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# The power of stigma: telling the story of the exclusion of Porn Pedallers Cycling Club from British Cycling

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## ABSTRACT

In 2019, Porn Pedallers Cycling Club (PPCC), an organization for adult industry workers who enjoy social and competitive cycling, had its affiliation revoked by UK cycling organization British Cycling due to its links with pornography. The removal of this privilege resulted in considerable media attention in the cycling, mainstream, and adult media. This article explores how British Cycling was able to effectively shut down the debate as to whether the PPCC should be allowed to affiliate through its positioning of both parties. Through critical discourse analysis of online news articles, the article demonstrates how the British media used images and language to stigmatize the PPCC, making constructive debate unfeasible. The authors of this article are public relations scholars and through the analysis of this fast-moving story suggest ways that small or independent organizations in the adult industry might react when in conflict with corporate entities.

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values

## Introduction

This article tells the story of the exclusion of Porn Pedallers Cycling Club (PPCC), a club for adult industry workers who enjoy social and competitive cycling, from British Cycling. The national governing body for the sport of cycling in Britain, British Cycling governs and develops the sport at grassroots level while also supporting riders representing Great Britain internationally. British Cycling has 145,000 members and around 2000 affiliated clubs (British Cycling 2024) – of which the PPCC was once one.

It is important to tell this story, not just to document a moment in the history of both organizations but also to demonstrate how the UK media's reporting of issues relating to pornography manages to (perhaps accidentally) sabotage any nuanced discussion of these issues. Voss observed that much reporting on porn and the adult industries as a business in the mainstream media is 'highly sensational and weak on validity [...]. [J]ournalists [...] don't use their usual standards when reporting about porn' (2012, 401). Thus, a story about porn and sport – especially one where women's sport is involved – suffers a

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double penalty due to the storyline (pornography) and the objectification of women in sport (as reported by, for example, Messner, Duncan, and Cooky 2003; Fink 2015; Jane 2017). Such a combination leads journalists prone to ‘delivering moments of sexual voyeurism’ (Messner, Duncan, and Cooky 2003, 49), rather than factually reporting on sport and sporting achievements while also sensationalizing the issue under discussion.



The event which is the subject of this article was effectively a procedural dispute between two organizations which, was it not for the involvement of the PPCC, would have probably passed without comment or media coverage. This article, therefore, has two research objectives: to tell the story of the PPCC’s exclusion from British Cycling in 2019; and to explore how stigmatization by the British media of the PPCC succeeded in closing down any debates or allowing for the PPCC to discuss being readmitted to British Cycling despite support for the PPCC in the tabloid media and from famous cyclists, as reported in the cycling media.

## The storyline

In March 2019, the PPCC, as a member of British Cycling, had its affiliation revoked by the organization due to its connection with pornography. These connections were multiple – via its name (although it frequently presented itself as the ‘PPCC’ which did not present any issues until the acronym was explained), membership (cyclists working in all aspects of the adult industry), and sponsors (which included adult channel Television X). The club had held British Cycling affiliation for two years previously. Most cycling clubs and teams in the UK are affiliated to British Cycling. It gives clubs the ability to manage membership, subscriptions, races, and race entry via the British Cycling website; it allows riders to race and be ranked, gives clubs significant public liability insurance, and offers support with training, events, and activities as well as discounts on products and services. Affiliation costs a club or team between £98 and £194 depending on its number of sponsors and whether it has a sponsor name in its title (British Cycling n.d.).

The removal of this privilege and the PPCC’s response – on social media and in media interviews – resulted in considerable media attention in the cycling, mainstream, and adult media. However, despite the club’s charitable aspect (e.g. it fundraises for charities such as the Terrence Higgins Trust), the media coverage was largely focused on a visual representation of the female porn stars among the club’s membership rather than (for instance) broader issues around health, recreation, and the value of sponsorship – all of which may have helped the PPCC’s case for readmission to British Cycling. This served to turn the story into one where the images and text used in the media coverage highlighted the club’s pornographic links and where ‘supposedly non-pornographic media forms [were] reminiscent of soft pornography’ (Jane 2017, 270), making debate difficult. Indeed, many of the stories in online newspapers such as *The Sun* and the *Daily Star* were clearly ‘clickbait’ – using photographs and video of women in poses unconnected to cycling or where cycling was secondary.

The PPCC story originally broke on Twitter on 5 March 2019 with a tweet from the PPCC which announced:

BREAKING NEWS: Cycling is for everyone. Except people like us @pornpedallers. Today @BritishCycling revoked our club affiliation because PPCC breaches @UCI\_cycling regulation 1.1.089. We’re just a cycling club, riding for fun & raising money for @THTorguk. Is this justified?  

This was followed by a screenshot of an extract of the email sent by British Cycling to the PPCC:

We have been made aware that the club name stands for 'Porn Pedallers Cycling Club' as per UCI [Union Cycliste Internationale] regulation 1.1.089 no 'pornographic bis products or any other products that might damage the reputation of the UCI or the sport of cycling in general shall be associated directly or indirectly with a licence-holder.' As such we would be unable to accept your affiliation at this time.

Notwithstanding the subjective difficulties in interpreting what is (or is not) pornography and what might (or might not) damage the sport of cycling, the news did not receive a significant social media reaction with fewer than 300 retweets/quote tweets and around 350 'likes'. It moved into the wider public domain the next day with stories in online cycling publications such as UK's *Cycling Weekly* and *road.cc*. These were factual and objective and, unlike subsequent sexualized media coverage, largely presented the membership of the PPCC as being men and women actively involved in recreational cycling.

The traction of the media story can partly be explained due to the existence of the PPCC's membership, name, and sponsors being 'outside and beyond the mainstream [and] a visible violation of moral values and sexual taboos' (McNair 2002, 62). However, it can also be viewed as a culture clash between sexuality and 'mainstream' commerce which leads to reactions of both moral revulsion and resigned tolerance (Agustin 2005).

This article explores why this story became a news 'event' which led to both parties having to manage their positions through the lens of the online and offline editions of British tabloid and broadsheet newspapers. We also discuss (as public relations scholars) the problems of seeking or achieving social media or mainstream media attention for adult industry organizations who have issues with a party or policy outside their sector. We show how British Cycling consolidated and used their position as a moral enforcer of 'the rules' to stigmatize the PPCC through its media quotes despite being in the weakened position of being the enforcer of another organization's rules. This led to the PPCC being permanently excluded from British Cycling with little or no backlash for the governing body or debate around what was (or was not) 'pornographic' or 'damaging'.

The story broke at a time when organizations such as Pornhub were starting to move into sports sponsorship and positioning themselves as a 'lifestyle' brand rather than focusing on their content. While sponsorship of sports organizations by adult industry organizations was (and is) controversial, there has been success in amateur sport sponsorship with sponsorship seen as a way to build corporate reputation and 'allow access to another very important field in communication strategies, namely that of social investment, dissociating anew the brand from its pornographic content' (Rodeschini 2021, 82). However, such uses and benefits of sponsorship were not exploited by either party in any subsequent narrative.

Although both organizations initially presented themselves as 'victims' to the rules passed by a higher body (the Union Cycliste Internationale [UCI]), the tabloid media took sides and supported the PPCC. This should have helped the PPCC's cause, but by (perhaps accidentally) stigmatizing the organization through its choice of words and pictures it allowed British Cycling to take the higher moral ground and ultimately win a debate after the story moved too far away from its central premise.

Stigma is only now gaining attention in public relations scholarship, with Dimitrov, Jelen, and L'Etang (2022) suggesting that it forms part of researching and understanding inequalities, societal power, and the way public discourses are promoted or contested. Additionally, the adult industries as the subject of research are also under-explored and researched in public relations scholarship (Bridgen 2024), and our article attempts to expand the understanding of stigma as part of the social construction of discourses involving power and othering in the media.

To research this story we gathered organizational announcements, news articles, and social media stories discussing British Cycling and the PPCC during the period 6–24 March 2019 as our data set, as well as some later articles which followed up the story.

The sample was selected via an incremental Google search. The search string “Porn Pedallers” AND “British Cycling” was used with a date range of 1 February 2019–31 March 2019. This search returned 54 articles, of which 17 were relevant to the study. Subsequent searches used a longer date range and alternative spellings of ‘pedallers’ (e.g. peddlar, peddler) and this produced four further articles of relevance to the study.

Our sample focused on media which was British in origin or widely read in the UK (although the story was reported worldwide). The articles in the sample came from three main sources: British daily newspapers; British/Global cycling media; and British adult industry media.

We carried out data examination via critical discourse analysis with the focus on the relationships of ‘dominance, discrimination, power, and control when these are manifested in language’ (Wodak and Meyer 2009, 10). It was helpful to understand whether the articles were pornographic – for example, ‘foregrounding of sexual activity within the narrative, with or without credible justificatory context’ (McNair 2002, 4) – or were in the context of commercial sex (Tyler and Quek 2016), or whether the media were describing the activities in the context of ‘porno chic’ – a celebrity-led and staged porn which is ‘sanitised to remove rawness’ (McNair 2002, 67) and is the ‘bridge between the pornosphere and the public sphere’ (12). McNair’s work has come under scrutiny by, for example, Tyler and Quek (2016), who argue that there is little or no distinction between pornography and porno chic, and when reviewing the media coverage we found it was often difficult to establish whether an article and accompanying visuals were published to excite and engage the reader or simply to illustrate and report the facts of the case.

## Behind the storyline

### *The story context*

The story played out against the backdrop of how organizations and individuals can be victims of stigmatization and the mechanisms of media amplification in this process. The interplay between stigma and the media reflects the tension and paradox evidenced in debates about the social and cultural place of porn in society including frequent moral panics when society is fearful of those perceived to threaten its safety or core values (Cohen 2002), including those thought to be deviant (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009).

However, while pornographic content in the mainstream can give rise to these moral panics, for instance the damage it could cause to ‘family values’ (for example, McNair

1996), Tyler and Quek stress that ‘scholars have been noting changes in the increasing accessibility and acceptability of pornography, as well as ways pornography and pornographic imagery are fragmenting and blurring into traditionally nonpornographic forms of popular culture’ (2016, 1), referencing fashion, music, beauty, and sport. Technology too has foregrounded the nature of porn in society given the way it has transformed the production, distribution, and consumption of pornography including through live streaming gaming platforms (for example, Ruberg 2021).

The increasing visibility of pornographic content continues to stimulate debates as to whether pornography equates to freedom of expression (i.e. consenting adults have the right to produce and consume pornography without government interference) or is harmful to certain groups (that it normalizes a particular type of sexual activity, one that objectifies women and is inherently violent [McNair 1996]). This divergence of view can reflect feminist perspectives which can see pornography as oppressive and exploitative towards women, or as empowering – providing it is produced ethically with a diverse representation of sexuality.

There are also discussions focused on ethical production and porn, a concept that embraces issues such as fair labour policies and the treatment of performers with a view to establishing a more equitable, responsible, and professional industry in line with other commercial sectors. It is interesting to note that throughout the media coverage of the PPCC/British Cycling debate the female talent was shown as consenting adults who were clearly enjoying a healthy lifestyle, which could position it at odds with some mediated views of pornographic actors. The responsibilities of producers of adult content – to users and society (for example, Rodeschini 2021) – are also of note here.

Mainstreaming has led to confusion and conflation of terms with pornography, pornification, porno chic, and pornification used interchangeably with sexualization (Tyler and Quek 2016) that triggers intense debates in the political arena centred on the role of censorship and regulation. This tends to pivot towards protecting children from, for instance, accessing pornography, as well as how to tackle non-consensual content and other forms of exploitation. However, ‘the task of defining what constitutes pornographic or otherwise sexually “inappropriate” content has proven notoriously complicated, culturally contingent, and charged with ideological meaning’ (Ruberg 2021, 1683).

In this respect, the PPCC story and its reporting illustrate how debates about pornography are paradoxical, a source of fascination and alarm. The story also reveals how public relations practitioners and journalists have their own role as ‘cultural intermediaries’ (Bourdieu 1984) shaping, reflecting, and amplifying societal beliefs and debates, and in so doing interject themselves into the porn narrative.

## **Stigma**

According to Goffman (1990), stigma diminishes an individual or group identity by association with an undesirable designation (in this case, pornography, despite the obvious paradox of the British tabloid media using ‘soft porn’ to sell newspapers and online content). Stigmatizing is the process of stigma and is socially constructed, involving complex discursive components that dehumanize, shame, and exclude people who are perceived not to exhibit the core values of the majority. For Tyler (2020), stigmatization

is purposefully crafted as a strategy often involving the degradation of groups that are othered, including those who choose alternative lifestyles or values.

Within the adult industry, 'pornography and the sex industry have come to be seen as socially and morally tainted' (Macleod 2021, 387) and the stigmatization attached to porn means that individuals and companies are less willing to come forward to advocate for pornographic causes. When we consider the media attention around this issue we can see that the language used by the media, while outwardly supportive of the PPCC, used 'a historical lineage of using the tropes of the "pornographer" and the "porn star" in a pejorative way, to stigmatise and demean' (Voss 2015, 2). Thus, the PPCC could only ever be seen as 'inferior' to British Cycling. Furthermore, focus from the British tabloid media could be seen to use the female athletes in the club for 'sexualised comic relief' (Davis 2010, 57), thus downplaying any idea that this was a conventional sports club or that the members could in any way be similar to 'normal' cyclists.

Just as individuals and groups can be the victim of stigmatization, so can organizations, with organizational stigma arising when a specific group 'discredits an organization because they perceive that it possesses a fundamental, deep-seated flaw' (Fong 2023, 136). Organizational stigma has received growing attention in organizational studies (for example, Thomson and Grandy 2018), with Devers et al. (2016) noting that while organizational stigma involves negative labelling by others contributing to social disapproval, not all stakeholders may perceive the organization in the same way; perceptions change as societal norms and expectations change. Organizations who are tarred as stigmatized need to develop strategies to manage their identity (which may not be effective and is difficult for organizations accidentally caught up in a media story) and stigmatized organizations are limited in their operations (which includes their opportunity for fair media coverage) by dint of their spoiled identity.

Importantly, organizational stigmatization involves de-individuating (Devers et al. 2016) through the organization being grouped or associated with a particular undesirable tendency. Thus, a stigmatized organization is grouped with others sharing that stigma, making it difficult to highlight its own uniqueness or difference. Given that the PPCC is a membership organization, individual stigma (a label given to those seen to be deviant through working in the adult industries) becomes conflated with organizational stigma, de-individuating members and labelling and equating membership with the being a porn actress (associated with sex) rather than reflecting a broad mix of roles and occupations within the adult industries.

### *News values and media amplification*

News values determine the newsworthiness of the story (Galtung and Ruge 1965) but these values vary between media outlets depending on the intended readership and are increasingly audience-oriented (Paulussen and Van Aelst 2021), with a focus on algorithms to ensure that a story is seen by as many people as possible online.

However, news involving extraordinariness, elite persons, and narratives embracing heroes and villains is suggested by Galtung and Ruge (1965) to still gain traction, as do celebrity and entertainment (Harcup and O'Neill 2001, 2017). The notion of news values is important in understanding why the British Cycling and PPCC disagreement gained media attention, as is the understanding of how occupational and commercial logic

(Paulussen and Van Aelst 2021) has influenced news values which have evolved to take into account how news algorithms influence story selection. Furthermore, writing on news values (for example, Harcup and O'Neill 2017; Keib et al. 2018) has pointed to the importance of visual elements for ensuring people's attention to news. This goes some way to explaining why what we described as a 'procedural' story gained such widespread attention. Furthermore, Shoemaker and Cohen (2012) suggest that people prefer news images to have a degree of deviance (although what is classed as 'deviant' is only very loosely defined). Writing about American TV network ESPN, Messner, Duncan, and Cooky claim that the producers of these shows 'seem to assume that their viewers are predominantly heterosexual men who (a) do not want to see or hear any serious, respectful reporting of women's sports and (b) find pleasure in sexual voyeurism and sexualized jokes about women' (2003, 49), and the same could be argued for the British tabloid media.

The amplification of the story followed a pattern described by Tuchman (1978) in how it was taken up by mainstream media. Cycling as a sport is not always covered or understood in the mainstream UK media (Grove and Griggs 2016). Likewise, stories about (rather than using tropes of) pornography are difficult for the mainstream media to report upon. However, mainstream cycling publications found a way to make the story highly attractive to the British media. They linked the issue to elite people (British cyclist and 2018 Tour de France winner Geraint Thomas had been photographed with a female PPCC member and this photograph was widely reproduced) and with porn actresses fulfilling the role of 'deviant' visuals. In addition, the British media's coverage of cycling (and sport in general) has often been linked to ideas of 'Britishness', fair play, and tradition. Thus, the introduction of the PPCC upset the norms of 'fair play' and complying with rules.

As McNair observes, journalists and news editors 'like porn because it presents an opportunity to talk about sex, perhaps scandalously or disapprovingly, while at the same time showing images of scantily-clad women [...]. Editors commissioned these with some enthusiasm, knowing their readers were fascinated by the subject' (2013, 39–40). The combination of sport, porn, elite people, and visuals of (female) members of the PPCC being easily available to journalists and picture editors meant that the PPCC/British Cycling story was instantly attractive. The visual element and opportunity for punning storylines (a feature of the British tabloid media) overrode the rather everyday story behind the sensationalist coverage.

## Findings

### *Chronology of the story*

The events had a two-stage chronology as presented in Table 1, where we attempt to show the chronology of the story via indicative headlines, quotes, and visuals. We are aware that our chronology may be affected by online updates of key articles.

## Discussion

British Cycling was able to consistently talk about itself as acting according to the world governing body UCI rules, establishing itself both as enforcer and being enforced. When it was



**Table 1.** Two-stage chronology via indicative headlines, quotes, and visuals.

| Stage 1: 6–7 March – emerging   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| Story breaks in cycling media. Both parties initially seen as ‘victims’ but British Cycling then appears to offer an opportunity for resolution |  |   |
| Media and date  | Headline and sub-heading   | Indicative quotes and descriptions of images  |
| <i>Cycling Weekly</i> , 6 March   | <p><b>Porn Pedallers Cycling Club has British Cycling affiliation revoked</b></p> <p>The club, which caters for cycling enthusiasts working in adult entertainment, will not be recognized by the governing body</p>                         | <p>‘British Cycling revoked the affiliation after it became aware of what the name, PPCC, stood for’</p> <p>‘<i>Cycling Weekly</i> has approached British Cycling for comment’</p> <p>Image 1: group shot of PPCC members in cycling kit with bicycle and luggage (13 men and 7 women)</p>  |
| <i>Road.cc</i> , 6 March  | <p><b>Porn Pedallers Cycling Club lose British Cycling affiliation – because name falls foul of UCI regulations</b></p> <p>Social media followers back adult entertainment industry-based club whose members raise thousands for charity</p> | <p>‘Formed in 2016 and headed by Chris Ratcliff, owner of Television X which is one of its sponsors, members of the club – some of whom are award-winning porn stars – have taken part in sportives at home and abroad, including organizing an annual trip to the Spring Classics in Belgium’</p> <p>‘Ahead of a trip to the Tour of Flanders two years ago, several members received the well-wishes of Sir Chris Hoy, while others had their photo taken with Geraint Thomas during last year’s Tour de France, shortly before raising almost £7,000 for the Terrence Higgins Trust’</p> <p>Image 2: Rebecca More with bicycle in PPCC kit at the seaside waving at the camera<br/>Image 3: 2019 Geraint Thomas in Team Sky kit with Rebecca More in PPCC cycling kit and another PPCC member (not identified)</p> |
| <i>Road.cc</i> , 7 March  | <p><b>British Cycling looking to help Porn Pedallers Cycling Club meet UCI rules</b></p> <p>National governing body acknowledges ‘excellent work’ adult entertainment industry-based club does for charity</p>                               | <p>‘Because the regulation in question is laid down by the UCI, rather than British Cycling itself, the national governing body has little room for flexibility, although it has now said in a statement that it is working with Porn Pedallers to see if a way can be found to help the club comply’</p> <p>‘Our network of clubs does fantastic work within their communities, encouraging cycling participation and promoting other numerous societal benefits’, said British Cycling</p> <p>‘The club in question, for example, does excellent work in raising money for charity, and has a loyal and active membership’</p> <p>Image 4: Rebecca More in PPCC kit acting as bike stand with bike<br/>Image 5 (from Twitter): story being discussed on Sky News</p>  |
| <i>Cycling Weekly</i> , 7 March   | <p><b>British Cycling working with ‘Porn Pedallers Cycling Club’ to help them meet regulations</b></p> <p>The club had its affiliation revoked when BC discovered what ‘PPCC’ stood for</p>  | <p>‘A spokesperson for British Cycling said: ‘We try to support everyone who actively encourages others to take up cycling, and we appreciate the efforts of everyone who contributes to our sport’</p> <p>‘As such, we are talking with the club and offering constructive advice on what it will take for them to meet with regulations’</p> <p>Image 6: 17 members of the PPCC in PPCC cycling kit with bicycle (8 women and 9 men)</p>  |

*(Continued)*

| <b>Table 1.</b> Continued.  |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| Stage 2: online arguments and/or entertainment (7 March onwards)  |   |   |
| British Cycling's offer of a resolution was unpicked and rejected by the PPCC, who claim they have been 'shafted'.<br>Stories in the media become increasingly visual and entertainment-led |   |   |
| <b>Media and date</b>   | <b>Headline and sub-heading</b>   | <b>Indicative quotes and descriptions of images</b>   |
| <i>The Times</i> , 7 March  | <b>We're not sleazy riders, insists head of porn stars' cycling club</b>  | <p>'A British Cycling spokesman said: 'The club [...] does excellent work in raising money for charity, and has a loyal and active membership [...] We are talking with the club and offering constructive advice on what it will take for them to meet with regulations'</p> <p>'Rebecca More, who rides with the club, has starred in Television X's "political trilogy" of adult films, the first two of which are called The Iron Lady Garden and Hard Brexxit'</p> <p>Image 7: Rebecca More in PPCC cycling kit with Geraint Thomas in Team Sky kit</p>  |
| <i>BBC Sport</i> , 7 March  | <b>British Cycling removing Porn Pedallers Cycling Club affiliation is 'overreaction'</b>   | <p>'We are what we are and proud of what we do', founder Chris Ratcliff said</p> <p>'British Cycling said it was offering "constructive advice" to the club to help it meet regulations'</p> <p>'Ratcliff, who is the chief executive of an adult television company and set up the cycling club for its employees, says he cannot see how it is "at odds" with the UCI regulations which British Cycling are bound by'</p> <p>Image 8: Group shot of PPCC members (13 men and 7 women) in cycling kit with bicycle and luggage</p>   |
| <i>Daily Star</i> , 7 March 2019  | <p><b>Outrage as charity club Porn Pedallers STRIPPED of British Cycling affiliation</b></p> <p>A CYCLING club of adult film stars which raises money for charity has had its British Cycling affiliation revoked</p> | <p>'Fans of the cycling club took to Twitter to voice their support for the adult performers. One said: "Utter nonsense from British Cycling. PPCC spread a positive message about participation in sport while raising valuable funds for charity." Another added: "What a bunch of w*nk*rs. What does it matter where the donated money comes from? PornSavesLives"'</p> <p>Image 9: video of adult stars watching their own performances<br/>           Image 10: Rebecca More in PPCC cycling kit, showing breasts<br/>           Image 11: PPCC female member riding bike with tongue out<br/>           Image 12: Rebecca More in PPCC cycling kit, showing breasts<br/>           Image 13: Rebecca More in PPCC cycling kit with Geraint Thomas in Team Sky cycling kit (with the caption 'RIDING DIRTY: The group regularly are seen taking snaps with cycling stars')<br/>           Image 14: Two female members of PPCC riding bikes<br/>           Image 15: Rebecca More with bicycle in PPCC kit at seaside waving at camera</p> |
| <i>Evening Standard</i> , 7 March   | <b>Head of London 'porn star' cycling club stands firm against demands from UK cycling chiefs to change name and sponsorship</b>  | <p>'Mr Ratcliff said: "We have engaged with a sexual health charity that gets what we are about"'</p> <p>'These reactions make it harder to push that message'</p> <p>'One fellow cyclist wrote: "Porn Pedallers do some amazing fundraising and I believe do great things for the profile of the sport, such a decision is incredibly short sighted. Maybe some form of consultation should of (sic) taken place before taking such actions!"'</p> <p>'Terrence Higgins Trust responded: "We really hope you get this resolved and thank you for your ongoing support for our work at Terrence Higgins Trust"'</p>   |

(Continued)

**Table 1.** Continued.

| Media and date                  | Headline and sub-heading   | Indicative quotes and descriptions of images  |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
|                                 |  | <p>'[British Cycling] said "if you can change your name and lose the sponsors then there's no problem"</p> <p>Image 16: group shot of PPCC members in cycling kit with bicycle and luggage (13 men and 7 women pictured)</p> <p>Image 17: Rebecca More in PPCC cycling kit at cycling event</p> <p>Image 18 (from Twitter): PPCC members, some in PPCC cycling kit, in Flanders</p> <p>Image 19 (from Twitter): picture of Rebecca More in PPCC cycling kit with Geraint Thomas in Team Sky kit</p>   |
| <i>The Sun</i> , 8 March        | <b>Porn to ride Porn Pedallers: Cheeky cycling club for adult stars kicked out by sport's governing body</b>   | <p>'Being a club that knows how to look after its members, the controversial decision to revoke their BC affiliation has sparked outrage on social media.</p> <p>Several slated BC for its "selfish" approach, with others calling them "dinosaurs"</p> <p>Image 20: still of video showing two PPCC female members in cycling kit showing breasts</p> <p>Image 21: Rebecca More in PPCC cycling kit showing breasts</p> <p>Image 22: Female in PPCC kit showing breasts with two men in PPCC kit, all sitting on park bench</p> <p>Image 23: Rebecca More in PPCC cycling kit with Geraint Thomas in Team Sky cycling kit with unidentified female in PPCC cycling kit</p>   |
| <i>(Mail Online</i> , 19 March) | <p><b>In the saddle with Tindra the Viking Princess and her adult star friends: MailOnline hits the road with the Porn Pedallers Cycling Club who proved too hot for Britain's bike bosses</b></p> <p>British Cycling revoked their licence when they discovered what PPCC stood for</p> | <p>"'I'm a busty size 12", I told Porn Pedaller Chris Ratcliff when he asked my size'</p> <p>'No I wasn't auditioning for an adult movie role, I was getting kitted up for a bike ride with the cycling club that sparked a social media bust-up'</p> <p>"'I can work with that," he replied. And with pornstar Rebecca More pictures showing just how much ample cleavage can be squeezed into the team's Lycra kit, I know this is a man who gets boobs'</p> <p>'Founder Chris Ratcliff, 49, Television X Chief Executive, told Mail Online: "I started Porn Pedallers Cycling Club three years ago. I did it to get us all fit and socialising and networking together within our industry"</p> <p>Image 24: Rebecca More and unidentified female cyclist in PPCC cycling kit with Geraint Thomas in Team Sky cycling kit</p> <p>Image 25: Tindra Frost, Pascal White, Mailonline's Sarah White, and Chris Ratcliff in cycling kit (all in PPCC jerseys)</p> <p>Images 26 and 27: Rebecca More (not in cycling kit)</p> <p>Image 28: Rebecca More with bicycle in PPCC cycling kit at seaside waving at camera</p> <p>Image 29: 8 female and 9 male members of PPCC in PPCC cycling kit with bicycle</p> |

interviewed or responded via social media it stigmatized and 'othered' the PPCC, suggesting that the PPCC was at odds with the core values of a family-friendly membership organization.

This position remained effective as British Cycling shifted through its various positions – from being a victim of someone else's rules to being an enforcer or enabler. These shifting narratives contributed to shutting down all debate as to whether the PPCC should be

allowed to affiliate as the PPCC were constantly having to evolve their position to respond to British Cycling rather than starting a new discussion or developing any counter-arguments.

The PPCC is a small organization and displayed little or no experience of formal communications processes, meaning that it was disadvantaged in terms of power dynamics and stigmatized for the company it kept. Thus, the PPCC's interviews and social media statements were largely defensive and frequently invoked aspects of victimhood, such as reinforcing its role as an underdog and positioning itself as an organization being discriminated against. It did speak about its charity work and while this was mentioned in media stories (including a supportive quote from the Terrence Higgins Trust) the focus of these stories centred around media outlets publishing photographs of PPCC members as porn stars rather than cyclists. Indeed, as the story evolved the reporting of the composition of its membership moved from being a club for adult industry workers (with men and women being photographed) to a club for (female) 'adult stars' (see [Table 1](#)). One of the few commentaries at the time in the adult industry media attempted to turn the conversation to the importance of charity work carried out by the PPCC and the need to champion 'members who are trying to make the industry a safer place and provide sex workers with a fairer standing in society' (Adult Work 2019), but this never became a leading theme in media coverage. Indeed, it appeared that the PPCC did not actively seek allies to help press its case – even when help was offered.

Ironically, British Cycling lacked support for their actions in the media and in some ways did not follow a media relations 'playbook' (e.g. they did not have a named spokesperson, did not supply illustrative material to the media, and did not discuss the values and benefits of their organization). However, despite this, they effectively managed to close the debate down through maintaining a deliberate position which upheld their role as enforcer of a set of values but orientating it to become more empathetic and conciliatory by saying they would work with the PPCC to try to find a resolution. This, as the PPCC pointed out, was not conciliatory as it would have involved the PPCC giving up its name and sponsors. British Cycling also stigmatized the PPCC through focusing on difference and the PPCC being at odds with British Cycling's role as a family-friendly organization rather than focusing on what the PPCC had in common with other clubs.

The positions developed by both parties evolved through quotes and statements but British Cycling maintained an over-arching position of a membership organization with the 'rights and duties that come with that position' (James 2014, 190). As James observes, the moral high ground tends to flat-foot other organizations as they 'are not geared up to respond in a set way' (190).

There was never any attempt by the PPCC to move the debate forward – for instance by asking what was meant by 'pornographic' in the context of its cycling activities and how it was damaging to cycling, especially when other cycling sponsors in the telecoms or entertainment business have derived income from pornographic material (although not in such an obvious way as the PPCC's sponsors). Neither party moved the argument away from the product and towards the social investment that the PPCC's sponsors had made – for instance, seeing sponsorship as a way to fund the sport of cycling and build participation among minority or non-traditional audiences. Interestingly, the PPCC's sponsors never became directly involved in the debate and their corporate social responsibility

strategy – interpreted by Rodeschini as ‘the improvement of the perception of the work of a company both in relation to possible investors and in the society’ (2021, 84) – in terms of their sponsorship was never clarified.

The PPCC did not try to move British Cycling from its moral high ground by drawing on any reputational issues in the cycling industry which were current or recent in 2019 (e.g. alleged use of performance-enhancing drugs by cyclists and sponsorship by media owners whose channels allegedly carried adult content). Such stories would have been accessible to journalists at the time.

There is also a difficulty and embarrassment when talking about pornography (McNair 2002; Tiidenberg 2021), which prevents nuanced debate in the public domain. For this reason it was difficult for the PPCC to gather allies to lobby for a rule change, or to talk about the benefits of cycling to its membership and why British Cycling affiliation was so important (interestingly, British Cycling did not talk about the value of affiliation, leaving the complexities of explaining the purpose of the governing body to the PPCC). Consequently, the PPCC was constantly on the defensive and, unable to use the media to its advantage, could not position itself differently or change the main narrative in its favour.

The paradoxical nature of the incident is also revealed in the way the media were supportive of the PPCC yet used visual and rhetorical cues to sexualize the story and stigmatize the PPCC by playing to core news values. We did find that even a factual and serious piece (e.g. in *The Times* report) introduced a paragraph naming some of cyclist and porn star Debbie More’s film titles. This was not needed from a news perspective but was possibly of value to the news algorithms used by *The Times*. This amplified the story through using words and images which provided ample ‘clickbait’. Interestingly, male members of the PPCC were only ever shown as cyclists whereas women were shown in sexualized poses (sometimes in cycling gear). Furthermore, when supporters of the PPCC were interviewed their quotes followed the PPCC’s rhetorical stance of victimhood.

The analysis of media showed that very few media organizations carried out their own interviews; the majority relied on previously published material. It is useful at this point to draw on Tuchman’s (1978) concept of a ‘news net’. British Cycling, as a national governing body, is a ‘legitimised institution’ (1978, 256) where journalists would expect easy access to press officers and spokespeople. The PPCC, an organization with no centralized press office function and seemingly only contactable via its social media channels (and with its leadership combining PPCC roles with jobs in the adult industry), would require journalists to carry out more investigation to find spokespeople. Journalists were thus reliant on social media channels and British Cycling’s reporting of the PPCC’s stance, and conducted interviews by what Tuchman would have referred to as ‘rip and read’ – pulling quotes and information from published (social media) material. Thus, British Cycling were able to use their more powerful position to effectively control and finally close the debate partly because of their accessibility. As Hudson (2008) hypothesizes, stigmatized organizations may remain small in size due to their limited access to resources – and in this case resources include access to the machinery of public relations expertise.

Despite support by some mainstream media including the *Daily Mail* and from famous cyclists such as journalist and former Northern Ireland international rider Michael Hutchinson, the PPCC was not able to renew its affiliation, or fight for a change in the rules, and the story vanished quickly from the media.

It appears that organizational stigma, ‘a label that evokes a collective stakeholder group-specific perception that an organization possesses a fundamental, deep-seated flaw that de-individualizes and discredits the organization’ (Devers et al. 2016, 155), was used by British Cycling (and media outlets) to discredit the sponsors and work of the PPCC, which meant the PPCC were unable to move the narrative away from porn as being deviant or not accordant with a sporting body. Attempts by the PPCC to move the conversation to, for instance, age verification or charitable work, or to highlight the value of sponsorship to the sport as a whole, were ineffective. Further complications reflect the conflation of individual and organizational stigma at play with the PPCC, with the media discourse focusing on those associated with ‘in front’ of camera roles who may have welcomed (and possibly encouraged) media coverage. Meanwhile, other members may have preferred to remain less visible or disassociate themselves from the public face of the story, thus compounding the problem of the PPCC being unable to redirect or refocus the conversation.

British Cycling was able to control the debate and move the narrative forward since they had the power to admit (or deny) the PPCC access to membership. Through other interlinked factors such as British Cycling having full-time media professionals among their staff, the media’s use of the story for clickbait, and the lack of willingness for supporters to more actively campaign (beyond social media posts or comments in interviews) on behalf of a stigmatized organization (Voss 2015), we can see how the debate was controlled by the more powerful organization.

## Conclusion, contribution, and limitations

Throughout this article we have shown how British Cycling both directly and indirectly stigmatized the PPCC, enabling it to justify its actions of exclusion. It did this through its – possibly unconscious – understanding of media norms. The organization built on its perceived institutional legitimacy, switching its position from victim to enforcer and enabler, and amplifying organizational stigma. British Cycling was aided by media that appeared to support the PPCC but actually stigmatized the organization further by using pornography for its news and amplification value and viewing the female porn stars in their ‘actor’ role rather than seeing them as cyclists enjoying a healthy lifestyle. There are a number of ways the PPCC could have used counter-positioning to gain support and/or reframe the debate. This could have included moving the narrative away from themselves to highlight the cycling sponsors of other teams and cycling bodies who were also not ‘family friendly’ and thus attempting to normalize their position, lobbying the UCI, highlighting the difficulties of obtaining sponsorship for cycling activities (and stressing the value of sponsorship to the future of the sports and the value of inclusivity), and praising those willing to be sponsors (regardless of their derivation) and arguing for a more inclusive approach for sponsorship. However, in hindsight, one of the best ways to resolve this issue from a public relations perspective would have been to keep it out of the media altogether by not discussing the issue on social media and maintaining discussions with British Cycling in private. This potentially points to a way that similar issues should be (and are) handled – out of the public eye where a considered and nuanced debate can take place. However, the issue at stake here is whether this creates further issues by taking discussion of pornography backstage.

This article contributes to knowledge in two ways. First, it continues to expand the understanding of stigma as part of the social construction of discourses involving power and othering. British Cycling used its status as a legitimate institution and its role as enforcer to dominate debate drawing on the media's fascination with pornography and perception of the adult industries being contaminated and immoral. The role of stigma in constructing communication is often a taboo subject but one that is often evoked and opens ethical dilemmas as to its appropriate use, if at all.

Second, the article extends the domain of public relations to the adult industries with a specific focus on pornography and discusses strategies for managing issues involving adult industry organizations. As Bridgen (2024) observes, public relations research gives little space to the experience of those carrying out public relations work in marginalized industries, which means that these areas are under-theorized.

In respect of limitations, this article relies on publicly available material rather than interviews with those involved in taking communication decisions. In future, it would be interesting to develop this article with interviews with representatives from the PPCC and British Cycling which would potentially enhance understanding of positioning decisions, and likewise with journalists from the media quoted earlier into their reporting decisions when writing about adult industry issues. It would also have been relevant to interview members of the PPCC as while some members would have welcomed increased visibility in mainstream media and used it as a route to further self-promotion and commodification, some 'backstage' members may have been less comfortable with such scrutiny (or equally may have desired it to tell their side of the story). It is here that this article reveals the complexity involved when organizational and individual stigma are conflated and this relationship warrants further exploration. Nonetheless, we believe that a review of the online media reports using critical discourse analysis as an analytical tool provides an excellent starting point for understanding the debate.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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