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## **Mediated football: Representations and audience receptions of race/ethnicity, gender and nation**

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### **Abstract**

Mediated football is one of the most popular global cultural practices. Within this cultural practice, meanings given to race/ethnicity, gender and nation are naturalized in an unacknowledged manner. In this article, we build on existing literature to critically examine the often implicit discourses surrounding race/ethnicity, gender and nation in mediated football and to interrogate how these discourses are embedded in wider relations of power. We focus not only on football media content and representations but also on audience receptions and negotiations of media content. We argue that while football in the media provides a shared topical resource for many people worldwide, the ways in which football is received and used by active media audiences have attracted insufficient academic attention. This article challenges this neglect and, in so doing, constitutes the starting point for the rich, cross-cultural and multidisciplinary mixture of articles that feature in this special issue. We conclude that a focus on the dynamic interplay between media representations and audience

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receptions across different cultural contexts and social dimensions can advance contemporary academic and societal debate on the role of mediated football in shaping social relations.

### **Football in the media: setting the scene**

In the twenty-first century, sport in the media can be considered one of the most important sources of entertainment for many people worldwide. Media sport is omnipresent, whether it be via mainstream media such as television, radio and newspaper, via cinematic screens, or via online reports, live broadcast streaming, YouTube videos, tweets or fan-generated blogs.<sup>1</sup> This omnipresence of media sport applies particularly to men's football (soccer). Almost no other media genre is capable of attracting more viewers at the same time. Televised men's football has become, in other words, a unique platform in its global visibility and in the vast numbers of viewers it attracts, many of whom watch broadcasts weekly in a social setting. With their immense media audiences, major football events like the FIFA World Cup have become more than just significant sport events. They have developed into mediated spectacles whose relevance extends to wider cultural and societal dimensions. The social power of mediated football is perhaps best illustrated by the visibility and popularity of football celebrities of different ethnic and national backgrounds, such as Lionel Messi, Neymar or Cristiano Ronaldo, who serve as role models for diverse youth audiences across the globe. These football celebrities – and the media discourses that surround them – offer narratives that young viewers appropriate and use to reflect on their own and other people's lives and identities. They provide the cultural material that youth draw on to give meaning to their own life and identity and that of others.<sup>2</sup>

The potential of football media narratives in informing viewers' perceptions is strengthened by the popular belief that football media professionals such as journalists and commentators work in a value-free and objective journalistic manner.<sup>3</sup> This popular perception reflects mediated football's position as in-between the human interest/entertainment domain characterized by the desire to attract as many people as possible and the news media domain which is characterized by an emphasis on neutrality and a detached stance towards football.<sup>4</sup> It is this apparently authentic and unmediated character of mediated football that makes it such a powerful and credible site for naturalizing differences, especially those related to commonly used markers of difference such as gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality.<sup>5</sup> This is particularly relevant in contemporary societies where developments relating to globalization have fuelled individual engagements with cultural

identity. People – young and old – increasingly encounter cultural ‘Others’ who have backgrounds and life trajectories different from their own and consequently become increasingly involved in a continuous process of defining and redefining themselves in relation to others.<sup>6</sup> In this process, the media play a crucial role by providing a place where a variety of discourses and identities can be found, negotiated and adopted.<sup>7</sup> Due to their popularity and their display of discourses surrounding cultural difference, the football media can be seen to play a key role in this regard.

### **Football media, stereotyping and persisting inequalities**

While some scholars have argued that the popularity of football, and sport generally, has the potential to engender mutual respect among diverse communities and foster a sense of connectedness and national belonging,<sup>8</sup> numerous sport media researchers also point towards the more obscure sides of the sport media. Their studies demonstrate that the football media often draw on hegemonic stereotypes based on race, nation and/or gender that privilege the majority population while disadvantaging minority groups. We know, for instance, that the media routinely draw on racial/ethnic stereotypes associating Black athletes relatively often with superhuman strength and natural physical qualities. White athletes, on the other hand, are more often constructed as ‘normal human beings’ and associated with mental qualities such as intellect, perseverance and hard work.<sup>9</sup> Other studies have shown that the sport media represent other ethnic minorities in stereotypical ways as well; Asian athletes are relatively often represented as machine-like and unemotional, Latin Americans as hot tempered and selfish, East-Asians and Muslims as irrational and threatening, and Aboriginal athletes as athletically gifted but lazy.<sup>10</sup>

The few studies that focus specifically on media portrayals of football players have generally found the same patterns.<sup>11</sup> These findings tie in with more general representations of ethnicity and race in the media that show how Black success is framed as normal and natural in sports and entertainment, but not in, for instance, business, academia or politics.<sup>12</sup> These everyday portrayals of race and ethnicity may be seen to help naturalize a mind-body split in which White people are associated with mental skills and rationality and Black people with athletic skills and physicality.<sup>13</sup> Such a racialized discourse potentially frames the understanding of race and ethnicity in non-sports situations as well, for instance when recruiting individuals for government, business or academia.<sup>14</sup>

Similar to race and ethnicity, dominant discourses surrounding *gender* in the football media also reflect hegemonic stereotypes. Reflecting on three decades of sport media research on gender, Crossman, Vincent and Speed conclude that ‘articles and photographs of women’s sports constituted a minority of the coverage and that women tended to be not only under-represented, but trivialized, stereotyped, devalued and marginalized’.<sup>15</sup> Previous studies show that the sport media characterize women athletes in ambivalent ways, as strong but also as dependent (on their male coach or family), as mentally vulnerable, as family members (mothers and wives), or as sexual objects.<sup>16</sup> According to Caudwell, the media tend to trivialize and feminize the performances of women when they perform in ‘traditional ‘male sports such as football.’<sup>17</sup> For males, on the other hand, mediated football consumption serves as a signifier for their masculinity. Male footballers are often associated with stereotypical male characteristics such as power, mental ‘toughness’ and the giving and taking of pain. These representations make football coverage a powerful site for (re)constructions of desirable masculinities that construct football as a particularly male domain.<sup>18</sup>

However, evidence on the extent and nature of media stereotyping in sport is somewhat contradictory. Some studies did *not* find significant evidence for racial/ethnic and gender stereotyping by the media or concluded that sport commentators have become more sensitive and increasingly avoid prejudicial treatment and the use of racial and gender-based stereotypes.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, there is some evidence that sport events such as the FIFA World Cup or the Olympic Games can elicit nation-based identifications among sport commentators that override commonly used markers of difference such as race/ethnicity or gender.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the massive support for national football teams during the recent 2014 FIFA World Cup suggests that mediated football can enhance feelings of collective identity and connectedness with the nation, even if such feelings are often relatively short-lived and ephemeral. Such connectedness may (temporarily) obscure racial, ethnic or gendered markers of difference, especially if success in the specific event is important for the nation’s self-perception.<sup>21</sup>

Wensing and Bruce’s research on media representations of Indigenous Australian runner Cathy Freeman during the 2000 Sydney Olympics illustrates the ambivalence of sports media coverage.<sup>22</sup> Their study found that Freeman was not described in the media in terms of stereotypes based on race/ethnicity or gender but was primarily portrayed as ‘Australian’ and, as such, became a mediated symbol of national reconciliation. The absence of commonly used stereotypes seems to support the idea that the nationalistic discourse outweighs racialized or gendered discourses in international sport events, especially when athletes are highly successful (Freeman won the women’s 400 metres gold medal at the 2000 Olympic

Games). Yet, Bruce and Wensing also show that, in contrast to the media celebration of Freeman, the letters to the editor sections of major Australian newspapers during the 2000 Sydney Olympics revealed competing, racialized claims over the place of Aboriginal people in Australian national culture.<sup>23</sup>

### **From media representations to audience receptions**

This example demonstrates how international research raises new and interesting questions for future academic study and intellectual engagement. More knowledge is needed, for instance, on how football media discourses surrounding race/ethnicity and gender intersect with those of nation. Such research should not only focus on football media representations but also on the ways these representations are received and used by media *audiences*. Overall, the audience is still largely absent in sport media research, and in football-related research in particular. This is problematic because conclusions are often drawn about sport media impacts on the basis of textual analyses alone, with audiences rarely coming into analytical focus. As a result, what we know about how sport media discourses surrounding race/ethnicity, gender or nation are negotiated by their audiences remains rather speculative. This is especially surprising considering the widespread agreement among media and cultural studies scholars that sport media content only gains meaning in and through the way it is negotiated and used by active media users.<sup>24</sup>

There are a few notable exceptions, however. For instance, North American scholars Buffington and Fraley found that both Black and White media users drew on racial/ethnic stereotypes along the lines of the aforementioned 'Black Brawn – White Brain' distinction when giving meaning to diverse athletes.<sup>25</sup> McCarthy et al. also identified the use of colonially informed stereotypes by White British football media audiences, who emphasized the natural physical strength of Black players.<sup>26</sup> The Black audience members, on the other hand, resisted and challenged this discourse and assessed it as stereotypical. In the Netherlands, Hermes and Van Sterkenburg investigated the intersections between race and nation among sport media audiences and found that some young Dutch males tended to use exclusionary discourses when discussing non-White players who played for the Dutch national football team.<sup>27</sup> More specifically, these viewers argued that their support for the Dutch national team would decrease if the team would include too many non-White players (in their perception).<sup>28</sup> The key assumption underlying such reasoning seems to be that the Dutch national team ought to be primarily a White team. This echoes the main findings of

Ilan Tamir and Alina Bernstein's study presented in this special issue, which examines audience reactions towards Arab-Israeli players in the Israeli national football team.

Similar to data on race/ethnicity and nation, research data on audience discourses surrounding gender are also scarce. In professional football, women of diverse ethnic backgrounds are increasingly visible as players, supporters and audiences. However, the role that the media play in this process, as a possible source of pleasure and identification for female (or male) audiences, is still under-researched. The few audience studies that examine the role of gender generally show that the social groups of men and women engage with mediated football in different ways. Men discuss players' achievements and abilities in a serious way using such 'football talk' to perform hegemonic masculinity and define football as a male preserve.<sup>29</sup> Women, on the other hand, more often use alternative readings seeing the mediated football match as a social event and a legitimate opportunity to watch male bodies and/or make fun of (male) players.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, other studies suggest that both male and female media audience members tend to confirm and reinforce hegemonic gender discourses, perceiving men's bodies as naturally stronger than women's bodies and perceiving some – traditionally masculine – sports such as football as too rough and tough for women.<sup>31</sup>

### **Aims of the special issue**

The above shows that men's and women's football can be considered a key media genre where meanings about cultural, gender and national difference are constructed, naturalized and presented to sizeable audiences. Herein lies yet further evidence of the important role that mediated sport has to an understanding of the nature of social and cultural change (and reproduction).<sup>32</sup> Any comprehensive discussion of the framing of race/ethnicity, gender and nation must therefore include the role of media sport and of mediated football in particular. Yet, despite the social power of the football media to offer discourses surrounding race/ethnicity, gender and nation, its role in (re)constructing ideas about such social dimensions usually receives relatively little critical reflection from the general audience, media professionals and even many academics in the field of football studies.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, football in the media is often seen as a popular but innocent pastime with no further social implications or consequences (just as football journalism tends to be viewed as frivolous and peripheral activity rather than serious journalism<sup>34</sup>).

In this special issue, we challenge this neglect by acknowledging football as one of the most mediated cultural practices in modern Western societies that provide players, officials and spectators with implicit and often hidden discourses about race/ethnicity, national identity and gender. The purpose of this special issue is to critically examine the role of mediated football as a catalyst for wider discourses surrounding race, ethnicity, gender and nation. Such insights are urgently needed given the function that mediated football has as an important frame of reference – given its enormous popularity – for many people worldwide.

Earlier in this article we identified the need for academic researchers to investigate not only football media representations of (the intersections between) race/ethnicity, gender and nation, but also how these representations are received and used by media audiences. Responding to this need, this special issue devotes attention to both football media content and football media audiences, while also – though to a lesser extent – illuminating production processes within the football media.<sup>35</sup> These issues are explored across all media genres (print media, television, online, social media, film, etc.) in a multidisciplinary and cross-cultural manner, with contributions from diverse disciplines and countries. This approach makes this volume rather unique and serves to progress and stimulate contemporary academic and policy debates on the role of mediated football in shaping social relations at the local, national and global levels.

## **Overview**

The contributions to this special issue have been grouped into two broad sections: representations and audience receptions. Each section draws upon historical and present-day events and developments within and across different countries including, but not limited to, the UEFA Champions League, 2010 and 2014 FIFA World Cups, 2011 Women's World Cup, domestic men's and women's football competitions, football-related films, and online social media activity such as tweets and 'talkbacks'.

We begin the issue with an article by Jorge Knijnik and Victor Andrade de Melo, which analyzes two Brazilian football movies – *Asa Branca: A Brazilian Dream* (1981) and *New Wave* (1983) – that profoundly challenged the country's gender order in the early 1980s. The authors show that by introducing emergent and alternative masculinities and sexualities into the male-dominated environment, the movies contested, and contributed to the transformation of, the traditional gender order both on the football field and in Brazilian

society more broadly. As such, these movies are representative of, and help us understand, the fundamental cultural transitions that Brazil underwent during that period.

The next two articles maintain an analytical focus on gender relations but examine these through the lens of mediated women's football. Rens Peeters and Agnes Elling set out to identify how newspaper and television coverage of the women's game in the Netherlands has evolved over the past two decades. The authors' quantitative analysis reveals a considerable increase in the amount of media coverage dedicated to Dutch women's football. However, this does not necessarily mean that the ways in which women's football is represented have also changed. Indeed, Peeters and Elling point out that change has been slow; while mainstream sports media in the Netherlands seem to increasingly recognize women's football as newsworthy, it is still framed in relation to men's professional football, which continues to hold the norm. In a similar vein, Gertrud Pfister examines how women's football and female football players are framed in the German tabloid press through an analysis of the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup hosted by Germany. While the World Cup put women's football on Germany's media and public agenda, Pfister also shows the persisting salience of framing processes of feminization, beautification and sexualization that hinder the emancipation of women's football. She also reflects on the thorny question of how women footballers 'do' gender within a commercial, male-dominated football environment, and, more specifically, how they cope with the demand to strive for sporting success and live up to expectations related to an attractive and feminine appearance at the same time.

Following on from the examination of football media representations of gender, the next two contributions shift the attention to discourses of nation and race/ethnicity. Simon Ličen's article on the play-by-play broadcasting of Slovenia's domestic football league provides a rare insight into the complex negotiation of nation and national identity in this new democracy. Ličen shows that Slovenian public broadcasters place considerable emphasis on nationality to discursively position Slovenia as an independent country that is part of the European Union. At the same time, broadcasters also romantically recall a shared football history with other countries that made up the former Yugoslavia, which, Ličen reminds us, is a marked departure from past denial of pre-1991 relatedness. Nationality is also a defining feature of media representations of non-Slovenian players in the Slovenian football league, and it is often used as a neutral substitute to acknowledgement of race. Ličen speculates that this may be a strategy to 'bring attention to the (Black) elephant in the room' without risking appearing racist.

While similarly exploring nationalistic discourses in the football media, the article by Ryan Cox, Laura Hills and Eileen Kennedy addresses this theme within the multinational context of the UEFA Champions League. They ask whether the multinational composition of clubs participating in the Champions League creates a movement away from the football media's well-documented nationalistic discourses to pave the way for the construction and representation of emergent and more diverse supranational or European identities. The article demonstrates the continuing salience of nationalistic discourses and othering within the reporting of this European football competition, and contends that a more ethical approach to media coverage of supranational football competitions is required in order to foster more creative and inclusive football identities.

The second part of the special issue shifts the attention to the way football media content such as that discussed above is actively received and used by audiences. A strong mandate for this approach is provided by, for example, Cox et al. who, drawing on Roland Barthes, identify the need to explore how fans and other audience members make sense of and respond to the complex and contradictory relationship between football, media and identity. David Rowe's contribution takes up this challenge by exploring the negotiation of practices and meanings surrounding mediated football and other sports in a social environment (Greater Western Sydney, Australia) characterized by high levels of ethno-cultural diversity and mobility. Rowe presents and reflects on fans' accounts of the relationships between mediated sports fandom, subjectivity and national identification. He concludes that in the context of mobility-inspired socio-cultural change, primary sporting support for the (adopted) nation is a politically prescribed test of national loyalty. It is particularly those who are considered cultural 'Others' who are subject to this loyalty test and who must carefully negotiate their national sporting identifications.

Toni Bruce and Arron Stewart follow this lead by examining the dynamic interaction between media discourses and audience responses as a way to better understand the contested nature of nation and masculinity. They do so by analyzing the intersecting news media discourses that nationalized New Zealand's 2010 FIFA World Cup team as well as the ways in which those posting online comments in news and social media during the 2010 World Cup campaign interpreted these discourses. The authors conclude that the public engaged in both assent and dissent with specific kinds of media truth claims. While news media discourses that nationalized the team were broadly accepted by online posters, who appeared to embrace the team as a national representative, the broader articulation of football with effeminacy was left largely undisturbed in public responses. In a similar vein, the article by

Andrew Billings, Lauren Burch and Matthew Zimmerman provides new insights into how football media content is received and used by audiences. Drawing on an analysis of more than 7,000 tweets during the United States national team's 2014 FIFA World Cup campaign, the authors show how Americans commented differently on their home nation team than on the opposing national teams. Significant differences between the types of attributions for success and failure and characterizations of physicality and personality were identified.

Despite the vastly different socio-political context, Ilan Tamir and Alina Bernstein's analysis of online comments posted by Jewish-Israeli readers on the topic of Israeli Arabs in the Israeli national football team reveals comparable, yet arguably more profound, processes of social differentiation and othering along axes of nation and ethnicity. The authors position football as a unique lens through which to understand the intricate relationship between the Jewish and Arab-Israeli populations in Israel. They conclude that despite some displays of empathy and support, there is a clear pattern of minimizing and underplaying the contributions and achievements of Arab-Israeli footballers as well as widespread concern among Jewish-Israeli readers over the growing number of Arab-Israeli players in the Israeli national team.

The final article similarly positions mediated football as a cultural context or space through which to read and interpret wider discourses and identities around race/ethnicity, gender and nation. Unlike the other contributors, however, Kevin Hylton and Stefan Lawrence do so by exploring media representations and audience receptions of white male identities in relation to one of the world's most revered football celebrities – Cristiano Ronaldo. Using images of Ronaldo, which were discussed with self-identified physically active white British men, the authors demonstrate how interpretations of Ronaldo's whiteness are inextricably linked to discourses of race, masculinity and football. Like the other contributions to this special issue, the article provides a powerful illustration of the complex and varying ways in which media representations and audience interpretations of race/ethnicity, gender and nation are constructed and negotiated.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce, 'Reflections on Communication and Sport: On Women and Femininities'; Boyle and Haynes, *Power Play*; Carrington, 'Fear of a Black Athlete'; Hutchins and Rowe, *Sport Beyond Television*; Hutchins and Rowe, *Digital Media Sport*; Krøvel and Roksvold, *We Love to Hate Each Other*.

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- <sup>2</sup> Azzarito and Harrison, 'White Men Can't Jump'.
- <sup>3</sup> Knoppers and Elling, 'We Do Not Engage in Promotional Journalism'; Van Sterkenburg, *Race, Ethnicity and the Sport Media*.
- <sup>4</sup> Van Zoonen, 'A Professional, Unreliable, Heroic Marionette (M/F)'; Knoppers and Elling, 'We Do Not Engage in Promotional Journalism'.
- <sup>5</sup> Bruce, 'Reflections on Communication and Sport: On Women and Femininities'.
- <sup>6</sup> De Leeuw, 'Television Fiction and Cultural Diversity'.
- <sup>7</sup> De Bruin, 'Multicultureel drama'; De Leeuw, 'Television Fiction and Cultural Diversity'.
- <sup>8</sup> Lines, 'Media Sport Audiences'; Verweel, *Respect in and door sport*.
- <sup>9</sup> Carrington, 'Fear of a Black Athlete'; Hylton, *'Race' and Sport*; Rada and Wulfemeyer, 'Color Coded'.
- <sup>10</sup> Coakley et al., *Sports in Society*; Coram, 'Race Formations (Evolutionary Hegemony) and the "Aping" of the Australian Indigenous Athlete'; Juffer, 'Who's the Man?'; Malcolm et al., 'Woolmergate'; Sabo et al., 'Televising International Sport'.
- <sup>11</sup> For example: Knoppers and Elling, *Gender, etniciteit en de sportmedia*; McCarthy et al., 'Constructing Images and Interpreting Realities'.
- <sup>12</sup> Sabo and Jansen, 'Prometheus Unbound'.
- <sup>13</sup> Carrington, 'Fear of a Black Athlete'.
- <sup>14</sup> Rada and Wulfemeyer, 'Color Coded'; Van Sterkenburg, *Race, Ethnicity and the Sport Media*.
- <sup>15</sup> Crossman et al., 'The Times they are A-changin'', 28.
- <sup>16</sup> Pfister, 'Women in Sport'; Peeters, 'Ze heeft nu eenmaal het mooiste gezichtje'; Van Sterkenburg and Knoppers, 'Dominant Discourses about Race/Ethnicity and Gender in Sport Practice and Performance'.
- <sup>17</sup> Caudwell, 'Sporting Gender'.
- <sup>18</sup> Elling and Luijt, 'Different Shades of Orange?'; Van Zoonen, 'A Professional, Unreliable, Heroic Marionette (M/F)'.
- <sup>19</sup> Billings, 'Depicting the Quarterback in Black and White'; Byrd and Utsler, 'Is Stereotypical Coverage of African-American Athletes as "Dead as Disco"?'; Peeters, 'Ze heeft nu eenmaal het mooiste gezichtje'; Sabo et al., 'Televising International Sport'.
- <sup>20</sup> Cho, 'Unfolding nationalism in South Korean media representations of the 1968, 1984 and 2000 Olympics'; Wensing and Bruce, 'Bending the Rules'.
- <sup>21</sup> Wensing and Bruce, 'Bending the Rules'.

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<sup>22</sup> Wensing and Bruce, 'Bending the Rules'.

<sup>23</sup> Bruce and Wensing, 'She's Not One of Us'. It should also be noted that throughout Australian sporting history, the sport participation of Indigenous women has generally received little media attention.

<sup>24</sup> Buffington and Fraley, 'Skill in Black and White'; Hall, *Representation*; Hermes, 'Burnt Orange'.

<sup>25</sup> Buffington and Fraley, 'Skill in Black and White'.

<sup>26</sup> McCarthy et al., 'Constructing Images and Interpreting Realities'.

<sup>27</sup> Hermes, 'Burnt Orange'; Van Sterkenburg, 'National Bonding and Meanings Given to Race and Ethnicity'.

<sup>28</sup> Van Sterkenburg, 'Come on Orange!'

<sup>29</sup> Hermes, 'Burnt Orange'

<sup>30</sup> Duncan and Brummett, 'Liberal and Radical Sources of Female Empowerment in Sport Media'; Hermes, 'Burnt Orange'.

<sup>31</sup> Knoppers and Elling, *Gender, etniciteit en de sportmedia*; Lines, 'Media Sport Audiences'.

<sup>32</sup> Woodward, *Planet Sport*.

<sup>33</sup> Van Sterkenburg, *Race, Ethnicity and the Sport Media*.

<sup>34</sup> Rowe, 'Sport Journalism'; Zion, Spaaij and Nicholson, 'Sport Media and Journalism'.

<sup>35</sup> It should be noted here that the development of new media technologies has created the opportunity for media users/audiences to increasingly produce their own media content thus blurring the traditional distinction between media users and producers. Some of the articles in the current issue are illustrative of this trend as they focus on media audiences producing their own media content such as online comments or 'talkbacks' and Twitter messages. The vast majority of media consumption including football media consumption can, however, still be characterized as 'the more mundane, internalized, even passive articulation with the media'. Bird, 'Are We All Producers Now?', 504.

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