

“I don't see different colors, different  
races. I just see eleven people on a pitch.”

*How British students assign meaning to race/ethnicity and gender in  
mediated sports*

A MASTER THESIS

*by*

RENS PEETERS

*Supervised by*

DR. JACCO VAN STERKENBURG

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*“Today, sports are a  
major part of the  
consumer society whereby  
individuals learn the  
values and behavior of a  
competitive and success-  
driven society.”*

Douglas Kellner

in

*Media Spectacle*



## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	1
Introduction .....	2
Theoretical framework.....	7
Literature review .....	7
Filling the gap.....	8
Method .....	11
Data Collection .....	11
Design and sample.....	11
Conceptualizing race.....	13
Data Analysis.....	14
Results.....	16
Ethnicity.....	16
Gender.....	21
Media commentary.....	23
Discussion .....	26
Confirming the dominant.....	26
Alternative discourses and internal inconsistencies .....	28
Conclusion .....	34
Appendix A: Topics and Sample Questions Used in Interviews .....	35
Works Cited.....	38

## **Abstract**

Due to its immense popularity across cultures, sports prove to be of particular interest to sociologists and various other disciplines that take up an interest in the machinations of a particular culture. The Cultural Studies perspective has become one of the most prominent and influential paradigms in the study of sports, which it views as a site where struggle takes place over a diverse range of topics such as race/ethnicity, gender, nationality and the body. Most people watch sports by way of the mass media, sites that (re-)produce and transform ideologies and ideas about these same topics. Textual analysis has shown how these ideologies and ideas circulate in mediated sports. However, still little remains known as to what extent actual viewers take up or resist these ideas. Starting from the point of view that audiences are not passive, but active in the creation of meaning, this study tries to identify the dominant discourses that television viewers use to assign meaning to race/ethnicity and gender in football on television. Utilizing eleven different focus groups that were comprised of 44 British university students, the goal is to show as to what extent the discourses used by the students are influenced by hegemonic media representations. The results are further compared with various other reception studies and related to a larger social context.



## Introduction

“The Terry and Luis Suarez furores, however, made it impossible to cling to the prevailing assumption we had somehow eradicated racism from football while it remains a problem in the society the game reflects”(Hyde).

The aforementioned quote is lifted from a column by Marina Hyde that was posted on the website of the British newspaper *The Guardian* under the heading “English football is racist, and the FA looks the other way.” Hyde initially responds to what she perceives to be yet another incident in English football, namely the racist chants of English supporters towards the English defender Rio Ferdinand and his brother Anton during a World Cup qualifying game against San Marino. Hyde’s remark on how racism remains a problem in the British society and as a somewhat logical consequence also makes its appearance in football, is something that has been a longstanding interest amongst sociologists of sport as well.

As Ben Carrington and Ian McDonald argued some twelve years earlier in their introduction to the anthology "*Race*", *Sport and British Society*, sport is:

a particular useful sociological site for examining the changing context of contemporary British racisms, as it articulates the complex interplay of ‘race’, nation, culture and identity in very public and direct ways (2).

However, the relationship between race and sport is neither single nor one-dimensional, but complex and inherently paradoxical. It functions as an arena where racism has been challenged, while at the same time it has provided a platform where racist sentiments are most clearly expressed (Carrington and McDonald 2). This complex and oftentimes precarious relation isn’t exclusively reserved for race, as the relation between gender and sport can be categorized in more or less the same way. Commenting on this paradoxical relation between gender and sport, Jay Coakley claims that sports “are sites for reaffirming beliefs about male - female *difference* and valorizing masculine characteristics”, while at the same time they also function in an oppositional manner by challenging those differences (262).

Increasingly people tend to be confronted by sport through mediated constructions and representations. Huge events such as the Olympics 2012 and EURO 2012 draw millions of

viewers and belong to the best watched shows of British television last year (Conian).

Furthermore, cases of racial abuse such as those of Terry and Suarez are widely discussed in all kinds of different media as they become a hot topic of public debate (Carrington, "Sport Matters" 961). As early as 1984, Sut Jhally published an essay in which he notes the large amount of time television devotes to sport (41). Jhally argued that sports cannot be theorized as a solemn entity, but has to be conceptualized alongside a critical theory of the media, as most people view sport through the mass media (42). The rest of the paper was dedicated to developing such a theory of what he dubbed the sports/media complex (42). As media culture has become more pervasive over time, this relation has been the central focus of much writing on sport. A continuous stream of publications such as *Mediasport* (1998), *Power Play: Sport, the Media and Popular Culture* (2000), *Critical Readings: Sport, Culture and the Media* (2004) and *Handbook of sports and media* (2006) are exemplary of this fact.

Sports are thus filtered through media representations, representations by which we make sense of the world around us, of ourselves and of others (Hall, "Whites of their Eyes" 81-82). The stories told and relayed to us through the mass media are however never ideologically neutral, as they always construct specific subject positions from where identification and knowledge can take place (Hall, "Whites of their Eyes" 81). Because ideologies work all the better when we're not aware of them, sportmedia, due to its incredible popularity, proves to be an ideal container for "naturalizing difference" around topics such as gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality and identity and the body (Hall, "Whites of their Eyes" 82; Bruce 126). What this difference entails is in large part dependent on the people who dominate the domain where the ideologies are (re)produced.

In this case, the sportmedia are predominantly male and most of these men are white, which leads Carrington to talk about the "white sports/media complex" (Bruce 130; Carrington, "What I Said" 86-90). White men tend to reinforce their own hierarchal status and position and thereby marginalize others, oftentimes unknowingly so (Bruce 130). These white men work inside a particular discursive formation that provides them with a language to talk and produce knowledge about topics such as gender and race/ethnicity (Hall, "Representation" 49). People working within the sportmedia produce, reproduce and transform discourses that acquire hegemony, i.e. natural dominance, in society (Giulianotti 49).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hegemony, as conceptualized by the Marxist Antonio Gramsci in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, is a much debated term as

To date, a large body of research is available that intricately documents the way women's sports are marginalized by the sportmedia by receiving much less coverage than men's sports (Cooky, Messner and Hextrum 3; Pressland 220-222). This is in stark contrast when one notes that participation rates among women in sport, even in such commonly marked male bastions as rugby and football, has been rising steadily for the last twenty years (Mennesson and Clément 311; Cooky, Messner and Hextrum 19; Boyle and Haynes 124-125). The latest longitudinal research actually shows that coverage on women's sports in television news has declined (Cooky, Messner and Hextrum 23).

Analysis of actual coverage shows that when women are depicted doing sport, it's mostly confined to individual sports such as tennis, gymnastics and athletics that represent a traditional view femininity that emphasize grace and aesthetics (Coakley 419; Duncan 238-247). Men are more easily associated with concepts that reinforce traditional notions of masculinity such as physical strength, speed and size and aggressive domination of their opponents (Coakley 420). Men's sport is constructed as being about more than sport and is often linked to narrow conceptions of nationalist pride and involves war-like metaphors that render them more exciting and dramatic than women's sport (Messner 119; Coakley 420-421).

The concept of hegemony is however never totally fulfilled, but always contested and must constantly be won (Hall, "Representation" 48; Hall, "Gramsci's relevance" 437). Forces are constantly struggling to challenge these dominant forces and create spaces for alternative viewpoints. Besides marginalizing women in sport, early research also found that they tended to be trivialized and sexualized in their performances (Daniels 402-403). This trivialization and sexualization would reinforce the dominant status of men in society. In some instances these aspects would temporarily disappear as research into the mediated performance of the Australian athlete Cathy Freeman during the Olympics of the year 2000 has shown. The success of Freeman allowed her to function as a symbol of the nation with the result that the gender lost its importance in the way she was framed by the media (Wensing and Bruce 393). Even more so, new research shows that this tendency to trivialize and sexualize is in decline, context-specific or has actually disappeared altogether (Cooky, Messner and Hextrum 21; Bruce 129; Pressland 222-

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it has been used (and some would say abused) by scholars to account for different things (for a further explanation and critique of much of this use, see: Bairner 195-212). The reading of hegemony that Stuart Hall has put forward will be used here which, contra Gramsci, encompasses the whole of the cultural domain and has the succinct possibility to be uncertain and contested (Trubshaw; Hall, "Gramsci's relevance" 411-440).

224).

So while discourses concerning femininity and masculinity inside the sportmedia complex may change due to challenges and critiques from within and without, change works slow and we should be wary of exaggerating resistance and thereby falling prey to a form of cultural reductionism (Giulianotti 58). The discourse of trivialization and sexualization for example, seems to be replaced by either representing women as family members (mothers and wives; always heterosexual), by ambivalence about their performances or simply by not portraying them at all (Cooky, Messner and Hextrum 21; Bruce 130; Messner 120). Change is also unlikely to instantly come about when women go to work in sport journalism and news agencies, as the discursive practice in which they have to negotiate their position is in its foundations predicated on an overtly macho and masculine identity (Hardin and Shain 816-817).

Just as in the case of gender, ideas about racial difference are produced and reproduced inside the sportmedia complex. In much the same way that men working inside the sportmedia believe they are gender neutral, there resides the deeply held belief that the sportmedia complex turns a blind eye when it comes to skin color (Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics* 171). This might be ascribed to the fact that white people, the ones controlling the sport media, often seem to be exempt from the category of race, a term that only applies to others (Dyer 1). White is the silent norm that is never invoked in speech acts, but is always implied as the only logical standard from which all else deviates (Dyer 2; Long and Hylton 87). What follows is the social construction of whiteness, a set of “locations, discourses, and material relations” that produces, sustains and legitimizes this white normativity (Frankenberg 6). Whiteness, thus not to be mistaken as a stand-in of a person’s phenotype, means viewing the world from a privileged and unmarked position that produces and reproduces dominance (Carrington and McDonald, “Whose Game” 64; Frankenberg 1-6). Pretending not to be aware of skin color only reinforces the status quo as it ignores the way race and ethnicity are fundamental concepts in the structuring of social relations (Coakley 282-283).

Racisms, both the crude biological version and the more subtle cultural form that has succeeded it, promote the belief that races are very much distinct each other, either in their biology or their cultural identity (Carrington and McDonald, “Introduction” 1). This is apparent in the way the black athlete came to be represented as being physically gifted and stronger than his white colleague (Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics* 17). Research shows that this discourse is

still in play today in the institutions of the sportmedia and remains very pervasive (Bernstein and Blain, 18; van Sterkenburg and Knoppers 303; Azzarito and Harrison 349). Success of white athletes tends to be explained by relating to cognitive factors such as hard work, intelligence and discipline (Coakley 425; van Sterkenburg and Knoppers 303).

Again, the relationship between race/ethnicity and the sportmedia isn't one-dimensional and certainly not stable. Studies on commentating during the Olympics show for example that certain biases are being eliminated and that longstanding racial stereotypes slowly begin to disappear (Billings et. al. 229; Angelini and Billings 7-8). For instance, success by white athletes was explained by reference to their athletic strength, while black athletes were described in terms of their experience (Angelini and Billings 7-8). Asians who have been represented mostly by associating them to mental terms like methodical, mechanical and intelligent, were in fact, more than black athletes, evaluated in terms of physical superiority (Angelini and Billings 7-8).

Thus, while the results of such studies "paint a more hopeful picture" for the future, one should not rush to conclusion that sports are the harbinger of a post-racial world (Angelini and Billings 8). Besides the arena itself, the institutions surrounding it are still reserved for white males (Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics* 172). Consequently, the black athlete is usually spoken for by others, which has resulted in the fact that it is never been represented as ordinarily human, but as always deviating from it in one way or the other; as either subhuman or superhuman (Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics* 19). It is indicative of the power that resides in discourses, in that they have the ability to construct topics in a certain way while at the same time limiting the ways the topic could otherwise be constructed (Hall, "The West and the Rest" 201). It furthermore shows that power is never equally distributed, but always contested, even if it is not always the oppressed that choose to do so (Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics* 177).

## Theoretical framework

### *Literature review*

While an increasing body of valuable knowledge is available on the domains of production and text in mediated sports, relatively little remains known on how actual audiences consume these texts and consequently give meaning to a diverse range of topics such as gender and race/ethnicity and nationality (Coakley 434; Bernstein and Blain 2; Van Sterkenburg and Knoppers 304; Bruce 128). A cultural studies approach, which also forms the basis for much of the research mentioned earlier, is primarily interested in popular culture as a site of struggle and stresses that audiences read texts in different ways (Morley 104). Struggle over the meanings in a text are made possible as they contain multiple contradictory meanings which are actively read in multiple ways by different people, depending on their social context (Kellner, *Media Culture* 114; O'Donnell 522).

Gill Lines made an attempt to fill this empirical lacuna by exploring the way young British people consumed and gave meaning to the sports that were part of the summer of sport 1996 (671). She employed a variety of different methods, including textual analysis, audience diaries and combined group and individual interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of audience reception (671). Findings indicated that the participants were active and critical in their relation with the texts and sometimes opposed dominant meanings that the texts provided (676). They critically reflected on the relations between sport success and national pride and didn't trivialize or idolize sport stars (676-677). Attitudes to gender were however still beset by stereotypical ideals and very much in line with the hegemonic media discourse (677).

Research conducted in 2003 by McCarthy, Jones and Potrac showed how racial stereotypes in media discourses were received by black and white students (219). Extensive content analysis of UK television commentators was deployed to find out how black and white players were described (221). The resulting interviews showed that white students did acknowledge that black athletes were described in stereotypical terms by commentators, but they weren't so sure if this stereotype didn't have some basis in reality (235). Black students confirmed the use of stereotypical representations by commentators, but in contrast to the white students, were very critical of their use (235).

A Dutch study done in 2004 focused on both gender and race/ethnicity and compared

the discourses used by black Surinam-Dutch and white Native-Dutch students to explain sport performances with the discourses that circulated in the sportmedia (van Sterkenburg and Knoppers 306). Results showed that the natural physicality discourse in the sportmedia was also used by students to explain sport performances by black athletes and it was also used as a way to justify the structuring in sport along gender lines (307-308). Mental discourses were used by some white students to explain the success of white athletes, although this discourse was much less pronounced (313). Furthermore, they identified an alternative discourse whereby the acquisition of athletic skills by black athletes was a consequence of a specific mind-set that valued hard work (313).

Natural physicality discourses were also found in American based studies conducted by Azzarito and Harrison in 2008 and by Harrison, Lawrence and Bukstein in 2011 (357). In the latter study, white students explained the performance of white athletes by reference to cultural and socio-economic factors, while avoiding biological explanations that were used to account for African American athletic superiority (357). Both studies reported that (white) females avoided racial difference altogether by adopting a discourse that emphasized “sameness” (Harrison, Lawrence, and Bukstein 358; Azzarito and Harrison 360). The hard work theme that was identified by van Sterkenburg and Knoppers in 2004 also made its appearance in the first study, although students here used it to explain as the ultimate determinant of athletic success regardless of the race of the athlete (357). Avoidance of race was explained by the researchers as a new form of subtle racism that implied the colour-blindness Carrington and Coakley referred to in their discussions of present day racism in the sportmedia complex (Harrison, Lawrence, and Bukstein 357).

Although these studies already provide valuable insights into the consumption of mediated sports, scholars affiliated with the sociology of sport increasingly acknowledge the need for further research (Cooky, Messner and Hextrum 22; Bruce 128).

### *Filling the gap*

The present study will continue and expand on the groundwork laid by these studies. Audience research is done in order to see how English male and female students with different ethnic backgrounds use certain discourses to assign meaning to gender and race/ethnicity in football on television and what differences and similarities can be identified. To facilitate such an empirical

undertaking, a cultural studies perspective is adopted that is at once critical, multicultural and contextual (Kellner, *Media Culture* 94 – 103). It is critical and multicultural in the sense that it perceives culture as the provider of material for the construction of identity and recognizing that this leads to the conception of a multitude of cultural identities (Kellner, *Media Culture* 96). Above all, the analysis will be grounded in the specifics of modern contemporary culture, thereby acknowledging that cultural texts don't exist in a vacuum, but are related to and actively defined by, and in turn define, their immediate surroundings (Andrews 112 – 114; Kellner, *Media Culture* 103).

The utilization of this approach directly confronts a few persistent critical notions made by various scholars working in the field of cultural studies that also shows the need for the present study. First, the critical component avoids either seeing media as an overwhelming force that manipulates its audience in every way possible (as the Frankfurt School did) or as a simple cultural and popular tool that viewers can deploy to their own liking (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 29). Instead, it looks for the intersection of text of audience consumption, taking seriously the way viewers consume and integrate these texts. Second, it answers to what Giulianotti described as the weakness of the human agency account in present day cultural studies whereby authors do textual analyses that “decode popular culture in *their* terms, rather than those of social actors” (60). By doing fieldwork, and thus returning to the roots of cultural studies in the British tradition, and actively adapting theory to the circumstances of the historical moment would provide a more valuable account of how people use culture to construct their identities in everyday life (Giulianotti 60).<sup>2</sup>

How social actors receive and make sense of media texts and how these texts themselves are shaped and produced has been addressed in audience studies. Cultural texts, which include mediated sports, are viewed as a site where meanings are negotiated, i.e. where a struggle takes place between the viewer and the text (McCarthy et. al. 218). Watching television, as Ien Ang remarked, is always “behaviour-in-context”, which means it can only be explained when the behaviour is grounded in the context in which it is practised (133). One could of course easily imagine an unlimited number of viewing contexts, but this doesn't mean that a viewer has the possibility to read anything he/she wants in a programme. Stuart Hall, developing his

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<sup>2</sup> For a good impression on the importance of fieldwork in the CCCS, see the anthology *Culture, Media, Language* which brings together an impressive collection of working papers from the Centre.



encoding/decoding model that accounts for the way messages are disseminated through the media, identified three hypothetical positions a viewer could take up in the reading of programme. A dominant-hegemonic position is one where the viewer operates “inside the dominant code” which results in the ideal position (“Encoding/Decoding” 126). A second position was that of a negotiated one, where the viewer adapts certain elements while opposing others (126). The third and final position Hall describes is the oppositional one, whereby a viewer “detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference” (127).

The model hinges on the notion that power is never equally distributed. Media corporations that encode messages are more powerful than the audience which decodes them. Audiences have the ability to interpret these messages, but they’re limited by the way these discourses are brought to them in the first place. The positions that can be taken up by the audience will inform part of the discussion of this study.

## Method

### *Data Collection*

Data collection started by utilizing focus groups consisting of English students at two different British universities. Interviews were held in October 2012 at Brunel University and Croydon College in London. These interviews belong to a larger body of research that is currently being conducted by its principal researcher Dr. Jacco van Sterkenburg as part of an UEFA Grant study (2012/2013). Although the present study is in many ways indebted to this overarching research for the fact that data is borrowed and utilized, it can nonetheless be viewed as independent in both its arguments and analysis.

### *Design and sample*

By choosing focus groups to gather insights into the way television viewers assign meaning to topics such as gender and race/ethnicity, the researcher is given the opportunity to see how social constructions, that means “normative influences, collective as well as individual self-identity shared meanings”, emerge in a naturalistic setting (Finch and Lewis 172). Due to possible sensitive nature of the topics at hand, the groups needed to be balanced to avoid having either too much heterogeneity or too much homogeneity which could influence the group dynamic, and thus the answers provided, in negative ways (Finch and Lewis 190).

This pitfall was deterred as best as possible by recruiting students from roughly the same age that attended the same university. There were a total of eleven ( $n = 11$ ) groups that contained anywhere from three to five students, thereby corresponding to the advice put forward by Finch and Lewis to work with smaller groups on sensitive topics (192-193). Ages ranged from fifteen to twenty-two with the average being 19.5 (the ages of five participants are unknown, but all fall well within the aforementioned range). The male students outnumbered their female counterparts by a ratio of 2:1, while there were just slightly more students with a Black-British background. The full details and exact composition of the focus groups can be gleaned from table 1.

Table 1 – demographics of the participants

Focus group	Gender	Race
1	M	Black-British
1	F	Black-British
1	F	White-British
2	M	White-British
2	M	White-British
2	M	White-British
2	M	White-British
2	M	White-British
3	F	White-British
3	F	Black-British
3	F	White-British
3	F	White-British
3	F	Black-British
4	M	Black-British
4	M	White-British
4	M	Black-British
5	F	White-British
5	F	White-British
5	F	Black-British
5	F	Black-British
5	M	White-British
6	M	Black-British
6	F	Black-British
6	M	Black-British
6	M	White-British
7	M	Black-British
7	M	Black-British
7	M	Black-British
7	M	Black-British
8	M	Black-British
8	M	White-British
8	M	Black-British
9	M	Black-British
9	M	White-British
9	F	White-British
9	F	Black-British
9	M	White-British
10	M	Black-British
10	M	Black-British
10	M	White-British
10	F	Black-British
11	M	White-British
11	M	White-British
11	M	Black-British
	<b>M = 29 / F = 15</b>	<b>WB = 21 / BB = 23</b>

Viewing behavior was generally consistent across the focus groups which included a lot of heavy viewers. People who pointed out that they generally watched football every week or follow every match available to them, were classified as heavy viewers. Then there was a group of students that watched football on a regular basis. Although there were few participants who watched little or even no football, those who reported this viewing behavior were generally females.

Before the start of the interviews, the participants were informed about the general focus of the research and the fact that the interviews would be recorded. They were asserted that their privacy and general anonymity would be protected. Interviews (which were conducted in the English language) generally lasted somewhere between 40 and 80 minutes and took place in a free and quiet place on one of the respective college campuses. Participants were paid five pounds each for their involvement in the research project. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview that allowed the researcher to combine open-ended questions within a more or less predetermined list of topics or questions (Ayres 810-811). The predetermined topics based on the available body of literature provided the necessary amount of focus, while the specific structure of the interview enabled the interviewer to probe or elicit responses from participants on new topics being brought to the foreground (Ayres 810).

Five themes were covered in each interview which consisted of multiple subthemes. Students were first asked to describe themselves and their background. They were then asked about their general viewing behavior to gather what, where and with whom they watch football. Following that, students were asked how they ascribed meaning to race and ethnicity in football. This included questions on identification with players or teams, what they liked to see in football players and if they noticed differences between footballers with a different racial, ethnic or national background. Focus was then shifted from race to gender to ask the students if they ever watched women's football, their reasons for doing or not doing so and in what ways, if any, men's and women's football were different. A fifth and final theme was comprised of questions on football commentary and included questions both on race/ethnicity and gender. The complete questionnaire can be found in appendix A.

### *Conceptualizing race*

Using the discourse of the black-white binary to both label the participants and structure the questions in the interviews is not without its detractors. For it revolves around a sensitive topic

much debated inside (as well as outside) academia.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, this binary discourse structures the questions and topics in the interview and have a very real effect on the way participants act and react, thereby influencing the discourses taken up by them. Binary oppositions are often seen as oversimplification of events, because complex differences are subsumed rather than explicated. Furthermore, these oppositions usually grant one of the poles domination over the other one, as in this case where white dominates black (Hall, “Spectacle of the Other” 329).

These arguments are valid and should not be easily discarded. Nonetheless, this black-white dualism is still very much alive amongst the general public in British society (Billings and Hundley 7; Song and Aspinall 750; Schönwälder 115). This was also apparent in the way students from different countries or regions described themselves, invoking either white-British or black-British. In discussing several theories of difference, Ann Phoenix argues that new constructions of difference that move away from the black-white binary aren’t necessarily better in that they “are recursive in reproducing longstanding problems in the treatment of difference (876). Binary oppositions also provide a strong opportunity to instigate political change (Phoenix 876). It is also apparent in such strong political and critical works on sport and race such as *Race, Sport and Politics: The sporting black diaspora* and “Race”, *Sport and British Society*.

### *Data Analysis*

While the qualitative research practice is comprised of many different traditions, the analysis undertaken here borrows several insights from the grounded theory approach (Boeije 8). Originally developed by the American sociologists Glaser and Strauss in second half of the 1960’s, this systematic approach laid down a methodology “in which the data became centre-stage in reaching a theoretical description of a phenomenon and explaining it” (Boeije 8). This bottom-up or inductive mode of analysis is coupled with a deductive one whereby the analysis is done in order “to test whether data are consistent with prior assumptions, theories, or hypotheses identified or constructed by an investigator” (Thomas 238). In this case, the deductive method meant that the discourses in the interviews will be identified and compared with the pre-existing topics and body of knowledge that also structured the interviews. The inductive analysis means

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<sup>3</sup> A contemporary insight into the way academics handle the conceptualization of racial/ethnic difference can be found in journals such as *Ethnicities* and *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.

that new themes that emerge from the data would be recognized as such and incorporated into the theoretical framework.

A software package, QDA Miner, was used for the qualitative analysis of the eleven interviews. This program offers the researcher a systematic way to organize and analyze his data and includes several features which analyzed textual data into statistical referents. The actual interpretation of the data was done by using a coding process that was originally developed as part of the grounded theory approach and which since has been reworked by numerous authors (Boeije 94; Birks and Mills 10). To discover concepts and themes in the interviews, a process called open coding was used (Strauss and Corbin 102). This meant that the first step was to break down the data “into discrete parts” and consequently to be “closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences” (Strauss and Corbin 102).

Labels (or codes) that were generated during this stage were then reassembled in a process called axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 124). The purpose of this process is “to form more precise and complete explanations about phenomena” by creating categories and subcategories (Strauss and Corbin 124). A third and final step is the integration and refinement of existing categories in a process called selective coding (Strauss and Corbin 143). Even though the coding process is described in three consecutive steps, it should not be seen as a linear process (Boeije 119). The approach required the ability to reverse between steps and question or alter earlier decisions as new themes or concepts emerged from the data.

## Results

In this section I will identify and categorize the various discourses used by the participants in this study. They will be structured around the three themes (ethnicity, gender and media commentary) that were also used in the structuring of the topic list.

### *Ethnicity*

#### **Stereotypes**

##### *Nations have different playing styles*

Practically all students argued, in more or less explicit terms, that countries display different playing styles. There seemed to be a consensus on the English style of play which is characterized as being very physical (rough, hard), static and rigid in its formations, but quick, and the emphasis being less on skills and technique and more on getting the job done for the team. The typical English players that are often named by the respondents are illustrative of this style. John Terry is one of those players, aptly described by a black male student as being “mister England”. Terry was viewed as a player who is not afraid to go into a challenge and one that doesn’t shy out of tackles, but instead will put “himself in line” for the team and the win. Wayne Rooney and Steven Gerrard are two other players that were perceived as being typical English by playing a fast and physical style of football and excelling in teamwork.

The English playing style was also frequently being differentiated in opposition to the Spanish style of football. As one female respondent remarked on the difference between the English and Spanish style of play: “Compared to them, they're more skillful.” Spain was often connected with terms like agility, fluency, technique and especially the quick passing game of Barcelona that some English clubs, like Arsenal, desperately try to imitate. Some respondents believed that the English football culture isn’t appreciative of skills and technique, because “it's seen as showboating”. This factor is also the reason for a few respondents to call English football single-minded and boring. A few times, it was compared with the Latin American style of play where players and teams also play with more freedom and generally like to show off their skills.

### *Natural physicality*

Irrespective of their ethnicity or gender, a majority of the respondents used this discourse to evaluate black football players and differentiate them from other ethnicities. Some of the respondents also used this discourse to explain the apparent over-representation of black players in attacking and winger positions. Black players were often seen as possessing a strong physique and being naturally fast. Most of time, a general statement was made to explain this difference, as the following reasoning by a black female student makes clear:

[...] but the black people are more often the ones with the power and the speed in order to like progress up the pitch. [...]. They've got the quick feet, they've got like the speed to get in behind the back four and I think you do see that an awful lot.

On only two occasions was an explicit connection made with a genetic advantage among black players. A black female student stated: "They are sprinters. They have like the fastest muscle fibers and can run." One ethnically diverse group of male students explained the physical difference by pointing out that black and white players have different eating patterns:

If you see in England, they like based in chips, and everything. Yes, so that's why you see most English players, like they're still strong, but they look slim. They can still play good football, but when you see lots of black guys, they're big and everything, because obviously when they go home, they eat properly.

The natural physicality discourse was refuted by some of the respondents. A group consisting of male students and a mixed gender group with different ethnic backgrounds did so explicitly. One male participant remarked: "I think it has been a big thing for a long time, like about black players have supposedly a genetic advantage of being quick. I think that stereotype just carries." This stereotype is so ingrained in modern football that it has a big influence on where players are positioned on the pitch, one group of students argued. Besides, this stereotype wouldn't hold up on closer inspection as most black players wouldn't conform to this stereotype of being big and physical.

A similar reasoning was found in other groups whereby stereotypes instilled in coaches or scouts about black players was seen as part of the reason for the over-representation of black



players in attacking and winger positions. A smaller portion of the respondents believed that positioning of players would ultimately boil down to the fact of which player has the best attributes for that specific position. Another portion of the respondents believed that this correlation between positions and ethnicity was no longer valid or would over time disappear. One black-British male gave an explanation that most closely resembled a cultural account of racial differences. On the topic of sprinting, the student argued that the good weather was a big influence on the dominance of Jamaicans in sprinting. They could train hard whereas their English colleagues have bad weather and thus few places to train.

White or Asian players were almost never described in terms of a natural physique. The exception here being the typical English players such as Terry and Rooney mentioned earlier, but in these instances the white players were discussed in a manner that directly associated them with the typical style of play of the English national team.

### *Mental discourses*

A second, much less prevalent, discourse that was used in some groups involved the evaluation of players on the basis of mental capacities. In a few instances, this discourse was linked to the positions taken up in the field by players of different ethnic backgrounds. Several respondents used a mental discourse to evaluate white players. First of all, white players were described in terms of having a good “perception” or overall view of the pitch. A white male student made it explicit in the following manner: “Paul Scholes he is always vision and what he can do with the ball, like the way he spreads the ball across 60 yard passes. Those are the same with Rooney as well.”

A few black male students that adopted this discourse thought that this could be the reason for the apparent over-representation of white players in the controlling positions of the game, such as central midfield or central backs. These same students also gave a different explanation for the fact that black players are almost never seen in defending positions or as a goalkeeper. The reason behind this, the students remarked, was that black players want to be “the star of the show”, and the people who get in the “limelight” are usually the one’s that make the goals. Furthermore, white players were more often related with characteristics such as teamwork and were frequently mentioned as being good role models with examples such as David Beckham and Paul Scholes being named. Nonetheless, there were also some students that used a mental

discourse to describe black players in a different way. A quote from a white female student provides a case in point:

The people that are not English put a hell of a lot more effort into the game, because they actually want to be there. [...]. So if you like think Drogba, he sends pretty much half of his wages back to his country, to help them out. So he appreciates the fact that he is playing at a high level of football.

A black female stated that Drogba possessed leadership qualities and as someone other players would look up to. In a different group, the black player Yaya Touré was described by a black male as a hard worker that earned his central midfield position because of this commitment to his job.

### *Under-representation of Asians*

Students agreed that the group of Asian footballers active in English football is substantially smaller when compared with other ethnic groups. Although different explanations were given to account for this hiatus, the dominant argument was of a cultural order. Asians, by which was usually meant Indians and Pakistanis, were seen as not being interested that much in football and instead more readily take up a sport like cricket. A statement made by a black male student on this topic was exemplary for this discourse:

Because, like say, in their own country, they...in India they play cricket. So, when Indian families come over to England...even if the child grows up in England, they're going to play cricket. Because that's what their parents or the whole family has been into.

Some argued that this tendency had the result of there not being as many Asian role models in footballs which kids could look up to. Religion (Hindu and Islam) was named by some respondents as being another factor, because children would have to attend a religious gathering after school rather than play football with their friends. A third explanation that was provided, focused on the fact that English scouts don't really scout for Asians. Asians would play in their own leagues according to some students, and these leagues were generally unknown to the larger public. Some students argued that Asians were stereotyped as not being able to play proper football or that they were seen as physically weak. A variation on this third argument was found

in a male focus group, where the students argued that Asians simply didn't like the English style of football and thus stayed in their own countries.

### Identification

#### *Quality trumps ethnicity*

A large majority of black and white students mentioned that a player's ethnic background is irrelevant for the degree of support or identification. Respondents contended that the best players should always play, regardless of their skin color or their ethnic background. Identification with a player would most likely be with their respective ability or style of play. Students who adopted this discourse would either state that an all-black or all-white team wouldn't affect their identification or support, while others stated that a mixed team was preferable, because there would be different playing styles and traits present. A diverse team would be able to gather more support as one white male explains: "A lot of football fans have a favorite player and it's usually someone they can identify with." This diversity would also improve the overall quality of a team.

An argument that often accompanied this dominant discourse was one where students stated that either the media and/or the general public would strongly react to a team consisting only of black or white players, while they themselves wouldn't have a problem with it. A female student used the example of her home-town to sketch out such a scenario:

"I just couldn't imagine Norwich having all black, like all black players in the football team. Not that I have a problem with it, but I know that it would be really strange. I think it would be shocking."

#### *National team represents a country*

This discourse was much less used by students. One ethnically diverse group said that "because if the nation is mixed I would expect to see a mixture" and that because England has many different ethnicities, the national team will always consist of a set of players with different backgrounds. A group with black students would feel a bit "uncomfortable" seeing an English team with only white players, as they would view it as being done on purpose. These respondents also perceived England as being a country that predominantly consists of white people. An all-black national team would in their view thus be much more of an issue in society. This thought was echoed in

another male group, who explicitly made clear that a national team made up of only black or white players would bring back “segregation” and would lead to an uprising in racial abuse.

### *Gender*

#### **Football is masculine**

Although it's difficult to single out a dominant discourse regarding gender amongst the respondents, a slight majority of them tend to view football as a masculine activity. Irrespective on their outlook on football, most students agreed on the fact that men are inherently stronger than women. For most respondents, this is also the main reason that mixed gender teams will probably never happen as the physical difference between men and women is just too big to justify such an undertaking. An argument put forward by a black male student further illustrates this point: “You know, the males, the males’ bodies are stronger. Their bodies are stronger. The female’s legs will get broken, if men never held back when they're playing each other.” Some of the respondents said that mixed teams would “ruin football”, thereby identifying football primarily as a physical contact sport and disavowing physical contact between males and females in a sport setting.

There was however also a different discourse that was, with a few exceptions, primarily used by female students to argue that mixed teams would be interesting in that it would improve the quality of the female players by increasing the competitiveness of the game. Besides the physical difference, some of the respondents also point to mental differences between men and women as a reason why football is masculine. As one white male respondent observes: “Whereas females still have that, kind of... In a way when you are older you have that maternal instinct, so you don't want to hurt anyone.” One male student states that “you don’t expect a woman to be aggressive” as it’s not a trait that he would normally associate with femininity. Instead, a male student argued that he associated women more easily with a sport like gymnastics and other sports such as athletics.

#### **Men’s football is entertainment**

A slight majority, a group comprised mostly by male students, found men’s football to be more entertaining than women’s football, because the game is played on a superior level. Men’s football

is viewed as always being better and “more exciting” compared to women’s football where “the quality of the football is not as good as in the man's game.” The concept of quality was in most cases being constructed along the same lines. Respondents argued that women’s football has a slower pace and the female footballers are frequently described as being less technical and skillful than their male counterparts. Some respondents just stated that they find it boring, while others go further as the following comment from a black male student illustrates: “[...] they're [women] not really meant to play. They're not skilled enough.” The students that used this discourse would only watch women’s football if it was entertaining enough, meaning that the female players should to some extent possess the same qualities that are displayed in the men’s game.

By contrast, a slightly smaller group that largely consisted of female students (and a few males, mostly black-British) also explicitly connected men’s football to entertainment, but insisted that this wasn’t necessarily a positive thing. The reasoning behind this is explained by one female student that points to the fact that men’s football is “all about the media” and that women’s football is actually “all about the football.” Male footballers were deemed to “play up to the cameras” and when they get fouled, they would also make a fuss about it. A female student discussing this topic said that: “If they get fouled, they roll around on the floor, wasting time. But everyone, likes it, enjoys that part of it.” While on the other hand, women’s football was seen as containing a lot less “drama”. When a female player gets fouled, she would be “up and ready to go again” making the game “flow more”.

In a female group a discourse was found where ethnicity and gender intersected. The female students remarked that there was far less racism in women’s football. This was explained in a twofold manner. The first explanation was that in general the crowd attending a women’s football match is fairly small, which means there are less supporters to shout racist chants. The second argument was that women are more emotional and “feel for the play more” and racist abuse resides at the opposite end of the emotional spectrum.

### **Women get fewer opportunities**

In some cases an economic or cultural discourse was used to explain why women’s football has a hard time gaining ground. The economic discourse, used by males and females, focused on the fact that there’re almost no sponsors and thus the game is barely funded. Consequently, women don’t have the best facilities to train or play. An example of this was given by a female student

that discussed the fact that the Arsenal ladies team can't play in the Arsenal stadium. Another aspect that was mentioned is that most of the female players have normal jobs as they don't get paid enough to rely solely on their income from football activities. The cultural discourse focused on the way males got more opportunities to play football from a young age onward as structured in society's institutions and societal norms and values. A female student remarks: "Boys do their sports, girl do their sports. So, it is kind of how you are brought up in education. That also impacts on what happens." This was also put forward as the reason why there resides more quality in men's football, as there is far more competition between players. The students of one all-male group argued that they don't know many girls who like football and that women who play football were most likely heavily influenced by the males in their family. As one male remarked, a woman has "to be very butch", directly taking back his words: "Not even butch, but you just have to be very male oriented to like football as a girl."

### *Media commentary*

#### **Men's football is the norm in coverage**

All respondents, irrespective of their gender or race, acknowledged that women's football gets less coverage than men's football and that only big international and cup final games are shown on television. When women's football is on television, there's hardly any advertising to promote the game and it's shown on what some of the respondents named as obscure channels. The dominant discourse here is that men's football is the norm in the media. In a female focus group, a black-British respondent claimed that in general "women aren't portrayed in the media as doing sport." Male and female respondents also stated that the commentary in a female match was often less exciting and that commentators were less critical on mistakes made by female players and thus don't take women's football as serious. One black-British male described it in the following manner:

It seems that sometimes commentators they don't take the women's game as serious when they're commentating. So it's kind of 'aaah she made a mistake,' like I don't know... It's not the same commentating, it's completely different.

A black-British male blamed the media for being “sexist in a way” by heavily favoring male football. Some female respondents argued that the reinforcement of typical gender stereotypes by the media would also be a reason that mixed teams wouldn’t work. This prioritization of men in the media was also witnessed by male and female students in the case of the commentator Andy Gray who made a negative remark about a female linesman. A few students also noticed that female commentators in men’s football are far and few between.

A contradictory discourse that was used in two focus groups that largely consisted of male respondents contended that there wasn’t any difference in the commentary on women and men’s football. Both groups still conformed to the view that men’s football receives more coverage and gets talked about more. Nearly all groups agreed on the fact that women’s football could and should get a lot more coverage and that this would probably increase its popularity. A few male respondents digressed from this by stating that female football just isn’t a viable commodity and that more coverage would probably not change its popularity.

### **Commentators are neutral regarding ethnicity**

The large majority of respondents claimed that commentators don’t make a difference between ethnicities or races during a match. In most groups the argument was posited that commentators actively reflect what happens on the pitch and that ethnicity isn’t a focal point. As a white British women noted: “I think mainly during commentating it all focuses on individual players’ performance, rather than where that player comes from.” In two groups this seeming neutrality of commentators was explained by pointing to the fact that commentators would be prone to a backlash in the media if they made remarks about someone’s race or ethnic background.

Opposite this dominant discourse, a discourse was found in which respondents pointed out that the media do indeed stereotype players based on their ethnic or racial background. This discourse was mostly used by male, black and white, participants and highlighted the fact the media would associate black players with physical qualities and white players with technical abilities. This claim was on some occasions followed by the argument that these kinds of observations do have some basis in reality, but are usually put forward as “massive blanket statements,” as one black participant notes. Another prevalent discourse was that the (white) English players got more support in the English media. This is among other things evident in the fact that most participants, mostly black students, believed that the Uruguayan Luis Suarez got

more slack in the British press than the England defender John Terry, whereby both have been involved in two separate cases of racial abuse.

Another claim made by some black and white students was that the English media tends to focus on a lack of English players in club team. One white male student describes it in the case of Arsenal: “[...] but there was a lot of bad press about actually. It's an English team that's not fielding English players.” A few male students claimed that the media would also emphasize attempts at diving and faking by non-British players, while ignoring those same actions when done by British players.

### **Sport media is a business**

This discourse found its way into a majority of the groups, although in some it was more pronounced than in others. Students, black and white, recognized the intimate connection between the media and football by pointing out that modern football is a business. As a white male student argued: “Back in the day football is football. Today football is money. Really. Football is all in the paper, football is all the money.” This intimate connection has the result of the media actively trying to “exaggerate things” and “blow things well out of proportion” to attract attention from the public and thus to increase their revenue.



## Discussion

This segment will provide insight in to the extent the discourses used by students to evaluate gender and racial/ethnic differences in football overlaps with the hegemonic media discourses described earlier. Results are also contextualized by comparing them with findings from earlier studies. As it is impossible to exhaust the whole set of data, the focus will be on those discourses that reveal the complex nature of discourses and power-relations and provide useful pointers for future research.

### *Confirming the dominant*

Regardless of gender or race, a majority of the students used a natural physicality discourse to evaluate black players. In just a few cases where a possible explanation was given to account for this natural physique, participants usually pointed to a perceived genetic advantage among black people. This type of discourse was almost never invoked when the students talked about and evaluated white or Asian players. The exception here is the evaluation of the typical white England players that represented (amongst other things) the physical side of the English game. White players were more readily connected with positive mental capabilities, although this discourse certainly was less dominant than the natural physicality discourse. Positive capabilities ascribed to white players included a good tactical overview of the pitch, but also terms like teamwork and role model were used. Being a good role model means that players should not only strive to satisfy their own ego, but instead adopt a proper and altruistic attitude, both on and off the pitch, that kids can look up to. Players that displayed bad character habits such as big egos and bad personalities were generally frowned upon.

This stereotypical approach to racial differences is in line with the dominant media discourse whereby black athletes are represented as being naturally gifted, while white athletes are more easily associated with mental and intellectual capabilities (Coakley 426; Hylton 1-5; Boyle and Haynes 108-109; Grainger, Newman and Andrews 452-454). The relative lack of British Asian players in the English Premier League and the national team was largely explained by reference to cultural inhibitions on the side of Asians. Students stated that Asians either don't play football as they're more invested in a game like cricket, or that they don't do sport at all as they have to attend to religious or educational activities. Daniel Burdsey shows that Asians do in

fact play football, but are largely invisible due to the white norm in media coverage (“No Ball Games” 483). It is only in the British Asian press that serious coverage is given, while the mainstream British press usually resorts to irrelevant coverage that fails to acknowledge the participation of British Asians in the game (Burdsey, “No Ball Games” 483).

A natural physicality discourse was even more pronounced in the case of gender, where the majority of students used this discourse to explain the present structuring in football along gender lines. Men were seen as being inherently stronger than women and this physical advantage was oftentimes used to argue why men and women (should) play separately. Football was primarily seen as a physical game that involves bodily contact. Men could hurt women if they would play together was the sentiment amongst some students. Arguments pertaining to this physical difference were part of a larger discourse which constructed football as a masculine activity. Mental discourses were also, although decidedly less often, used to further this specific construction of masculinity. Students that used this discourse constructed masculinity as having a sort of killer mentality whereby a player doesn’t shy away from aggressive tackles and duels. Here, an idea of femininity was constructed in the opposite sense and connected with terms pertaining to a maternal instinct and emotional fragility. Furthermore, some male students argued that females would have to be very masculine or even homosexual to actually enjoy football.

This natural physicality discourse corresponds with the one practiced inside the masculine domain of the sportmedia where femininity and masculinity are still being constructed along the lines of traditional gender values (Coakley 419-425; Bruce 129; Messner 118-121). Male students tended to combine this discourse of masculinity with the argument that men’s football is more entertaining and exciting than women’s football, which was deemed to be boring. Men’s football is huge and popular and male players are the celebrities of this world, whilst women footballers were hard to even name for most of the students. The general idea that men’s football is more than a game was noted several times. Analyses of men’s sport events point out that the media promote these events in a dramatic fashion which favour the grandeur of the game (Messner 119; Coakley 420).

Entertainment was also associated with the overall quality game. The overall quality of the game is deemed to be of a higher level in men’s football. More and better skills and technical ability are displayed in the men’s game compared to the women’s game. Women were not

directly associated with good technical skills and some would be all the more surprised if women actually acquired these skills. Female players, it was argued by some, should possess the same qualities as their male counterparts, thereby supporting the hegemonic media discourse that constructs male events as the norm (Bruce 129; McDowell and Schaffner 549-550).

*Alternative discourses and internal inconsistencies*

The discourse of entertainment was however also used in a non-hegemonic manner by what were mostly female students, although there were a few male participants who also adopted it (more black-British men than white-British). Women's football, it was argued, flows more, because there were less arguments over probable fouls and thus more effective playtime. Where men, more or less obliged, play up to the camera's as they want and need to excite the audience, women just got on with the game proper. As some of these students stated they enjoyed women's football or actually prefer it over men's football, they adopted a different approach to football that doesn't correspond to the dominant media discourse that aligns football with masculinity (Duncan 238; Caudwell, "Reviewing UK" 323). While some of them still believed that men were inherently stronger than women, those who argued against this also recognized the role the media play in constituting this difference. They remarked that the media stereotype women which results in an image that women don't do sport and that men's sport is constructed as being more important.

Little research is available on how viewers (men and women) interpret women's sport on television, but a study conducted by Toni Bruce on how women view representations of women's basketball might provide some useful pointers. Bruce reports that women took the coverage on the men's game as the norm to make comparisons with the coverage of the women's game ("Audience Frustration" 381). Students in the present study also made remarks on how the commentary was less exciting than it was in the men's game and that coverage of women's football was extensively different in this respect. Perhaps somewhat surprising, it was a white male student that most straightforwardly argued that the media were sexist. Instances of sexualization and trivialization were also commented upon in other groups, coinciding with the discourses identified by Bruce ("Audience Frustration" 383-385). Students argued that women were either portrayed as wives or mothers and in another group the incident with the commentator Andy

Gray was put forward as an example of sexism in the media.<sup>4</sup> Students thus identified the discourses of trivialization and ambivalent representation of female athletes that textual analyses have found, but also showed that these can be challenged (Pressland 224; Cooky, Messner and Hextrum 22).

Thus receiving any form of pleasure from watching a women's football match requires a constant act of negotiation, as preferred meanings that are encoded as such by the media need to be read and reconstructed in an alternative way (Hall, "Encoding/Decoding" 123/124; Bruce, "Audience Frustration" 386). Even tuning in to a women's game requires effort as games aren't always announced beforehand or are broadcasted on the more obscure channels (Bruce, "Audience Frustration" 386). It's also worth noting that the students who adopted this discourse generally tended to view a lot of football and some of them even played football themselves, as knowledge and experience is considered important in the way viewers read a cultural text (Morley, "Cultural transformations" 106; Morley, "Texts, readers, subjects" 162). Discourses at the disposal of the students might also explain why it was mostly black males that took up this specific discourse, because members of minority groups in general tend to be more likely to read dominant texts against the grain (Bruce, "Audience Frustration" 376-377). In one particular group, this explanation is further reinforced by the readings that called out the media on racial stereotyping.

A couple of male students (with diverse ethnic backgrounds) did acknowledge that women's football can be good and some of them resorted to the statement that gender doesn't matter. Commentators were deemed to be neutral regarding gender even though they were aware that men's football received more coverage. Women's football, it was argued by some, should receive more attention in the media. Although it might be interpreted as a positive view on the behalf of women's football, these students did eventually fall back on stereotypical views of men and women. Men were naturally seen as stronger than women and were in possession of a greater set of skills. Thus, statements such as gender doesn't matter imply a negation of difference and at the same time conflict with the stereotypes used to explain differences between men and women. Such ostensible gender neutrality amongst males can instead be argued to be a form of gender-blindness (Bruce, "Shifting the Boundaries" 6). Furthermore, it lays bare the inherent

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<sup>4</sup> Andy Gray and Richard Keys were commentators that worked for Sky Sports. They were subsequently suspended when they were unknowingly recorded mocking a female lineswoman which provoked outrage in the UK (Norrish).

contradictory nature of discourses which results from the place of both the cultural text and the subject in the realm of the interdiscursive where conflicting discourses coincide (Morley, "Texts, readers, subjects" 162).

Nonetheless, the much heard argument amongst women as well as men that women's football should receive more coverage to increase its popularity and the fact that both men and women already actively enjoy women's football or even prefer it above men's football, might indicate a change that warrants further exploration (see also: Kane 4). Almost all students were well aware of the fact that sport is a business and that the media play an integral part in creating or denying opportunities for athletes. While some of these students were thus able to articulate a more comprehensive account of the sportmedia by seeing how this business model could lead to specific and stereotypical approaches to, for example, women's football, others only acknowledged this fact without any further reasoning as to what this actually implied.

There existed an even greater incongruity between the dominant discourses used by students to evaluate race/ethnicity and the discourses used to evaluate commentary. Those who were prone to stereotypical approaches to race and ethnicity generally argued that the football commentary is neutral on the topic of race. If pressed a bit further on the topic, some students did acknowledge stereotypes might happen once or twice. Such reasoning was by some accompanied with the argument that commentators merely reflected reality and stated facts about players. Results from other reception studies indicate this precise ambivalence towards racial difference in commentary: "They argued that commentary emphasizing physical attributes merely reflected the needs of the position and was, therefore, not a reflection of the race of the player" (McCarthy, Jones and Potrac 232).

Whereas previous studies mainly identified this discourse amongst white participants and related this to the notion of whiteness as the subconscious norm, this discourse was used here by white-British as well as black-British participants (McCarthy, Jones and Potrac 232-233). As argued earlier, whiteness functions as a particular worldview that can be taken up by non-whites. It is thus possible that these black students have internalized this stereotypical discourse as it has become firmly ingrained in the larger discursive surroundings these students inhabit (Azzarito and Harrison 349; Shakib and Veliz 4). However, students also remarked that they simply didn't hear any stereotypes even if they paid attention to it. Research on the use of racial/ethnic

stereotypes in British football commentary dates back to 2003 which warrants the need for an update, especially as incidents surrounding racial abuse referred to in the beginning of this study might have impacted the way football commentators express themselves (McCarthy, Jones and Potrac 217).

Certainly, not every student was compliant with the natural physicality discourse. Both black and white students identified and opposed racial stereotypes that circulate in the media and that also persist in the sport itself as it is expressed through trainers and scouts. A few participants used a mental discourse to positively evaluate black athletes or gave cultural explanations for differences in sport performance. Success and motivation of black athletes was for example explained by adopting the discourse of hard work and success, a theme that has been found in numerous other reception studies (van Sterkenburg and Knoppers 313; Harrison, Lawrence, and Bukstein 357). Consistent with the findings of van Sterkenburg and Knoppers, it was a white (female) student that linked this theme of hard work to an economic discourse (313).

Several studies have found that the media regularly employ such representations of black athletes which emphasize sport as a gateway for achieving social upward mobility and harbinger of economic success (Grainger, Newman and Andrews 451). Scholars have argued that black athletic success stories have the danger of ignoring the complexity of an athlete's cultural situation and his/her subject position and ends up actually reinforcing racial inequality rather than breaking it down (Grainger, Newman and Andrews 451). By focusing on the economic upward mobility of individual athletes, one can imply that failing to escape poverty is the result of individual failure on the side of black minorities (Grainger, Newman and Andrews 451).

Non-stereotypical explanations for the under-representation of Asian players were oftentimes derived from personal experiences. Several students, both black and white, used examples from their own encounters to argue for example that Asians have their own football leagues which receive little attention from English scouts who still hold stereotypical views on Asian athletes. Interviews conducted with British-Asian football players revealed that social segregation has played a part in the invisibility of Asians in the English leagues (Saeed and Kilvington 608). These players also agreed on the scarcity of British-Asian role models in the game which could act as a driving force behind the popularization amongst British-Asian youths, a theme also identified a number of times in the present study (Saeed and Kilvington 609).

The aforementioned discourses all focused on differences between various races, but a large majority of the students actually argued that a player's race/ethnicity is not a factor in the process of identification with or support for that player. Students watch football to witness some of its brilliance and quality or what has been dubbed as the aesthetic motivation (Raney 321). Skin color is deemed insignificant, a non-issue, in light of a player's (or teams) overall quality and skill. Identification takes place with a favorite player or team who exhibit(s) a certain style of football, according to both black and white students. An all-white or all-black national team wouldn't be a problem for a good portion of those who adopted this discourse. Even while such a team might not affect these students personally, many of them argued it would lead to negative reactions in other parts of society.

This particular account might be indicative of what has been termed "color-blind racism", an ideology that implies that there's no color, just people (Bonilla-Silva 1-4). Although this ideology is (re)produced by white people to maintain white privilege, it can also affect those who it dominates (the minority groups) by creating a sort of false consciousness (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 195-196). This explanation seems to be purported by various claims that race or ethnicity has nothing to do with how players play, while different nationalities do exhibit diverging playing styles. In the first instance then, race and ethnicity seem to be exempt as a useful category for classifying athletes, but the dominance of the natural physicality discourse further problematizes this account.

However, such an explanation might to easily gloss over the complexity of identification, a never-ending process that operates across difference, by neglecting other contextual factors (Hall, "Who Needs Identity?" 2-3). One contextual factor is what has been dubbed denationalization, which emphasizes how increasing migratory movements in the world of professional sports has led to a "deterritorialization and reterritorialization of identities" (Poli 648). By placing the emphasis on how globalization has profound effects on nation-states, denationalization calls into question the taken-for-granted relation between State, identity and territory (Poli 649). Questioning British sport-fans, Keith Parry notes how some of these students identify with a player on the basis of their quality or performance for their respective team, rather than for their nationality (11). Reterritorialization, the process whereby the globalization of broadcasting made it possible to view competitions from all over the world, also explains

students' identification with Spanish players or teams such as Barcelona.

Of course, globalization is an aspect that underlies much of the modern cultural experience that is gradually being lifted from its traditional localities (Tomlinson 273). Location becomes less of a determinant factor as this place is increasingly penetrated by globalized experiences, forces and outlooks (Tomlinson 273). With American popular culture at the heart of this contemporary globalization, British (and other) viewers come into contact with American ideologies (through news reports, movies and so on) that promote specific ideas and values on topics such as race and ethnicity (Crothers 2 - 69). These globalized ideologies may eventually come to dominate the particular, historically infused, ideologies of a country. To then understand the complex interplay between different factors in the formation of identity and the process of identification in sporting practices, future research should also look beyond the borders of the nation state in determining the factors that influence the construction of identity.



## Conclusion

The discourses that students used to assign meaning to race and gender in sport did show considerable overlap with the hegemonic media discourses as identified in the literature. It didn't manifest itself so much in the use of explicit stereotypes (although these were also present), rather it took on the form of gender- or colour-blindness which neglects or discards differences among people and instead champions quality and entertainment. Thus, while preferred readings of the sportmedia were identified, it is certainly not the case that these readings dominated a majority of the students. Especially in the case of gender, more heterogeneous discourses were identified. A considerable portion of the participants, most of them women, presented very much a negotiated and positive reading of the women's game. These alternative discourses also indicate and support the argument that cultural texts don't exist in a vacuum, but that readings of these texts are interspersed by a variety of external factors. A few female students that were actively involved in the women's game used their own personal experiences to provide a different account of women's football. These contextual factors were also explicit in some alternative accounts on the underrepresentation of Asians in English football, whereby some students used their own knowledge and experiences to provide different explanations for this statistic.

Differences between black or white students were more difficult to single out. It might be that this topic illuminates one of the limitations of the study, it being the specific conceptualization of race. Labelling the students as either black or white on the basis of their own textual introduction, which wasn't always very explicit, isn't entirely without its pitfalls. For example, some students only briefly mentioned the home countries of both parents or gave a mixed interpretation of their own ethnic background. Furthermore, this conceptualization sidesteps other forms of belonging such as those at the national or local level and proves problematic with the idea of mixed people (see also: Song and Aspinall 749-750). The use of these same categories in the topics and questions that were asked during the interviews also structure the way participants use certain discourses.

Despite these limitations, this study reveals the complex nature of reading mediated sports and the contextual nature of identification that accompanies it. It has provided some useful pointers for future research in this area. The negotiated readings regarding women's football shows signs of potential, but more research is necessary to corroborate such a story.

## Appendix A: Topics and Sample Questions Used in Interviews

**\*\*INTRODUCE RESEARCH AND YOURSELF IN GENERAL TERMS**

**\*\*ASK PARTICIPANTS NOT TO SPEAK ALL TOGETHER, BUT TO FEEL FREE TO SPEAK AND REACT TO EACH OTHER**

**\*\*TELL THEM ABOUT ANONYMITY, THAT THERE ARE NO WRONG ANSWERS.**

### 1. General

Ask participants one by one;

**\*\*What is your name?**

**\*\*Educational background?**

**\*\*Age?**

**\*\*National and ethnic background?**

**\*\*Born where? \*\*Grew up where, live where now?**

(This is important to check regional spread)

Do you practice sport, or football, yourself?

### 2. Football on TV and context of watching

**\*\*Do you watch football on TV? How often do you watch?**

**\*\* Club football? National team? European leagues (CL and EL)?**

**\*\* What channels?**

**\*\*Context:** Do you watch alone, with others? Where?

### 3. Meanings given to football players on TV (focus on race/ethnicity)

**\*\* Do you have a preference or do you identify with certain players more than with others?**

**\*\* Does race/ethnicity matter in this respect; e.g. is it easier to identify with players of the same ethnic background or doesn't this make any difference? Why? Why not?**

**\*\* And in terms of nationality; Do you identify easier with English players than players with other nationalities or not? Who do you consider typical 'English' players? Why?**

**\*\* Is bonding with your club or the national team irrespective of ethnic composition of the team?**

E.g. would your support be influenced if the team you support would only consist of White players / Black players?

Does this differ between the national team and the club team you support?

**\*\* What are the skills required to be a typical good football player?**

(for me: are these traits usually associated with hegemonic masculinity?)

**\*\* Can you mention players who possess these traits?**

\*\*Does race/ethnicity of players influence the qualities players possess, e.g. do Black players have other skills than White players and vice versa?

\*\* What would be the reason for that?

\*\*Other ethnicities (such as South-Asian players?) Why do you think they are under-represented in football?

\*\*In professional English club football, teams have relatively many Black football players compared to the overall share of Black people in the population as a whole (or not?). If so, what would be plausible explanations for why the racial composition of club football teams is different from the racial make up of the country as a whole?

\*\*Previous studies have shown that Black players are often positioned as wingers in the field as coaches see them as fast, while White players hold central positions as they are seen as leaders in the field with tactical capacities. Do you think that this positioning still applies?  
Does the media play a role in this? How?

#### **4. Meanings given to football players on TV (focus on gender)**

\*\*You have just mentioned skills that a typical (male) football player possesses.

\*\* Do the same qualities/skills apply to a good female footballer?

\*\*Can you mention examples?

\*\*Do you watch women's football?

Why/Why not?

\*\*Do female footballers play differently or similar to men in your opinion?

In what respect is there a difference?

\*\*If they do play differently, What's the reason for that?

\*\*Football is structured along the lines of gender; there is men's and women's football. What do you think is the reason for that?

Should football be a mixed practice so that males and females play in the same team?

\*\*Is the women's game as ethnically diverse as the men's game? Does ethnicity of players influence playing style?

#### **5. Evaluation of the football coverage**

\*\*How do you evaluate the football commentary generally?

\*\* Is football commentary different for the national competition than for the national team?

E.g. When the national team plays, do commentators construct more of a community feeling (we are all together in the support for the team)? In what way do they do this?

Are all players considered real 'English', regardless of ethnic backgrounds as they all play for the nation, or do commentators make differences between players in this respect?

More generally; do you feel commentators treat all players the same irrespective of their racial/ethnic background?

Do commentators use ethnic stereotypes? If yes, what kinds of stereotypes? What is your opinion on this?

Gender: Do commentators use gender stereotypes, e.g. what traits do commentators use to describe male and female footballers? Are there any differences in traits ascribed to male and female players? What is your opinion on that?

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