

## **“The other side of the net”: (Re)presentations of (emphasised) femininity during Wimbledon 2016**

**Keywords:** Gender, media, race, sport, tennis, Wimbledon, women

### **Abstract:**

This article examines how the British popular Press articulated notions of femininity during the 2016 Wimbledon Championships. Copies of the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* and their sister Sunday papers were collected during the tournament and subsequently analysed using textual analysis (McKee, 2001) and drawing on Connell's neo-Gramscian concept of gender power relations (1987, 2000b, 2002) for theoretical insight. The analysis suggests that although the women's and men's competitions were held concurrently and female tennis players gained a greater share of the overall coverage (when compared to their male counterparts) than female athletes in other sports, long-standing gendered discursive strategies were still evidenced within the reportage of the tournament. In particular, the media image of white female players, and the white partners of male players was constructed in accordance with traditional subordinate, passive and sexualised roles. At the same time black female tennis players were cast in the role of 'other' through their representation as extraordinary 'superwomen'.

### **Introduction:**

At the end of the 2016 Wimbledon fortnight the two singles champions, America's Serena Williams and Great Britain's Andy Murray returned home with their respective bank balances increased by £2m each. Although Wimbledon was the last of tennis' four blue riband Grand Slam tournaments to award equal prize money to both men and women<sup>1</sup>, 2016 was the 10th successive iteration of the tournament in which both sexes received equal prize money. This may well signify progress in an arena that typically privileges masculinity. However, tennis is one of the few major sports in which such financial parity is found (Thompson & Lewis, 2014). This is one manifestation of the historical construction of sport as a male domain in which male professional athletes are (re)presented as being at the apogee of sporting achievement and 'women play only a subordinate and/or sexualised role' (Bernstein, 2002, p. 426). Successive studies have shown that sportswomen 'are significantly under-represented in quantity and misrepresented in quality of sports coverage' (Godoy-Pressland, 2014, p. 606). Tennis is among the most commonly reported sports involving sportswomen (Cooky, Messner & Musto, 2015; Godoy-Pressland, 2014; Duncan, Messner, Willms & Wilson, 2005). Yet these highly reported women's sports are overwhelmingly those which 'emphasize traditional feminine attributes such as grace, balance, and aesthetics' (Crossman, Vincent & Gee, 2007, p. 29) — tennis, gymnastics, athletics, swimming — in turn reaffirming the hegemonic masculinity of sports-media coverage. Furthermore, the Wimbledon Championships, which began in 1877, are the oldest tennis tournament in the world and as such are 'steeped in socially elitist, White, heterosexual, British patriarchal 19th century traditions' (Vincent, 2004, p. 436) making them a fertile arena in which to interrogate the print media's (re)presentation of femininity.

By drawing on Connell's theory of gender power relations (Connell, 1987, 2002, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) for theoretical insight and employing critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2016) this study seeks to locate women — both as competitors and supporters — within the gendered British newspaper coverage of professional tennis. In particular it explores: (1) in what manner, if at all, such coverage adheres to and strengthens the related concepts of hegemonic masculinity, and emphasised femininity, and; (2) how, if at all, these notions, particularly those of femininity, are contested. The analysis looks firstly at the sexualisation of female players and focus on their bodies (for example, coverage of Nike's Power Slam dress, which was described as a 'nightie', and Serena Williams' attire, which drew complaints because her nipples were visible) before addressing the (re)presentation of male players' partners (namely Kim Murray, the wife of Andy Murray and Jennifer Bate, the girlfriend of Marcus Willis) as 'the devoted and supportive wife', (Clayton & Harris, 2004).

### **Gendered hierarchies**

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<sup>1</sup> The French Open began awarding equal prize in 2006, one year earlier than Wimbledon, the Australian Open in 2001 and the US Open in 1973.

For its theoretical framework, this study draws on Connell's (1998, 2000b, 2002) neo-Gramscian theory of gender power relations. Connell argues that at any point in time there are multiple femininities and masculinities at work within a socially constructed gender hierarchy. The most dominant of these archetypes is 'hegemonic masculinity', which occurs when the most idealised masculinity, which Connell (2000b, 2002) characterises as being white, western, heterosexual, able-bodied and aggressive, 'claims and sustains a leading position in social life' (2005, p. 77). Connell (1987) suggests that the hegemonic nature of this social hierarchy implies 'consent' from other masculinities because most men benefit from the subordination of women. Connell (1987) argues that the inverse of hegemonic masculinity is 'emphasised femininity', associated with white, heterosexual, socially elite, feminine women. Connell does not use the term 'hegemonic femininity' as, she argues, no femininity can achieve hegemony in a patriarchal society. Instead, all femininities are dominated by masculinity and 'constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men' (Connell 1987, pp. 186-187). Women who subscribe to and display the ideals of 'emphasised femininity' will be less marginalised and/or demonised than other femininities (such as women who are black and/or physically strong) but they will still be 'defined around compliance with this subordination [to men] and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men' (Connell, 1987, p. 183). These hegemonic and/or emphasised norms are frequently re-inscribed until they become commonplace and 'feel "natural" and acceptable, whereas in reality they are preferred, constructed images' (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 163). More recently, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have modified the concept of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity to acknowledge critiques of the original definition of the former as being attributional, negative and universal (Jefferson, 2002) but also the fact that the relational nature of gender has increasingly been overlooked. This, they argue is problematic because: 'Gender is always relational, and patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) of femininity' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848). They also argue that by focusing only on the activities of men there is a danger of ignoring the 'practices of women in the construction of gender among men' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848). This is particularly relevant in the study of media discourses which use images of female athletes which not only required the women's consent but also their active participation, such as those identified below in *The Sun's* daily 'Sets Appeal' feature.

During the last two decades, research focused on the gendered nature of media discourses constructed around tennis intersected with emphasised femininity in three ways: (1) the representation of female players who conform to the norms of emphasised femininity; (2), the representation of male players' wives and girlfriends who conform to these norms, and; (3) the representation of female players who do not conform to these norms, in particular the Williams sisters: Venus and Serena. As Bruce (2016) argues, 'access to public acceptance and visibility favours elite sports-women who embody a femininity that appeals to White, male, heterosexual media producers and audiences' (p. 363). Within women's tennis coverage, this visibility is afforded to female players with slim, lithe figures. The greatest exemplar in the last two decades being Anna Kournikova known for her 'waist-length flaxen hair, endless legs, smooth tan and metallic silver-blue eyes' (*Hello!*, 1999, quoted in Bernstein 2002, p. 423). Several studies examined the media coverage of the 2000 Wimbledon Championships and drew similar conclusions. (Harris and Clayton, 2002; Vincent 2004, Vincent et al. 2007). Harris and Clayton (2002) analysed coverage of the tournament in the British newspapers *The Sun* and the *Daily Mirror*. They found that women's sport accounted for just 5.9% of all sports coverage in these newspapers during the period of data collection. However, approximately one-third of the coverage of women's sport was specifically devoted to Kournikova, despite the fact that she had been knocked out of the tournament in the first round. Little of the coverage of Kournikova was focused on her sporting prowess or performance on the court. The majority was 'non-task relevant' commentary focused instead on her appearance and love life. Kournikova did not only dominate women's sports coverage at the time. In their examination of the coverage of the same tournament, Vincent et al. (2007) found that she received more coverage than any other player, at the tournament including the eventual female and male singles champions (Venus Williams and Pete Sampras respectively), leading them to argue that: 'female tennis players who either conform to or exaggerate idealized heterosexual feminine appearance receive the most media attention' (p. 289).

Emphasised femininity is also (re)presented in the sports media's coverage of the female partners of male athletes, coverage which casts women in an inverse role to the hegemonic masculinity of their male partners. Research in this area is limited and mainly focuses on the wives and girlfriends

(WAGs) of male footballers (Clayton & Harris, 2004; Bullen, 2014). Bullen (2014) argues that discursive constructions of respectable femininity are built on middle class ideologies and thus footballers' wives—working class women who have obtained significant wealth — are denigrated for 'fail[ing] to conform to middle class femininities' (p. 72). It is important to acknowledge that tennis and football players and their partners are, in the main, from different social milieu. However, Bullen's (2014) analysis is instructive in telling us something about the gendered way the female partners are portrayed in the reporting of male sport; that they are shown as adjuncts to their husbands displaying a sexualised 'hyper-femininity' (p. 94). As such, her work reflects the findings of Clayton and Harris (2004) a decade earlier. They suggest that wives and girlfriends of male athletes fulfil a dual role. They are inactive 'portrayed not as women, with lives and minds of their own, but merely as "tools" for increasing the self-esteem and morale [of their menfolk]' (2004, p. 327) while also portraying ideals of emphasised femininity which 'bolster hegemonic notions of women as idyllically feminine, sensual figures' (2004, p. 325). Harris and Clayton (2002) do briefly touch on the coverage afforded female partners of male tennis players in a wider discussion of the British tabloid Press' representation of femininity and masculinity in the sport. They argue that in men's tennis (as in men's football) wives and girlfriends project ideals of emphasised femininity. The women are portrayed as non-active extensions of their husband or boyfriend, undertaking feminine tasks which maintain the male player's masculine status. Therefore, by focussing on the attendance of the women, the Press substantiates the masculinity of the players.

Since they burst on to the scene in the late 1990s, the Williams sisters have presented direct challenge to this aforementioned representation of emphasised femininity. At the start of a wider discussion of negative attitudes towards black female bodies, Hobson (2003) briefly touches on the 'seemingly exaggerated response' (p.87) to Serena Williams' choice of attire—a black, spandex catsuit—at the 2002 U.S. Open. She argues that although the mainstream media and wider contemporary culture seek to downplay the role of racism in the representation of black bodies, in reality these representations reflect a 'racialized sense of aesthetics that position blackness in terms of grotesquerie while whiteness serves as an emblem of beauty' (p. 88). This racialised aesthetic is a manifestation of Connell's notion of emphasised femininity, to which Williams does not conform in two ways: (1) she is black; (2) she has a powerful physique. As such it is impossible to dislocate Williams' alterity from either her blackness or gendered and sexualised (re)presentations of her; each magnifies the other in what King (1988) argued was 'multiple jeopardy'. Several studies (Douglas, 2002, 2005; Schultz 2005, Spencer 2001, 2004) have analysed the manner in which these aspects are represented in the media's construction of Williams and her older sister, Venus, as 'other' and found that the sisters' bodies and choice of attire is often the focus of media discussion. Spencer (2004) argues that the sisters 'have been characterised in terms of their physicality since their arrival within the popular imaginary' (p. 120) with their physical strength and athletic ability being foregrounded at the expense of their mental strength and tactical awareness. This 'visible trace of scientific racism' (Spencer, 2004, p. 120) was complimented by cultural racism within which the basis for racial differentiation manifested itself in other identifiable signifiers, such as dress. In the Williams' case this was their beaded, cornrow hair styles which were the subject of dismissive media commentary which further marked them out as 'others'. Spencer (2004) suggests these are two of several narratives constructed around the pair that 'provide evidence of sincere fictions that work in subtle ways to obscure White racism' (p. 131). A similar conclusion was drawn by Douglas' (2005) in her analysis of the coverage of the 2001 Indian Wells tournament and the French Open two years later. Douglas argued that the media's 'raceless' explanations for the negative responses towards the Williams' sisters effectively made race invisible thus reinforcing the notion that tennis is a 'white' sport. Schultz' (2005) analysis of the media coverage of the 2002 U.S. Open, which interrogates reaction to Williams' on-court catsuit in detail, suggests (re)presentations of Williams 'are located within racialised discourse [and use] oppositional rhetorics' (p. 338) thus constructing her blackness in contrast with 'normalized, white female tennis athletes' (p. 339). Schultz (2005) argues that the majority of media accounts represent Williams in terms of difference thus 'reinscrib[ing] whiteness as the normative racialized identity in women's tennis, thereby marginalising blackness' (p. 352).

### **Media Analysis**

This study interrogated 369 articles focused on the 2016 Wimbledon tournament published in the UK's two best-selling paid-for daily newspapers and their Sunday sister papers. *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* were analysed between the 26th June and 11th July 2016, a period which included the

duration of the tournament and two days either side of the start and finish of the competition. To achieve a balance of coverage the papers were drawn from the two different sections of the market-place — tabloid and middle-market respectively — and ownership of the papers was split between two different companies<sup>2</sup>. The papers' respective readerships also display significant demographic differences with *The Sun* having a younger, male, working class readership. Men make up 58.77 % of its total readership of which 29% are under 34 and 36% over 55. Some, 32.85% of *The Sun's* readership falls into the ABC1 social categories (defined on the National Readership Survey social scale as upper middle class, middle class and lower middle class) with 67.15% in the C2DE categories (defined as skilled working class, working class and non-working). By contrast, 54.12% of the *Daily Mail's* readership are women, 70.67% are over 55 (with just 11.26% under 35) and 61.96% are in the ABC1 demographic categories (<http://www.newsworks.org.uk/>). In particular textual analysis (McKee, 2001) was undertaken on 135 articles which included text and/or photographs concerning either female players and/or the wives and/or girlfriends of male players that could be 'wrench[ed] free from the routines of its consumption that would ordinarily have us take it for granted, and open[ed] up for analysis' (Turner, 1997, p. 317). As Turner (1997) suggests, 'media texts offer especially rich opportunities to observe the cultural construction of meaning' (p. 326), thus, the aim of the analysis is not to reproduce the newspapers' content, but to provide a rich, descriptive analysis which draws out the 'textual constructions of realities' (Sparkes, 1992) inherent within the dominant media discourse. For this study, the focus was on those constructed realities which intersected with cultural understandings of (emphasised) femininity and (hegemonic) masculinity as articulated in Connell's relational theory of gender power dynamics (1987, 2000b, 2005). Unless stated otherwise, the quotes cited represent a broad cross-section of meanings representative of those found in a variety of articles. To represent the gendered narratives in evidence within the coverage of the tournament in full, the analysis employs 'tabloid speak' (Watson, 1998, p. 46), such as double-entendres, puns and sexualised language, where appropriate.

#### *Game, set & flash*

Of the 369 articles focused on the 2016 Wimbledon tournament in *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*, 135 (36.6%) focused on female players whereas 234 (63.4%) focused on male players. It may be argued that this sample is biased in so far as Briton Andy Murray won the men's tournament and thus dominated coverage of the tournament as it progressed and elicited more articles than might have been the case had a Briton not won or reached the final (by contrast Johanna Konta, the British women's No1 was knocked out in the second round). Furthermore, 36.6% is a considerably higher proportion of coverage for women than the 5.9% found in Harris and Clayton's (2002) research, or the 3.6% found in Godoy-Pressland's (2014) longitudinal study of print media coverage of sports women, although it does support her findings, and those of Vincent et al. (2007), that coverage of female athletes increases during major sporting events. This discursive practice which renders female players relatively 'invisible' in the coverage of a tournament which maintains an equal balance between male and female athletes at the highest echelons of the competition (for example by awarding equal prize money) is a reminder that masculine hegemony is 'constructed and promoted most systematically through competitive sport' (Connell, 1987, p. 84).

Duncan and Messner (1998) refer to this as one of several 'formulae of exclusion', another of which is also in evidence in articles analysed: the sexualisation of female players. Hargreaves notes that modern sportswear is 'manufactured specifically to promote a sexy image' (1994, p. 159) and therefore the media narratives focus on and refer to players dress and hairstyles. Several articles focused on female players struggling to play while wearing the Nike Premier Slam dress, a short, light, unfitted dress which was worn with short, lycra dance shorts, quickly dubbed the Nike 'Nightie'. The focal point of the images accompanying the prose were photos of the women's lithe, bodies, in particular their buttocks and bare midriffs, which had become exposed by the flimsy dress riding up. *The Sun* article headlined 'GAME SET & FLASH' (4 July 2016) noted that viewers had complained that the BBC was 'leering when skirts flap up' although the article was itself accompanied by a revealing picture of Canadian player Eugenie Bouchard struggling to play while wearing the dress.

This focus on the women's appearance, and in particular the portrayal of them as passively sexual, constructs the female players as 'the other', placing them in a position of weakness within the gendered hierarchy. The erotic emphasis on the players implied a masculine ideal of female players and

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<sup>2</sup> The *Daily Mail* is owned by DMGT and *The Sun* by News UK.

was reinforced in a daily feature in *The Sun* entitled “Sets Appeal” which started on the first day of the tournament. It featured female players, or the female partners of male players, in glamorised or provocative model shots. The most explicit of these was a photograph of the tournament’s women’s No. 3 seed Agnieszka Radwanska in a ‘netty nude pose’ in which she was pictured without any clothing and which dominated a page of *The Sun* (6 July 2016) in the final week of the tournament. Other pictures in the series presented female players out of competition attire and instead in lingerie or swimwear and in seductive poses focusing on their legs, chest and/or face. These photos rendered the players in passive, ‘non-active’ roles in which they were shorn of their athletic ability and sexualised for the benefit of the male gaze. This had the effect of reinforcing their femininity and trivialising their bodies thus undermining their athleticism and sporting expertise. Furthermore, the citing of these images on Page 3<sup>3</sup>, a traditional location of sexualised images of women in British tabloid newspapers, ‘is suggestive of their sexual implication’ (Harris and Clayton, 2002, p. 408). It must be acknowledged that the women who appear in the feature are willing participants, exploiting the dominant gendered discourse for pecuniary gain and increased publicity. However, women’s, and in particular female athletes’, decisions to pose for sexual provocative photographs has caused division among feminist scholars. Some argue that the images reinforce notions of emphasised femininity by sexualising the female body for the male gaze (Kane, LaVoi, Fink 2013; Vincent et al. 2011; Markula 2009). Conversely others suggest that ‘the standard objectification thesis [is] at least partially inadequate’ as sportswomen’s bodies ‘when coded as athletic, can redeem female sexuality and make it visible as an assertion of female presence’ (Heywood & Dworkin 2003, pp. 82-83). However, it is important to acknowledge that women are often not in control of either the mediation of the images or the sexualised narratives constructed around them in the mainstream media. For example, the image of Radwanska which featured on Page 3 of *The Sun* had initially appeared in the 2013 *Body Issue* of ESPN Magazine in a feature ‘Bodies We Want’. There the picture appeared alongside nude or semi-nude images of other athletes including both men and women in a celebration of their athleticism; a very different context to its use in *The Sun*. It is such lack of control that continues to cause concern.

#### *‘My dentist doesn’t look like that’*

Several articles in the data collection period construct another non-active role for women in sport: that of the wife or girlfriend of the male player as supporter. Thompson suggests that casting women in such a passive, supporting role serves to reinforce the privileged position of the male players within the hierarchical gender order while at the same time rendering the women more-or-less anonymous except when they are ‘identified in the stands’ simply because they are involved in a relationship with one of the active sportsmen (Thompson, 1999, p. 176). It is worth noting that only four articles featured groups of male supporters. These were fans of British player Marcus Willis — the so-called ‘Berkshire Bulldogs’ and ‘Will Bombs’ — who were portrayed as undertaking support in an active, carnivalesque or ‘rowdy’ manner which *The Sun* (28 June 2016) compared to football fandom. Conversely, not one of the newspaper articles analysed focused on any husband or boyfriend supporting a female tennis player.

The prime focus of these articles was Jennifer Bate and Kim Murray, the respective partners of Willis, the World No. 772 who claimed a surprise first-round victory before losing in the second round match on Centre Court to Roger Federer, and fellow British player Andy Murray, who won the men’s singles title. Both women conformed to the ideal aesthetic of emphasised femininity, being white, slim and attractive. Bate, who is a qualified dentist, was referred to as ‘gorgeous’ and a ‘former beauty queen’ (*Daily Mail*, 29 June 2016) while Kim Murray was ‘the real Centre Court star’ thanks to her ‘gorgeous style’ (*Daily Mail*, 10 July 2016) in an article focused on the outfits she wore while watching her husband play. Masculine and feminine roles within a gendered hierarchy are relational, thus male athletes’ relationships with women who conform to such idealised feminine norms are an important part of constructing an individual masculine guise for the players reinforcing their ‘heteromale social capital’ (Vincent et al, 2011, p. 622). Similarly, the affirmation of heterosexuality by foregrounding the players’ virility and focusing on their sexual eminence is also important for male athletes to accrue this ‘heteromale social capital’. Of the two women, Bate in particular was (re)presented in sexualised narratives in articles that focused on the pair’s ‘Love match’ (*The Sun* and *Daily Mail*, 29 June 2016). Willis was ‘spurred on to glory [...] by a secret kiss’ from Bate and also ‘hinted on

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<sup>3</sup> The feature was occasionally moved to later pages to accommodate coverage of other events, for example the Conservative Party leadership contest.

Twitter that his preparations for his big match had been helped along by some #birthdaysex' (*The Sun*, 29 June 2016). Bate was also the subject of a 'sexism row' (*Daily Mail*, 1 July 2016) after BBC commentator Andrew Castle was accused of 'ogling' her and saying on air: 'My dentist doesn't look like that' (*The Sun*, 1 July 2016). Perhaps ironically, these stories were accompanied by photographs that reinforced Bate's femininity, for example *The Daily Mail* used a full-length photo of Bate in skinny jeans and a tight jumper, which accentuated her breasts, buttocks and long legs.

By contrast, narratives constructed around Murray were less salacious. She was not only cast in the role of supporter but also as a 'domesticated mother figure' caring for her and her husband's four-month-old daughter (*The Sun* and *Daily Mail*, 29 June 2016). Research focused on the partners of male athletes in a variety of sports (Gmelch & San Antonio, 2001; Thompson, 1999; Sheedy & Brown, 1998) has shown that the lives of the women concerned were subsumed by their husband's or partner's career. The representation of Kim Murray in the motherly role replicates the traditional familial division of labour which casts 'certain kinds of work as domestic, unpaid and usually women's, and other kinds as public, paid and usually men's' (Connell, 1987, p. 122). The reason for the different approach to the women was perhaps that, as the wife of the men's champion, Murray effectively became Wimbledon 'royalty'. On the day after Andy Murray lifted the trophy, his victory was proclaimed the 'RETURN OF THE KING' by *The Sun* (11 July 2016). On the same day Kim Murray was in effect presented as his 'Queen' by the *Daily Mail* in a full-page article dominated by a series of photographs comparing her to the Duchess of Cambridge, who was also in attendance, in the 'style match of the day' (11 July 2016).

Supplementing the gendered coverage of Bate and Murray were provocative and sexualised photographs of the female partners of male players in *The Sun's* aforementioned 'Sets Appeal' feature. Six of the 11 issues of *The Sun* in which the feature appeared portrayed partners of male tennis players. The women, often referred to by the term 'Tennis WAG', are described in gendered puns characteristic of tabloid vernacular, for example Danielle Knudson, the girlfriend of Milos Raonic, is referred to as 'a real smasher' (*The Sun*, 28 June 2016). This sexual objectification not only subordinates women to the erotic desires of men but also reproduces and re-enforces the dominant hegemonic ideology of masculinity (Duncan & Messner 1998).

#### *Match points*

The discourse about Serena Williams, who won the women's singles title, and her sister Venus, who reached the semi-final (and who thus was the subject of less coverage), intersected with hegemonic notions of race. The sisters were framed as 'natural athletes', the focus on them as 'strong black women' placing them outside the dominant culture's definition of ideal emphasised femininity. This manifested itself in coverage which focused on both "scientific" and "cultural" racisms identified by Spencer (2004). McKay and Johnson (2008) argue that in the past the sports media had negatively represented women as "objects of ridicule, inferiority and weakness", however, because the Williams sisters do not conform to these norms of emphasised femininity the media has been forced to find 'new ways to disparage the powerful and therefore "uppity" African-American sportswomen' (p. 492). Thus they found that although the Williams sisters had achieved unprecedented success<sup>4</sup>, their bodies were (re)presented as both sexually grotesque and pornographically erotic. In an article headlined 'MATCH POINTS: Fury at Serena nipples' *The Sun* (7 July 2016) reported that fans watching on TV had been 'shocked' as Serena Williams' nipples were visible through her 'tight-fitting, see-through top'. On the day of the women's singles final, the *Daily Mail* (9 July 2016) portrayed Serena Williams as a 'Superwoman' figure (the 'S' of 'Serena' being replaced by the 'S' logo from Superman in the headline). The photograph accompanying the article showed Williams in an action shot and highlighted the circumference of her biceps and thighs reinforcing her 'strength' and non-conformity to notions of emphasised femininity, while the accompanying prose referred to her 'natural aggressive game'. Several other articles in the *Daily Mail* rooted the discourse of the Williams sisters in the stereotype of the naturally able black athlete by employing aggressive language which foregrounded the players' strength. Serena Williams' third round victory over Annika Beck was portrayed as her 'latest act of tennis violence' with Williams herself was labelled as 'brutal' in an accompanying picture caption (4 July 2016). Two days later, Venus Williams was described as 'bludgeoning' her 'victim' Yaroslava Shvedova in a quarter-final victory that saw the American display her 'same old vicious serve, her same old growl' (*Daily Mail*, 6 July 2016). The sisters' physicality was thus used as a tool

<sup>4</sup> Serena has the most Grand Slam wins (23) by a tennis player in the Open Era and in 2001, Venus became the first African-American woman to be ranked world No 1 in the Open Era.

to emphasise and naturalise the differences between them as 'others' and their white opponents as 'ideals' of emphasised femininity making the sisters 'anomalies that did not belong' (Vincent, 2000, p. 446).

### Concluding remarks

The results of this research showed that although the coverage of the 2016 Wimbledon Championship provided greater equality between male and female athletes than has been the norm in wider sports coverage (Harris & Clayton, 2002; Godoy-Pressland, 2014), the British newspapers analysed during the tournament utilised images and narratives of women which conformed to the subordinate characteristics of Connell's notion of emphasised femininity, intersecting with race to reproduce and legitimise the gendered hierarchy. The underlying discourse running through the coverage (re)presented women (be they players or the partners of male players) in subordinate, decorative and highly sexualised roles. This served to trivialise their athletic ability and achievements, instead presenting the female body as a commodity to be enjoyed. While these findings might at face value suggest there is 'nothing new' to report, this very fact suggests that "[...] entrenched gender ideologies and dominant representations of sport have remained highly resistant to change [...]" (Bruce 2013, p. 128), at least in the traditional British print media. The trend for female tennis players and the wives of male tennis players to pose for provocative and sexually alluring photos (as evidenced in the 'Sets Appeal' feature in *The Sun*) does raise the question of whether these women are being exploited or empowered. However, the eroticised narrative constructed by the photographs and the (albeit brief) sexualised prose that accompany them serve only to reinforce hegemonic notions of women as stereotypically feminine, sensual figures represented solely for the male gaze (Clayton & Harris, 2007). This in turn diminishes the image of the strong female athlete thus reducing the challenge to the dominant gender hierarchy (Markula, 2009). The research also showed the newspapers reinforced the notion of emphasised femininity through the discourse constructed around femininities that do not conform to its ideals, in this case the black, muscular physiques of Serena Williams and her older sister, Venus. The narratives that represented the Williams sisters as 'other' served to reinscribe whiteness as the norm.

Tennis is one of the few sports in which tournaments for professional male and female competitors run concurrently and as such its premier 'Grand Slam' events provide an opportunity for newspapers to provide coverage that is equal in terms of both amount and type of discourse. Despite the equality of prize money awarded at Wimbledon, female tennis players will not achieve true equality with their male counterparts until and unless the media rises to this challenge and portrays female tennis players as race- and gender-neutral athletes.

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