract-based, professionalised route:

Within the [government] system, their job is more secured because when they are retired, the government will find them a job; if these players were to get rid of their *Bianzhi* to sign the clubs' so-called professional player contracts, they can easily become unemployed, so there is

no certainty in it. This could even affect their marriage, as no mother-in-law would want an unemployed woman marrying their son.

Bianzhi represents a government job with security and benefits, which is highly valued culturally. The pressure to maintain this job rather than pursuing potentially unstable professional player contracts highlights the societal expectations placed on women to prioritise job and financial stability over career passion.

When asking the players about their perception of the job security and whether they would consider dropping *Bianzhi* to fully commit themselves to a career on the commercial scene, i.e., professionalised clubs, one player (P8) who is registered within the government system answered negatively:

So far I haven't really met any club which gives me the confidence to alter my status to a fully professionalised player. I love my sport and I have my career goals, but I also need to make sure that my future is somewhat protected, a professional club does not offer the security I needed, but *Bianzhi* does, it's simple as that.

Enablers of effective integration and positive integration experience

Even though there was sparse organisational support to better integrate the women's team into the club, data suggested that the players have been consciously or unconsciously looking for ways to improve their integration experience through their own proactivity. These include sensemaking and positive framing of the integration.

Players' sensemaking of the integration

Sensemaking was particularly evident in the attachment that players developed towards their respective clubs and the meaning associated with it, as P7 was proud of being able to play for her home team:

I am a local and this has been my home team. My parents have been supporting this team since I am a child. Now I can say that I am actually playing for this club, this is making me very proud. It is also making my family proud that I represent their club in competitions.

Whilst not every player has the pleasure to play for their home team, some tend to create meaning by playing to prove themselves, as exemplified by P8: "I want to try my best for every match that we play. I want to prove myself to the country, to the club, and to the city that stands behind us".

Noteworthy, some players made sense of their identity through the support of football fans, which can be seen as some form of feedback:

I like my new identity associated with the club. In the past, we didn't really attract many fans to watch our games, like maximum 100 fans per match and half of them were families or friends. But now, not only more fans come to watch us playing, but they also chant for us, which made us feel like home. (P9)

According to the players, these fans used to support the men's team and since the women's team joined in, the fans have transferred similar support and passion for them, which have made them felt valued and thus gradually developed a sense of belonging to their clubs, as P4 commented:

It's been three years since I joined the club, we have developed a bigger fan base. When we were on the pitch, our fans would come to the stadium and cheer for us, they'd chant from the beginning to the end. Hearing this made me feel that I cannot let them down, I want to try my best to win. The experience is unique to the club, my school team does not have this.

Players' positive framing of the integration

The data revealed the other proactive behaviour of positive framing exhibited by the women players in helping themselves transition better into the new identity. This is firstly evident in their reaction towards the integration policy, as illustrated by P11:

I believe this policy has been very beneficial for us women footballers. Integrated with a men's club means we have more chances to enhance our tactics and skills, which will likely benefit the women's football performance overall in the future.

P2 concurred with this point and commented that: "I feel very lucky to be able to compete for a professional club and at the same time studying for a degree". Other players highlighted the enhanced support including better access to facilities. For example, P4 underscored the benefits brought by the integration in terms of access to pitches:

There were both natural and artificial grass pitches for training at the university. Prior to the integration, we could only use the artificial surface because the natural ones are more costly to use. Since joining the club, we are now training on the natural grass every day and it is much better for match-day preparation.

Another player (P3) echoed this point, suggesting the same for the gyms:

Prior to the integration, we had to compete for gym equipment with other student users, and now the university has allocated a time for us to use so we don't have to compete anymore.

Some players even mentioned that they were gaining some financial support, albeit not so much that may qualify as salary, which allows them to focus more on football training, as P3 commented:

Before we signed with the club, we didn't really have any subsidies from our university, literally nothing. However, now representing the club, we are provided some subsidies each month, it's not a lot, but compared to other students at universities, it is not too bad. Plus, playing football is something that I enjoy, so I feel lucky to be in this situation.

Players have also perceived the integration policy to be positive for the women's football development overall, as P7 summarised: "this policy propelled the development of women's football, especially helped the professionalisation of women's game in general". However, she also pointed out the actual implementation of the policy by clubs may have not lived up to the intention of the policy:

The fact is that most CSL clubs chose to work with an existing women's team and therefore not really contributed to developing new players onto the field. We cannot achieve the goal of developing women's football like this because we need more players and more teams in the long run. (P7)

Discussion and conclusion

Based on the findings, it was obvious that an integration mechanism of “Preservation” (Haspeslagh & Jemison, 1991) has been adopted by the CSL clubs, which means that there was a relatively high level of autonomy, but at the same time, a low level of strategic interdependence existing between the two organisations, i.e., the clubs and the women’s teams with their affiliated sports schools or universities. It appeared that clubs and universities have based their decisions on their organisational strategic objectives, with minimal regard for the needs and conditions of the players themselves, underscoring the reciprocal interests for clubs and universities while sidelining players in the dialogue. The data further highlighted the marginalised position of women players in the integration process because, despite managing the same women’s team, both clubs and universities preferred to, respectively, keep their culture and ways of doing business. For example, clubs were not ready to change their male-dominant masculine culture to adapt to the incoming women’s team, in line with previous literature that identified football as a sport where efforts to realise sex integration encountered barriers and normative conceptions of gender were reaffirmed (Winiarska et al., 2016). In this study, this was also reflected in the all-male staff team and their limited experience in coaching or managing a women’s team. The male-dominant composition of support staff embodies broader structural gender inequalities that often disregard or undervalue the perspectives and specific experiences of women in a male-centric environment (Channon et al., 2016; Dashper, 2012; Taylor et al., 2022).

The finding complements existing studies related to the integration of a women’s team into a men’s football club (Hadwiger et al., 2025; Valenti et al., 2025) and highlights the potential negative impact associated with such integration from women players’ perspectives. The lack of adaptation by men’s clubs to integrate women’s teams was perceived as problematic and inconvenient by the women players. The women’s teams were essentially left to the management of their previous owners (e.g., universities) and there was little intention at the organisational level to better merge and embrace the women’s team to the clubs.

Moreover, the data revealed a relatively low level of resource-sharing in physical assets (e.g., training facilities), personnel (e.g., head coaches), and knowledge exchange between the men’s and women’s teams in the club, which amounted to a low strategic interdependence (Angwin & Meadows, 2015). Reflecting on the objectives of the CFA integration policy, which aimed at providing a platform for resource-sharing and enhancing visibility and professionalisation of the women’s game, the study argued that the outcome of integration was not as effective as intended. The arguably mechanical and superficial integration evidenced in our analysis potentially resulted from the lack of motivation from clubs to invest in a women’s team. As the data suggested, if it was not for the CFA policy, most clubs would not have shown interests in building a women’s team, especially when burdened by their financial struggles. This indicates that despite the growth of women’s sport (Scelles & Pfister, 2021), the sport centre continues to be socially and politically constructed by and for men (Messner, 2002). This also confirms the “vicious circle” fuelled by a “self-fulfilling prophecy”, with women’s sports being seen as an unworthy investment because it does not make money and at the same time not being given the opportunity to

make money due to a lack of investment and coverage (Cooky et al., 2013, 2015; Guyot et al., 2024; Lebel et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the results underlined that the everyday organisational practices that served to reproduce structures of inequality point to the potential limitations of integration strategies to increase opportunities for women to play football equally. Specifically, the findings highlighted the neglect of women players during the integration process, especially in terms of their voices, needs, and requirements, consistent with previous literature (Channon et al., 2016; Dashper, 2012; Taylor et al., 2022). The players discussed structural limitations that restrict their ability to access improved training facilities due to their already packed schedules. Neither the clubs nor the universities have addressed this issue from an organisational perspective, further underscoring the point of marginalisation. Women's agency has been constrained to the extent that participants simply had to "accept" as it is because "this is the normality". This highlights the persistence and reinforcement of gender inequality in women's football but also the role management process as a result of the organisational socialisation (Taylor et al., 2025). Moreover, it underscores the lack of empowerment for women athletes to face these barriers. The study therefore emphasises the importance of empowering women players in their capacity to speak out and enabling their agency in the implementation of these integration programmes, in line with existing literature (Cooky, 2009; Taylor et al., 2022). While our research acknowledges the functionality of the agency performed by women players via proactive tactics during the integration process to enhance their individual experience, it reveals the constraining cultural ideologies within the society and organisations in question. For instance, the comment about the importance of *Bianzhi* to players' marriage also underscores cultural norms where women's financial stability is crucial for their marital prospects, that is, women nowadays are expected to demonstrate their financial independence to be accepted by their future parents-in-law. Such cultural expectations arguably limit women's opportunities to fully commit to professional sports careers, perpetuating gender inequality. Moreover, there was no obvious resistance from the women players regarding the unequal status between the male and women teams. As such, the forms of agency enacted through proactive tactics do not really lead to the objective improvement of the women players' working conditions, rather, it was an incrementally internalised acceptance of what has been provided by the men's club.

Practical implications and contribution to scholarship

In Chinese football, the survival of the women's teams is fragile and subject to the existence and performance of the men's teams. If the men's team was no longer existing in the CSL, then the women's team would not have the legitimacy to exist either, leading to the collapse of the integration scheme. We acknowledge that there are examples of more successful integration approaches internationally in football, for example, in England (Valenti et al., 2025) and Germany (Hadwiger et al., 2025), and outside the sport, for example, in cricket in Australia (Taylor et al., 2024)² and rugby league in Australia and New Zealand (Taylor et al., 2022). Nonetheless, the Chinese football case

²The authors kept the two leagues covered anonymous, however the details provided for "League B" correspond to the women's cricket league in Australia.

reflects the potential limitations of a mandatory policy in structurally and culturally shifting the masculine narratives inside sports organisations to benefit the women's game, echoing difficulties outside China, for instance, in French football as exemplified by the case of Bordeaux (Jucobin, 2024).³ While such policies may aim to promote equality, they also reveal the extent to which women's sports (football) can be structurally dependent on external mandates rather than being organically integrated and valued (Valenti et al., 2025; Woodhouse et al., 2019). In Chinese football, the motivation resulted from policy compliance without genuine cultural change is bound to lead to a superficial level of commitment to the integration policy at the club level. This puts a question mark on the sustainability of this "preservation" integration mechanism for women's football development in China. Another aspect of unsustainability in the "preservation" mechanism lies in the fact that by integrating an existing women's team, these football clubs were not making extra effort in building new teams or developing new players, which is the foundation of the future of the women's game (Thomson et al., 2023). Moreover, women's football teams are merely seen as "beneficiaries" of the integration policy, without actual power in negotiating their position in the club (Taylor et al., 2024). A practical implication therefore is the need for sports (football) governing bodies to reconsider the policies to be implemented by clubs to promote women's sports (football), which may include offering more financial incentives to clubs, providing guidance to club managers and employees on how to adjust clubs' structure and culture to better support women players, and potentially allowing more time for clubs to develop their own women's team (instead of having to "borrow" existing teams to meet the entry policy) so that clubs are in a better position to support women's sport (football) development.

Furthermore, evidence suggested a lack of formal organisational socialisation process to integrate the women's team into their organisations. The fact that the players had to resort to self-learning through channels like social media and supporters' pages at the anticipatory stage (Taylor et al., 2025) implies that their integration into the club is not prioritised, which perpetuates the notion that women's sports are less significant compared to their men's counterparts (Cooky, 2009; Valenti et al., 2018; Woodhouse et al., 2019). This also exposes a significant area where clubs could improve in contexts such as Chinese football, advocating for a gender-sensitive support network that aligns with the lived experiences of all players through the development of formal socialisation programmes that focus on an inclusive team and club culture (Taylor et al., 2022).

The findings underlined that the affiliation status of Chinese women's football teams to the men's counterparts created a sense of insecurity and inequality for women footballers, which echoes results in other sports and countries (Taylor et al., 2022, 2024) and has served as barriers to an effective integration process. However, in contrast with the clubs' attitude towards the integration policy, Chinese women's football players were able to use sensemaking and positivity to create a smoother transition experience for themselves, which indicates the benefits of newcomers' proactive behaviour (Adil et al., 2023; Ashforth et al., 2007). Nonetheless, due to structural constraints, women players could not negotiate their position, role, and social integration, suggesting their limited voice as

³Only three years after having played in the UEFA (Union of European Football Association) women's Champions League qualifiers, Bordeaux women's team was excluded from the French national-level divisions in 2024/25 after the club went into administration (Jucobin, 2024).

newcomers (Farh et al., 2024). Therefore, our research calls sport managers in situations comparable to Chinese football to provide more secure and equal working conditions for women players, as well as channels for their voice to be heard. This is so that players are more empowered in their position to protect their own wellbeing (Taylor et al., 2022, 2024). More generally, our study offers recommendations for sports organisations operating in similar situations to adopt more holistic approaches that account for the lived realities of women athletes, ensuring that integration policies and mechanisms are not only inclusive in principle but also supportive and effective in practice (Taylor et al., 2022).

In the research to date, the concept of integrating men's and women's football has generated much debate around whether mirroring what has been taking place in the men's football world is the right approach to develop the women's game (Valenti et al., 2021; Woodhouse et al., 2019). Nevertheless, little empirical evidence has been gathered to reflect on the perceptions of key stakeholders involved in the process in football, as opposed to other sports (Taylor et al., 2022, 2024). This paper contributes to academic knowledge by illuminating the complex gendered, cultural, and organisational dynamics which impacted the integration process and shaped the individual perception and experience of women footballers in the Chinese context. This study also extends the literature on integration and socialisation by merging the two theoretical bodies to offer a more holistic theoretical lens in examining organisational integration in sport, with equal attention to individual experiences during the process. This has addressed the weaknesses of current studies on organisational integration, which often lacks the perspective of employees who are crucial to make the process successful (Meyler et al., 2024; Shaw & Dickson, 2024; Taylor et al., 2025).

Limitations and directions for future research

We acknowledge that this research has some limitations, which open the door to directions for future research. First, the lack of motivation from men's clubs to integrate women's teams may be specific to Chinese football and have been exacerbated by their financial difficulties, which can be linked to the Covid-19 pandemic that has impacted women's sport internationally (Bowes et al., 2021; Clarkson et al., 2022). It may be worth replicating similar research in different sports, different countries or at a different time when clubs are in a better financial position to evaluate whether similar results hold. Second, the efficiency of the integration process was assessed in a qualitative way in our paper. Future research may attempt to do it in a more quantitative manner, with for example, initial identification of key objectives and quantitative targets for governing bodies and clubs then evaluation of whether these objectives and targets have been reached and the associated determinants of performance. Similarly, the experiences of women's players and their determinants could be assessed quantitatively through a survey. Such survey could include different countries and sports, therefore helping international comparison across sports.

Despite the limitations identified, our research contributes important knowledge to academia and practitioners pertaining to the integration mechanisms, processes and experiences between women's and men's sports. It represents a relevant reference

point for future research on the topic, women's sports and more generally integration in sport, and provides valuable insights for the practice of sport management and policy.

Disclosure statement

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

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