

Gender Bias in Sports Reporting: Female Athletes in the British Press

Les préjugés sexistes dans les reportages sportifs: Les athlètes féminines dans la presse britannique

Prejudecăți de sex în reportajele sportive: Atletele feminine în presa britanică

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Abstract

This paper addresses the question of the representation of female athleticism in the British press. By means of a corpus-assisted analysis of sports reporting of two female athletes, the Russian tennis champion Maria Sharapova and the Italian swimming champion Federica Pellegrini, it offers a linguistic description of the stereotyped discourse reserved for women in sports settings. The study reveals the presence in the corpus of a discursive frame which tends to downplay the athletic ability and success of female athletes. This frame emerges from two basic discourse strategies, a thematic strategy, which eroticizes the body of the female athlete and a metaphorical strategy, which trivializes it. The study suggests that this type of representation is motivated by sexist stereotyping related to the ideological interests of male hegemony. [1].

Résumé

Dans cette étude, on pose la question de la représentation du sport féminin dans la presse britannique. Avec l'aide d'un corpus spécifique composé d'articles de la presse sportive concernant deux fameuses athlètes: la championne de tennis russe, Maria Sharapova et la championne de natation italienne, Federica Pellegrini, cette étude veut montrer comment la presse britannique décrit souvent le sport féminin. Le but de cette analyse est d'identifier dans le journalisme réservé aux femmes du monde du sport, la présence d'un discours discriminatoire, fondé sur des stéréotypes sexistes, qui dévalorise les femmes. Les résultats ont indiqué un cadre discursif caractérisé par la tendance à minimiser la capacité athlétique et le succès sportif des femmes. Ce cadre discursif est l'effet de deux stratégies principales : une stratégie thématique qui érotise le corps de l'athlète féminine et une stratégie métaphorique qui la banalise. Dans la conclusion on suggère que ce type de représentation montre la présence significative des stéréotypes sexistes dans le discours du journalisme sportif, et par voie de conséquence la persistance de l'idéologie patriarcale.

Rezumat

În acest studiu punem în discuție problema reprezentării atletismului feminin în presa britanică. Pe baza unui corpus specific, compus din articole sportive privind două atlete renumite, campioana rusă de tenis Maria Sharapova și campioana italiană de natație Federica Pellegrini, acest studiu caută să arate modul în care presa britanică descrie adesea atletismul feminin. Scopul acestei analize este cel de a proba, în jurnalismul referitor la femeile din lumea sportivă, prezența unui discurs discriminator, fondat pe stereotipii cu trimitere la sex, devalorizant pentru feminitate.

Rezultatele au identificat un cadru discursiv caracterizat de tendința de minimizare a capacității atletice și a succesului sportiv al femeilor. Acest cadru discursiv este efectul a două strategii principale: o strategie tematică ce face referire erotic cu privire la corpul atletelor feminine, și o strategie metaforică ce marchează feminitatea prin apel la banalizare. În concluzie, vom sugera că acest tip de reprezentare dovedește prezența semnificativă, în discursul jurnalistic sportiv, a unor stereotipii cu referire la sex, cu consecințe ce evidențiază persistența unei ideologii patriarhale.

Keywords: *bias, gender, patriarchy, athleticism, sports journalism, conceptual metaphor analysis, discourse analysis.*

Mots clés: *discrimination, sexisme, patriarcat, athlétisme, journalisme sportif, métaphore conceptuelle, analyse du discours.*

Cuvinte cheie: *discriminare, sexism, patriarhat, jurnalism sportiv, metaforă conceptuală, analiza discursului.*

1.0. Introduction

Scientific scholarship in diverse disciplines (sociology of sport, gender studies, discourse analysis etc) has often focused on the underrepresentation of women in media discourse. Van Dijk (1995) likens the representation given to women and women's issues in the press to that reserved for minorities and immigrants. Noting that "virtually all major news topics are as male-oriented as the social and political domains they define", he comments:

Feminist scholarship has extensively shown the prevalence of male chauvinism in the mass media, even today, despite the modest gains in the employment of female journalists and program makers in the media and the slow acceptance of some major demands of the women's movement. In spite of these socioeconomic advances and obvious ideological changes, most of what has been said for minorities also holds, although somewhat less extremely, for the position of women in the media and in the news (van Dijk 1995:16).

In the domain of sports, it has often been noted that female athletes achieve press visibility primarily when they are targeted as sexual objects. The rationale behind the present study is that despite advances in the sexual emancipation movement, gender-linked stereotypes condition the assignment of professional value to women in athletic settings. This socially-constructed value is that women must be above all young, attractive and available, and in most cases, objects for the pleasure of men. Nowhere is this more evident than in the attention that is paid in the contemporary press to the physical appearance of female athletes. In a field like sports, where competence, expertise and competitive success should take center stage in the description of events and participants, we find that a good deal of press coverage of female athleticism is devoted to anything but that; on the contrary, female beauty and sexual allure are distinctly foregrounded.

This study investigates the issue of gender discrimination in the contemporary press through a linguistic lens, using as an example the sports coverage given to two sportswomen, the tennis athlete, Maria Sharapova and the swimming athlete, Federica Pellegrini. Through a linguistic analysis of the discourse regarding these two athletes in mainstream newspapers of Britain, it reveals the persistent tendency in media language to trivialize the female body by representing sportswomen through traditional stereotypes of femininity and sensuality. In accordance with the claims made by Harris and Clayton (2002), it argues that discriminatory, stereotyped descriptions of female athletes are motivated by an ideological stance aiming to confine women to behavior consonant with, and assertive of, hegemonic masculinity.

2.0 Method

2.1. Corpus and data analysis

A corpus consisting of two sub-corpora (the first referring to the tennis athlete Maria Sharapova and the second to swimming athlete Federica Pellegrini) was created consisting of articles taken from the British newspapers *The Times* and *The Guardian* ranging from 2003 until 2011. Each subcorpus consisted of 20 articles. On the basis of previous research on gender stereotyping in the media and especially in sports reporting of female athleticism, the corpora were searched for figurative expressions hypothesized to encode sexist discourse strategies. The utterances were extracted from the corpus both manually and with the aid of electronic content queries, yielding a dataset of figurative expressions for each athlete. The datasets were then analyzed according to two taxonomies: functional/discursive strategies based on the thematic categories proposed by Harris & Clayton (1992) and a conceptual metaphor taxonomy resulting from a study by Luchjenbroers (1997). The aim was to identify the major thematic and metaphorical patterns often guiding the stereotyped description of female athleticism. The study therefore assumed a primarily qualitative perspective in an attempt to uncover the presence of gender bias in sports reporting.

2.2. Analytic categories

The study observed both the functional/discursive strategies and the metaphoric conceptualization present in the two datasets, the first referring to Maria Sharapova and the other to Federica Pellegrini. For this purpose, we adopted

- the taxonomy of **thematic strategies**, identified by Harris and Clayton (2002) for the mis-/under-representation of female athletes in the British tabloid press;
- the taxonomy of **conceptual metaphors**, identified by Luchjenbroers (1997) for gender-differentiated descriptions in the Hong Kong English language press.

The two data sets were then searched for evidence of categories taken from those taxonomies, as explained below.

2.2.1. The thematic taxonomy

The taxonomy suggested by Harris and Clayton (2002: 408-410) consisted of eight main discursive themes: the 'Invisibility' of Female Athletes, Emphasizing Traditional Male Traits, Communicating Pain, Anguish and Sacrifice in Sport, Creating Heroes and National Identities, Coverage of Women in 'Appropriate' Sporting Roles, Non-Task Relevant Commentary, Trivialization of Female Accomplishments in Sport, Eroticizing of the Female Body. These themes were found to work conjointly in much press reporting to represent female athletes in their traditional feminine roles and to downplay their athletic accomplishments. For the purposes of this study, we shall briefly explain only the last category, *Eroticizing of the Female Body*, since it is the one which emerged most saliently in both our datasets. The reader is referred to Harris and Clayton (2002) for a detailed explanation of the other categories.

2.2.1.1. Eroticizing of the Female Body

The sports media often convey the idea that female attractiveness and sexual desirability are more important than athletic ability. Commentaries highlight the female athletes' sexual attributes, explicitly mentioning body shape and parts (legs, breasts, mouth), often with evocations of bedroom activities. They also devote much attention to the athletes' clothes, both on-court, where their sports outfits are often described in terms of sexy lingerie, and off-court, where their style is described in beauty pageant, pin-up and fashion designer language. Harris and Clayton (2002) note that sports media use both non-athletic and athletic women for this eroticizing effect.

The tabloid press for example inserts in their sports articles pictures of female fans, the non-athletes, in scant clothing and pin-up poses¹. In the same vein, the female athletes are depicted in non-athletic moments, highlighting passivity and suggesting sexual desirability and seduction. Harris and Clayton (2002: 408) note that:

Such emphasis of sexuality, through eroticism, implies a masculine ideal of the role of women in sport, and simultaneously trivializes the athletic capabilities of the female body.

Furthermore, a calculation of the amount of press coverage given to sportswomen reveals that those who are not targeted as objects of sexual desire are significantly underrepresented and very often misrepresented. Female athletes who do not respect the male canon of femininity and sexuality are covertly ridiculed as mannish, labeled as gay, represented as social misfits, or in the words of Harris and Clayton (2002: 409) considered “heterosexual failures”.

2.2.2.. The metaphoric taxonomy

Luchjenbroers (1997) studied the language used to describe men and women in the Hong Kong English language press. She found essentially that men were conceptualized as “thinkers” and “pro-active doers”, whereas women were consistently represented as under-developed and immature, emotional and sensitive, silly and incompetent, child-like and in need of protection. The Conceptual Metaphors [2] which emerged from her study were WOMEN ARE ANIMALS (e.g. *She whines*), WOMEN ARE EMBRYOS (e.g. *She is still evolving*), WOMEN ARE CHILDREN (not strong: [e.g. *She feels disarmed*], or not bright [e.g.: *She is counting out loud on her fingers*], or not rational [eg. *She lives very much with her senses*]). Luchjenbroers (1997:35) summarizes her findings as follows:

In general these examples illustrate a cultural image of men as pro-active, intelligent, goal-directed and sometimes aggressive, whereas the few references to women appear far less deterministic over the roles they fulfill.

Moreover, in expressions related to career success, Luchjenbroers (1997) found that references to men establish the male as already having a successful career, while references to women emphasize the struggle to achieve a career, foregrounding the female status as an incomplete adult. By unveiling the conceptual metaphors motivating descriptions of men and women in the Hong Kong English language press, Luchjenbroers (1997) confirms the persistence of the traditional male/female binary in contemporary cognitive representation, where, as summarized by Goddard and Patterson (2000:32), men are defined as “logical, rational, aggressive, exploitative, strategic, independent and competitive” and women are described as “intuitive, emotional, submissive, empathetic, spontaneous, nurturing and co-operative”.

3.0. Results

3.1. Dataset 1: the tennis athlete Maria Sharapova

3.1.1. Table 1 gives examples of some expressions from *The Times* which exemplify the thematic categories identified in Harris and Clayton (2002):

| Dataset 1 - Maria Sharapova: Examples of Thematic Strategies | |
|---|---|
| The Invisibiliy of the female athlete (the woman as visible; the athlete as invisible) | <i>-the sexiest woman in the world</i> |
| Emphasizing Traditional Male Traits | <i>-“But I should be OK - I sound like a wimp saying this to you guys”... -There has always been a degree of vulnerability to her.</i> |
| Communicating Pain, Anguish and Sacrifice in Sport | <i>-“After having a tough last six months with my shoulder injury, I’m not expecting a lot from myself”.</i> |
| Creating Heroes and National Identities | <i>- ...she rents a couple of streets from the All England Club...</i> |
| Coverage of Women in ‘Appropriate’ Sporting Roles | <i>-blew kisses to the court -blows victorious kisses to the four sides of the stadium</i> |
| Non-Task Relevant Commentary | <i>- photogenic beauty - sexy Maria - four leggy Maria - copulatory shrieks - blue movie grunting</i> |
| Trivialization of Female Accomplishments in Sport | <i>-Sharapova said she rushed through her warm-up and cut it a little short because she "couldn't wait" to get into the dress.</i> |
| Eroticizing of the Female Body | <i>-She arrived on Centre Court yesterday in a curious coat and stripped this off to show a dress artfully contrived to make the most of her: bare at the shoulders, translucent panels, a little skirt complete with VPL, swirly enough to give every photographer a chance for the Marilyn-over-the-grating shot.</i> |

Table 1: **Examples of Thematic Strategies, Dataset 1: Maria Sharapova**

3.1.2. In the last example of Table 1, the press comment highlights style and fashion, emphasizing how the athlete is dressed in order to evoke images of her *undressed (stripped this off, bare, translucent)* and then to make an explicit association with the famous photo of eternal sex-symbol Marilyn Monroe (*swirly enough to give every photographer a chance for the Marilyn-over-the-grating shot*). It is interesting to note that the image of the famous photo (Marilyn Monroe in a white halter dress with her skirt revealingly blown upward by the wind from the underground grating) is expressed through a creative compound used as a modifier, which produces the noun phrase: “*a Marilyn-over-the-grating shot*”. The multiple iconic and verbal connotations of the modifier are thereby transformed into a single lexical item, giving the expression a sense of fixity, conventionality and therefore social acceptance.

3.1.3. It is to be noted, moreover, that the discourse operations are often multicategorical as is evident in the following comment which combines the strategies, labeled by Harris and Clayton (2002): eroticizing the female body, non-task relevant commentary, emphasizing male traits, trivializing female accomplishments, emphasizing female appropriate roles, creating national identity.

Maria Sharapova puts the kettle on. OK, it is an everyday occurrence in most households across the land, but we are days from Wimbledon, she is in the sitting room of the home she rents a couple of streets from the All England Club and, unwinding, utterly relaxed. And, catching you off guard, she asks whether you take sugar.

Obviously, this press comment is an evocation of seduction (*sitting room, unwinding, utterly relaxed, catching you off guard, take sugar*), introduced by the polysemy of the idiomatic expression “*to put the kettle on*”, which has both a literal interpretation and a figurative one: sexual excitation.

3.1.4. In Table 2, we would now like to give examples from the dataset of the taxonomy of Conceptual Metaphors adapted from Luchjenbroers (1997: 38-40).

| Dataset 1- Maria Sharapova: Examples of Conceptual Metaphors | |
|---|--|
| Conceptual Metaphor | Linguistic realizations |
| Women as animals | <i>-the bloodcurdling howls</i> |
| Women as embryos (undeveloped or immature) | <i>-Women, we are regularly told, are unpredictable.</i> |
| Women as children (at play) | <i>-Cuddling the 2006 US Open trophy with the excitement of a child reunited with her favourite doll, Maria Saratoga embodied delight, triumph and pride.</i> |
| Women as children (not strong) | <i>-For all her worldliness, the Russian still sounded like a gawky teenager when she gushed: “It’s really weird - I’ve never gotten blisters before on my feet, so I was kind of a little shocked and forgot what I was doing out there”.</i> |
| Women as children (not bright) | <i>-refreshing candour</i> |
| Women as children (not rational; emotional, sensitive) | <i>-Sharapova has gone on from the “little girl” to become a very big girl.</i> |

Table 2: **Examples of Conceptual Metaphors, Dataset 1. Maria Sharapova**

3.1.5. Again, a single expression can encode multiple metaphorical conceptualizations and thematic strategies as in the following example:

Sharapova is a joy to watch when she is cooking up a storm and she was forced to do exactly that yesterday. It's one of the great sporting experiences: Sharapova in full cry [4].

Obviously in this expression, the senses include the various stereotypical roles: object of desire, non-agency, homemaker, etc. Furthermore, the expression “*in full cry*” seems to evoke both child and sexual behaviour.

3.2. Dataset 2: the swimming athlete Federica Pellegrini

3.2.1. Table 3 reports examples of the application of the thematic taxonomy to the dataset regarding Federica Pellegrini

| Dataset 2-Federica Pellegrini: Examples of Thematic Strategies | |
|---|---|
| The Invisibiliy of the female athlete (the woman as visible; the athlete as invisible) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -that wonderful woman Pellegrini -Italy's Federica Pellegrini has gone from diva to national darling -Pellegrini has been a star |
| Emphasizing Traditional Male Traits | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Pellegrini swam a shocking tactical race -Federica Pellegrini was the undoubted galactica -She's an unbelievable athlete -But determination made her dig deeper. |
| Communicating Pain, Anguish and Sacrifice in Sport | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -has been prone to pulling up during races after suffering panic attacks -In Beijing, she lost badly, shockingly -Federica Pellegrini was under her own world record pace -but she was also suffering - after suffering panic attacks -the 400, seemed to inspire un her a particular fear |
| Creating Heroes and National Identities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -for local heroine Federica Pellegrini -ahead of Italy but was chased down by Federica Pellegrini, 200m world record holder and world champion, as the Roman crowd roared. -When Pellegrini starts, Italy seems to stop |
| Coverage of Women in 'Appropriate' Sporting Roles | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Pellegrini and Marin are often pictured -- kissing pool-side -Italian swimmer Luca Marin, who is now Pellegrini's partner -Lovely pictures of Federica Pellegrini |

| | |
|--|---|
| | <p><i>celebrating</i></p> <p><i>-Italian swimmer Luca Marin, who is now Pellegrini's partner</i></p> |
| Non-Task Relevant Commentary | <p><i>-The soap opera took yet another turn when Federica Pellegrini [...] began a relationship with Marin</i></p> <p><i>-a diva who lives her life on the front pages of newspapers and glossy magazines</i></p> <p><i>-she lives her life on the front pages, is blessed with movie-star looks</i></p> <p><i>-Ended up with the man and the world record</i></p> |
| Trivialization of Female Accomplishments in Sport | <p><i>-Not bad for a girl</i></p> <p><i>-Pellegrini attacked the 200 metres freestyle final as though she were the advertising face of Vesuvius</i></p> |
| Eroticizing of the Female Body | <p><i>-she posed nude, spray-painted gold, for Vanity Fair last year</i></p> <p><i>-allegations she might have a part in subsequently leaking naked photos of her jilted French foe-pulling</i></p> <p><i>- the ultimate "psych job" by bragging about the great sex with Manaud's ex</i></p> <p><i>-Pellegrini and Marin are often pictured kissing pool-side</i></p> <p><i>-Pellegrini has been at the centre of a pool-side triangle</i></p> |

Table 3: **Examples of Thematic Strategies, Dataset 1: Federica Pellegrini**

3.2.2.. Similar to what appeared in the Maria Sharapova dataset, the press insistently evokes images of a naked Federica Pellegrini (*she posed nude, spray-painted gold, for Vanity Fair last year, has modelled nude for Vanity Fair*). However, in the case of Federica Pellegrini, the press resorts to a eroticizing strategy by pouncing on her personal, intimate relationships and depicting her as sexually active (*pulling the ultimate "psych job" by bragging about the great sex with Manaud's ex, Pellegrini and Marin are often pictured kissing pool-side, Italian swimmer Luca Marin, who is now Pellegrini's partner, Pellegrini has been at the centre of a pool-side triangle*)

3.2.3. In this dataset as well, the discourse operations are often multicategorical. An example is the segment which follows taken from an article entitled *Diva Federica Pellegrini emerges as Italy's national darling*.

She is the biggest star at these championships, a diva who lives her life on the front pages of newspapers and glossy magazines, which revel in revealing the

intimate details of her life. Pellegrini has been at the centre of a pool-side love triangle and, of late, has been prone to pulling up during races after suffering panic attacks. There is more than a little soap-opera about the way she lives [5]

It can easily be seen how this textual segment encodes various strategies: eroticizing the female body (*at the centre of a pool-side love triangle*), non-task relevant commentary (*on the front pages of newspapers and glossy magazines*), trivializing female accomplishment (*a diva*), creating national identity (*Italy's national darling*), communicating pain, anguish and sacrifice in sport (*suffering panic attacks*).

3.2.3. Table 3 which follows reports the application of the Conceptual Metaphor taxonomy to the dataset regarding Federica Pellegrini:

| Dataset 2-Federica Pellegrini: Examples of Conceptual Metaphors | |
|--|--|
| Conceptual Metaphor | Linguistic realizations |
| Women as animals | - <i>the Lioness of Verona, Federica Pellegrini</i> - <i>a fascination of the king of the jungle</i> - <i>after her ferocious progress</i> |
| Women as embryos (undeveloped or immature) | - <i>Italian teenager Federica Pellegrini</i> - <i>she has only just turned 21</i> - <i>the Italian prodigy</i> - <i>the 15 year old Italian</i> |
| Women as children (at play) | - <i>Pellegrini's racy out of the pool's antics.</i> - <i>Just wonderful</i> - <i>Pellegrini played into the hands of the british pair</i> - <i>But determination made her dig deeper</i> |
| Women as children (not strong) | <i>She said the event made her feel caught in two minds unable to trust her own pace</i> - <i>not bad for a girl</i> |
| Women as children (not bright) | - <i>of swimmer babe Federica Pellegrini</i> - <i>showed that she had learned her lesson</i> - <i>one that told a tale of lessons learnt</i> - <i>she made a big mistake</i> - <i>It was a massive mistake</i> |
| Women as children (not rational; emotional, sensitive) | - <i>Italy's national darling</i> - <i>Since then, Pellegrini has been seeing a sports psychologist</i> - <i>But pride kept Pellegrini a fingernail ahead</i> |

Table 4: Examples of Conceptual Metaphors, Dataset 2: Federica Pellegrini

Thus, the tennis athlete has often been presented as a child (*teenager, child prodigy*) who must still strive to achieve adult status (*lessons learnt*), in need of guidance (*has been seeing a sports psychologist*).

3.2.4. Again, a single expression can encode multiple metaphorical conceptualizations and thematic strategies as the use of the word "babe" in *swimmer babe*, which, by encoding both

infantile and sexually-desirable senses, evokes the metaphoric conceptualization of WOMEN ARE CHILDREN and the thematic strategy “Eroticizing the female body”.

4.0. Conclusion

In summary the study both confirms and extends the insightful study by Harris and Clayton (2002) on the representation of female athletes in the tabloid press. By searching for the same textual patterns in the British quality press (*The Times* and *The Guardian*) of two distinct sports domains, tennis and swimming, it confirms the suggestion that the eroticism of the female athlete is a constant rather than an occasional or tabloid-specific feature in print media sports reporting. This analysis added to the thematic taxonomy, identified by Harris and Clayton (2002), the metaphorical taxonomy present in Luchjenbroers (1997). The results indicated that along with the sexually-toned stereotype, women are also often represented in sports reporting as “cute little girls”, implying their immaturity and therefore lack of adult competence, including athletic skill. The presence of these consistent thematic and metaphorical strategies would lend support to the conviction that ideologically-motivated, gender-related stereotypes condition the sports world and permeate the linguistic description and general textual representation of female athleticism.

5.0. Discussion

Many scholars have emphasized the powerful role of the media in orienting ideological processes (cf. especially van Dijk 1998a, 1008b, 2002, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2009) and among these, several have emphasized its impact on the modelling of gender-specific positions (cf. Harris and Clayton 2002, Connell 1995, 2002, van Dijk 1995). As noted by Clayton and Humberstone (2006: 298) :

While numerous social agents may communicate ideological messages (e.g. the family, education, peers), the media benefits from being more concrete and absolute in the structuring of gender.

This study has demonstrated that stereotyped descriptions of gender roles and activities heavily influence media coverage of female athleticism even in the quality press. The study used a corpus created from the sports pages of two national mainstream papers of Great Britain (*The Times* and *The Guardian*) regarding the athletes Maria Sharapova and Federica Pellegrini.. Adopting thematic and metaphoric taxonomies identified in previous studies as a methodological and heuristic framework, it extracted a dataset of expressions which were not related to sports and which could therefore be said to characterize the non-athletic description of the sportswoman. A well-defined discursive frame emerged from the data. It would seem that female athletes are consistently portrayed in traditional feminine roles (passive and docile, sexually desirable and available, fragile and child-like), rather than in pro-active athletic positions, and are especially represented as top models, pin-ups, and sexual partners. This was specifically evident in this corpus for the thematic category *Eroticizing of the female body*, which resulted as particularly salient. In the datasets for both athletes, numerous non-task relevant comments emerged which de-emphasized their athletic ability and highlighted their physical attractiveness and sexual desirability. Moreover, in both datasets, the athletes were consistently represented as child-like, a textual representation that is most likely motivated by the conceptual metaphor WOMEN ARE CHILDREN. The effect of foregrounding the “non-adult status” of the female athlete is again the downplay of her physical strength, of her athletic competence, of her competitive life-style. Moreover, the “child-like” lexical patterns often simultaneously evoked additional erotic connotations, like “*copulatory shrieks*” for Maria Sharapova and “*racy out of the pool’s antics*” for Federica Pellegrini. In both expressions we have a combination of a term from the domain of

sexual pleasure and one from that of childhood play. In accordance with common articulated positions on this subject, it has also been suggested that the only plausible explanation for the representation of women as desirable sexual commodities and/or incomplete adults rather than proactive athletes is the affirmation of hegemonic masculinity, which is here intended as the Gramscian-based definition given by Connell (1995:77): “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women”.

These discriminatory discourse strategies trivialize the body of the female athlete. In addition to responding to male subjectivities, codifying masculine ideals and confirming men’s sense of their identity as men, they also encode an ideology of femininity, which in turn becomes hegemonic. As argued by Harris and Clayton (2002:398), “the construction of hegemonic femininity is integral to the gendered sports formula, which serves the interests of male dominance”. They explain that

The construction of masculinity is achieved, in part, through the construction of femininity, and many of the aforementioned media mechanisms originate from this very basic principle. Quite simply, by highlighting the sensuality of the female body, the tabloid media creates an awareness of femininity, which in turn is over-utilized in these newspapers to construct non-task-relevant commentary and trivialize female athletes (2002:410)

When female athletes are targeted for this type of sexist operation, athletic performances become “gendered performances”, in the sense suggested by Butler (1990, 1993, 2004), where social scripts imposing a prescriptive heterosexuality and fixed ideals of masculinity/femininity are reiterated. These ideals, thereby “homogenized” and “normalized”, to use the terms adopted by Bordo (1993), become dominant and reinforce the power of certain groups (especially heterosexual men), relegating the others (those whose bodies and behavior do not reflect the normative ideals) to a status of exclusion, which also often includes disapproval and even ridicule.

Moreover, although traditional gender roles have been forcefully questioned in contemporary society, and despite the fact that women have emerged successfully in public (including athletic) settings, it seems that many discursive spaces of the sports world are highly and obstinately conservative. In their study on the relation between myths of the female body, female athleticism and feminist liberation in the US context, for example, Roth and Basow (2004: 235) remark:

US society continues to accept myths regarding the supposed weakness of women's *bodies*. Women's displays of physical power are often prevented or undermined, typically in ways centering on the concept of femininity. Increasing numbers of *female* athletes have not led to a true physical feminist liberation, one which would increase women's confidence, power, respect, wealth, enjoyment of physicality, and escape from rape and the fear of rape.

Understanding and producing discourse requires the activation of mental frameworks which are socially-structured. Van Dijk (2004) emphasizes that journalists activate knowledge of the world which is filtered through ideology, defined as “shared social representations of social groups.”(Van Dijk 1998b). The mental model motivating discourse on the female body is historically of a “deficiency” nature. Traditionally, general social discourse concerning the female body encodes the lack of physical power and this discourse carries over to specialized and professional domains. Rather than foreground a powerful female body, the sports pages of the mainstream press display a mental model of female athletes that is child-like, sexually desirable

and powerless. The significance of the female athlete's body as locus for ideological struggle has been aptly formulated by Messner (1998:197):

The socially constructed meanings surrounding physiological differences between the sexes, the present "male" structure of organized sports, and the media framing of the female athlete all threaten to subvert any counter-hegemonic potential posed by female athletes. In short, the female athlete-and her body-has become a contested ideological terrain.

Although female athleticism could be seen to reflect women's successful struggle for equality and self-determination, sports institutions (organizations and media) still seem to support an ideology of male superiority and privilege. On the one hand, the presence of women in sports represents a counter-hegemonic tendency which opposes the well-guarded male control of the athletic world; on the other hand, that presence, especially when it is filtered through biased media messages, risks becoming another place for the affirmation of male hegemony. The power of the press, as forcefully argued by Van Dijk (1995: 9) is "not restricted to the influence of the media on their audiences, but also involves the role of the media within the broader framework of the social, cultural, political, or economic power structures of society". It could be suggested therefore that an athletic subculture assumes the task of the survival and reconstitution of hegemonic masculinity, and it does so through a specific, reiterated media script which trivializes the female body. Thus, the sports section of mainstream print media is often complicit with male dominance and becomes one of the primary sites of the legitimation of patriarchal ideology.

References

- [1] This paper is an expanded version of a presentation given at a conference entitled *Les Langues du Sport / Le Lingue Dello Sport*, held at the Libera Università S. Pio V, Rome, on October 1, 2009; cf. Ponterotto (2010).
- [2] For her analysis Luchjenbroers (1997) adopts Conceptual Metaphor Theory as it developed from the seminal proposals of Lakoff & Johnson (1980).
- [3] Neil Harman, "Maria Sharapova, tennis still my driving force", *The Times*, June 22, 2009.
- [4] S. Barnes, "Sharapova in with a shout after turning up the volume", *The Times*, June 27, 2007.
- [5] This article written by Andy Bull appeared in *The Guardian* on August 1, 2009.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2009/aug/01/world-swimming-rome-federica-pellegrini>

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