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Representation of British footballers in the press: private versus public performance

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of sports coverage in the British press, particularly the national sport of football, has created celebrities of footballers who have been elevated to the position of role models and heroes, symbolising the talents of the nation. This status has left them vulnerable to press scrutiny and their private lives are often viewed as fair game in reporting circles. The substantial lack of empirical data on the representation of British footballers is addressed in this study via the analysis of four national newspapers over a 28 day period to examine how much the press report on their private and public lives. The data reveals tabloid newspapers' coverage is much more abundant than broadsheet newspapers' and tabloids contain more stories about the private lives of footballers, which are often more negative in sentiment. However the research concludes that despite expectations to the contrary, the British press represent footballers as sportsmen first and foremost, reporting infrequently on their private lives. Nevertheless there remains evidence of the celebrity status of footballers, particularly national team players past and present, and the existence of hero worshipping in the broadsheet press and role model scrutiny in tabloid newspapers.

KEY WORDS: footballers, press, celebrity, representation, private lives

The emergence of sports journalism

Readers today expect to see reams of sports news when they turn over their British newspaper to the back page but this has not always been the case. Although the original printed newspaper in Britain dates back to the early seventeenth century (Cranfield, 1962) the first forms of sports journalism did not emerge until the 1820s in *Pierce Egan's Life in London and Sporting Guide* and its competitor *Bell's Life in London* (Nugent 1929). And mainstream newspapers did not begin to seriously devote space to covering sport, and more specifically football, until the turn of the twentieth century (Kelly 1998) with the emergence of tabloid newspapers (Conboy 2011) and the launch of *The Daily Mirror* in 1903 (Boyle 2006). This growth in sports coverage steadily increased over the last century in response to reader demand from around two to twenty-eight pages (Andrews 2014). Sport now plays an important role in the multimedia news ecosystem and in terms of audiences it is able to regularly deliver "large, often extremely loyal cohorts of readers, listeners and viewers" (Rowe 2004: 31). Growing on the populism developed in the 1900s the twenty-first century has continued to witness a huge growth in the amount and significance of sports coverage across broadcast, print and online media (Farrington 2012). In the British press sports reporting has often been seen as soft journalism which has more in common with the sensationalist, entertainment approach taken by tabloid newspapers. Sports coverage has become an important element of "brand identity" in major tabloid newspapers in recent years (Boyle 2006: 49) with titles such as the *Daily Mail* dedicating a minimum of 10% of its space to sport since its first ever issue (Mason 1988). Despite its strong history and correlation with the infotainment style of tabloid newspapers, sports content today also has considerable reach within British quality broadsheet newspapers where it holds an important place in the field alongside other forms of journalism often considered as more serious or harder news (English 2016). Boyle et al. (2002: 166) claim that "almost all the broadsheets have increased the

resources they allocate to their sports pages as they attempt to attract new and younger readers." For example *The Times* sports coverage increased from 11% to 21% from 1974 to 2004 whilst *The Guardian's* increased from 11% to 17% within the same period (Farrington 2012).

Heroes and celebrities

In Britain football is viewed as the national sport and as such takes up a significant amount of newspaper sports coverage (Cashmore et al. 2016). Rather than focus on the results of football matches the media now has to satisfy the public demand for discussion and interpretation of these results (Bernstein and Blain 2003). In addition, Boyle (2006) asserts that the press have allowed football to amplify its relevance within society and helped the sport to create its heroes. This can be seen in the increasingly extensive media coverage of footballers like David Beckham or Michael Owen (Boyle et al., 2002). Furthermore, Cashmore (2000) establishes that Britain started feting football stars like George Best in a way that only great artists were represented. Wenner takes this a step further by arguing that "the sports press is like the entertainment and business press, in that they all are far more disposed to being cheerleaders for their sectors and stars," (2013: 9). By highlighting and emphasising the achievements of individual football players the press are symbolising the talents of a nation (Leven 1984) and representing patriotism. Footballers have therefore become society's role models (Cashmore and Parker 2003; Whannel 2001, 2002) who are held to account in the same regard as politicians becoming "central figures in the social construction of contemporary ideals of public morality, gender and celebrity" Horne (2006: 60). This doubled edged sword means that high profile footballers are subject to scrutiny in their private lives as well as for their performance on the pitch (Pape and Featherstone 2005). This moves footballers into the realm of celebrity news, a form of journalism with a cultural emphasis on "scandal, controversy and sensationalism" (Schultz 2002: 40). Furthermore

stories on the private lives of sportspeople, particularly footballers, are now found within the news section of newspapers, meaning sports news has escaped the confines of the newspaper back pages (Farrington 2012; Pape and Featherstone, 2005). Since celebrity continues to be a commonplace news value (Harcup and O'Neil 2001) which has gained even more currency in the digital era (Harcup and O'Neil 2017) sportsmen, in particular British footballers inadvertently entrenched in symbolic patriotism, are highly newsworthy particularly when their celebrity status meets with other news values such as entertainment, bad news and exclusivity.

Understanding the representation of footballers

Despite the significance of sports journalism in the news arena, the discipline is seen by some critics as "sloppy" or an easy way of doing journalism (Boyle, 2006) and as such is often overlooked in research. When it is a topic of study researchers separate it from news when analysing content claiming that it is different from other types of news such as finance or politics which are more factual and objective (Reinardy and Wanta 2008). Yet there is evidence of a growing phenomenon of both celebrity news (Evans and Hesmondhalgh 2005) and sports coverage in tabloid and broadsheet newspapers (Boyd 2006; Farrington 2012) and yet this field of enquiry is largely understudied. There is limited empirical data on the representation of footballers in the British press beyond studies on minority groups. As Farrington observes, there has been several practical guides to sports journalism (Andrews 2014; Steen 2008), but these do not focus on the content of newspapers specifically, instead, they offer guidance and practical advice for journalists. Conversely, there has been research on racism, women in sports or violence in football, or other sports (Poulton 2005; Rainey 2000; Schmidt 2016) however the content of the coverage on British footballers and how they are represented in the press appears to have received minimal attention. To date there is no scholarly understanding of the representation of male footballers and whether their standing

as national heroes of celebrity status is an accurate reflection of the content of newspapers which are increasing their sport related content. Does British football coverage largely contain content on match reports, sporting achievements or players' private lives and what can it tell us about the national press? And how do tabloid and broadsheet newspapers differ in their approach to covering football related stories? Do tabloids prefer to cover news stories about the private lives of footballers whilst broadsheets include harder news such as corruption scandals? In the national press are footballers largely represented as celebrities via stories focusing on their personal lives or do they maintain their role as sportspeople first and foremost? This research aims to address these questions by using empirical data to build a picture of the representation of footballers in the British press in 2018.

Methods

Berelson (1971) puts forward that content analysis is “a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (1971: 18) which academics advise using for the examination of the content of news (Holsti 1969; Krippendorff 1980; Weber, 1990). Moreover, content analysis has been successfully utilised to research the coverage of sportspeople within the media (Hurdley and Billings 2010; Zion, Spaaij and Nicholson, 2010). As such content analysis has been identified as an appropriate research method for this particular study which analyses the content within football related newspaper content.

For this study four British newspapers were selected in order to gather a range of perspectives from media with different agendas and news values. The selected newspapers were: *The Sun*, the *Daily Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*. The Sunday edition of each publication was also analysed so the sample included *The Sun on Sunday*, *The Mail on Sunday*, *The Sunday Telegraph* and *The Observer*. As discussed in the review of the

literature, content can vary depending on whether the newspaper is a tabloid or a broadsheet (Baker, 2011; Karlsson and Clerwall, 2012) therefore this sample includes two 'populist' tabloids (*The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*) and two 'quality' broadsheet newspapers (*The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*) from a range of partisan perspectives.

Content analysis is a very time consuming research method (Davies and Mosdell 2006: 106) and due to time restrictions, four weeks - including weekends - was deemed to be an appropriate length of time to provide enough data for this study. The samples were selected every day between February 12 2018 and March 11 2018.

Additionally, Davies and Mosdell (2006) observe that it is important to specify how articles will be analysed in newspapers. "For example, you may consider only the headline and the first leader paragraph to be of interest, or you may break the article down into separate paragraphs," (Davies and Mosdell 2006: 102). For this research, every story which presented a male British footballer as the main focus point was selected for analysis. The footballer had to be identified by the research as of British heritage and had to play for a British or overseas football club. In order to identify whether the footballer was the focal point of the story their name or nickname had to appear either in the headline or introduction of the article.

Once the articles were selected there were placed into the pertinent category of three formulated questions.

The first question: "What section of the newspaper does the story appear in?" with the selection of: front page, news section or sports section. This was important in order to determine whether sport is treated as general news or if the stories were only published in the sports section. The second question: "What is the story about?", with the selection of: personal life, sporting life or other. As identified from the literature, sportspeople are often treated as celebrities by the media, and so by defining what each of the stories are about, a

conclusion can be reached on whether the personal lives of these sportsmen appear more significant than their sporting achievements. Finally, the third sentient question: "How is the story portrayed?", with the selection of: positively, negatively or neutrally. In order to determine this, the language used in the news story was analysed to identify if footballers are more commonly praised, or criticised.

It is crucial to take into consideration the existence of objectivity in the research. Weber (1990: 12) notes that for content analysis to be valid "different people should code the same text in the same way". This means that if only one individual classifies the articles during the analysis, the conclusions developed can be seen as subjective, and therefore the research can be unreliable. Therefore in this study there were two sets of coders who compared coding results and recorded a 90% consistency rating.

Results

The number of stories analysed in *The Guardian* (41), *The Daily Telegraph* (61), the *Daily Mail* (72) and *The Sun* (179) provide an overall data set of 353 published items. Due to the variation of amount of coverage offered by each publication, all the figures have been converted into percentages to make it possible to compare the reporting tendency of each newspaper.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

It can be observed that *The Sun* offers considerably more sports related coverage in general than the other three newspapers, with 179 identified stories about British footballers. To illustrate the margin of difference, the *Daily Mail* produces the second highest number of stories – 72. It can be noted that as the type of newspaper moves from tabloid to broadsheet,

or indeed informal to formal, the number of stories about British footballers decreases. Figures 2, 3 and 4 below, provide an analysis for each part of Figure 1. In the graphs the predominance of football stories in *The Sun* in comparison to the other publications is striking.

[Insert Figures 2, 3 and 4 here]

The reporting on British footballers in general, from these results, can be seen to be given higher priority in tabloid newspapers. This impression can be taken from the number of stories which appear on the front page of each newspaper, with two appearing on the front page of *The Sun* and none in any of the other newspapers. Also, in terms of stories appearing in the news section of the publications, 16 are observed in *The Sun*, four in the *Daily Mail*, one in *The Guardian* and none in *The Daily Telegraph*.

As previously mentioned, it is also useful to represent these figures in percentages, in order to determine the inclination of each newspaper.

[Insert Figures 5, 6 and 7 here]

In regards to the content of the stories about British footballers, *The Sun* and *The Daily Telegraph* share the highest percentage of those concerning the sporting life of the subjects (72%). In contrast, *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun* produce the highest percentages of stories about the personal lives of footballers (14% and 10% respectively).

The sentiment of the stories varies with *The Guardian* appearing to have the greatest number of positive articles (41%), and the *Daily Mail* the least (24%). The opposite matches this tendency, with *The Guardian* having the lowest percentage of negative stories (10%) and the *Daily Mail* having the highest proportion of negative ones (22%). After this, all newspapers

included similar percentages of neutral stories of around 50%, but *The Daily Telegraph* had the most (59%).

Despite all newspapers having a sports section, not all include the football news in the same location - *The Guardian*, the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun*, place their football news at the end of the sports section, whereas *The Daily Telegraph* is placed at the beginning. It is also important to note that *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* include an additional supplement within the newspaper, which includes more football news enabling them to offer more stories of British footballers than both broadsheets.

Discussion

The results give clear empirical evidence, as expected, that tabloid newspapers prioritise football, to a greater extent than their broadsheet counterparts. *The Sun*, Britain's best-selling newspaper, has four times as much football coverage as leading quality newspaper *The Guardian*. Although English (2016: 1014) reports that "the inclusion of sports stories in broadsheet newspapers is considerable", it appears that the proportion still remains much smaller than tabloid newspapers. Furthermore, it is visible that tabloids and broadsheets use different sections to include footballer-related stories, with tabloids including a greater amount as news stories or front page articles, giving them greater significance as they are elevated beyond the sports pages. There is some evidence therefore of the continued celebrity status of British footballers, who are represented as role models (Cashmore and Parker 2003; Whannel 2001, 2002) meaning their private lives are subject to greater scrutiny (Pape and Featherstone 2005).

Tabloid newspapers in particular, show a greater affinity for reporting stories about footballers' private lives with the *Daily Mail* publishing more than three times as many of those stories than *The Daily Telegraph*. As Hanusch (2013: 508) observes "tabloids are more sensationalist than broadsheets in their coverage." However the number of private stories still remained relatively low across the four newspapers (between 4% to 14% of coverage) and the differences between tabloid and broadsheet were relatively small particularly when comparing *The Guardian* and *The Sun* (just 3% between them). However the type of personal story did vary between the newspaper types with tabloids tending to focus on footballer's personal relationships and broadsheets tending to publish articles that linked footballers to current affairs or community stories. The tabloids therefore did have more of a disposition towards sensationalist issues (for example girlfriends and sex scandals) whilst broadsheets' coverage on private lives could be considered more serious (for example footballers engaging with city improvements) and leaned towards hero worshipping rather than exposing or scrutinising role models.

Bernstein and Blain (2003) maintain that football is no longer about results only, and this trend continues more than a decade later as the data in this paper confirms that apart from match reports and results, there is a considerable amount of coverage about transfer rumours, player's injuries and also private life issues. Farrington (2012: 2) also reasons that "with the rise of celebrity culture, sports stars are no longer confined to the back pages. Increasingly, they find themselves open to public and media scrutiny of their private and social lives." This emphasis on scandal, private lives and the treatment of British footballers as celebrities continues as most stories included in the news pages in this research sample treated footballers as celebrities, whereas the majority of stories in the sports section referred to them as sportsmen and reported on their sporting achievement alone. For example, articles included in the news section were: David Beckham's aftershave being sold in Poundland -

covered by *The Sun* and Wayne Rooney having his fourth son - covered in both *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*. British footballers also act as a conduit for addressing hard news stories, particularly in the quality press, as the celebrity status of these national heroes is a lens through which to explore topics such as sexual abuse, such as the story of Kieron Dyer covered by *The Guardian* in several editions.

A key secondary finding worth further analysis is the treatment and coverage of retired British footballers, specifically those who played for England during their career, who continue to be treated as newsworthy celebrities, often for the duration of their lifetime. Stories about the private lives of these former England players, often quite inane in content, continue in the tabloid press. Examples of this are: Frank Lampard being unable to load a dishwasher or Jamie Redknapp being sacked as a model - both covered by *The Sun*.

In terms of the sentiment of the news stories involving British footballers, all publications offered a similar percentage of neutrality - *The Guardian* (49%), *The Daily Telegraph* (49%), the *Daily Mail* (54%) and *The Sun* (51%). However broadsheets tended to be more positive with their coverage, whereas tabloid newspapers were more negative. This supports the claim made by Schultz (2002), who argues that tabloids emphasise controversy and scandal, which in turn leads to negative representation. Conversely, Wenner (2013: 9) claims that "the sports press is like the entertainment and business press, in that they all are far more disposed to being cheerleaders for their sectors and stars." For instance, Harry Kane's performance against Juventus FC is reported positively in each of the newspapers, and *The Sun* also includes a news story about Gareth Bale helping his sister-in-law financially. These are examples of the press treating British footballers as heroes and idols for ordinary people, as stated by Boyle (2006).

All publications included positive stories about lower level footballers, including: Will Grigg's performance against Manchester City - published in all newspapers - two youth footballers, potentially becoming the future of England's football team - covered by *The Daily Telegraph* - and Ollie Palmer's last minute winner goal to give Lincoln FC a victory - covered by *The Sun*. Whereas it is true that if a footballer has a good performance on the pitch or performs a positive act in their private lives, newspapers will report it, it is also evident through this analysis, that the press have a larger expectation for higher level players than those who are developing or are in lower divisions. None of these players play in the Premier League - the highest level league in the UK, and no negative stories about lower level footballers were published in this time frame. However, there are numerous negative stories about British footballers who play in Premier League or national teams. It appears that expectations towards higher level footballers are more than those in lower leagues and the level of hero worship is greater. This in turn raises the value of their celebrity status and the likelihood of a greater amount of press scrutiny over their private lives as their role model status is also elevated.

Conclusion

This paper illustrates how the British press offers regular and varied content about male, British footballers, which supports previous research that notes the increase of sports coverage in the press (Andrews 2014). From the results, it can be observed that most of the stories focus on the sporting life of footballers, within the confines of sports sections of newspapers. There is however, a noticeable difference between the coverage of tabloid newspapers and broadsheet newspapers, with the former providing more news stories, more sensationalist in nature, as has been observed by other academics (Pape and Featherstone 2005; Schultz 2002). However, although stories about footballers have migrated from the back pages to the news pages and front pages of newspapers, the volume of these kinds of

stories is less intensive than expected. For the most part British footballers are represented as sportsmen in newspapers, rather than as celebrities. This may in part be due to a number of social, legal and regulatory changes in the post Levenson era. Newspapers are more cautious when it comes to exposing private matters of public figures due to the threat of super injunctions, civil law suits and public distrust following the phone hacking scandal. There is also perhaps less of a public appetite for kiss and tell stories rife in the nineties and noughties, particularly in light of the #MeToo movement.

Nevertheless, there still remains an element of reporting in the press which elevates British footballers beyond sportsmen. The celebrity status of Premier League, England players and more strikingly former England players, is intrinsically linked with hero worship - particularly in the quality press - and the sensationalist scrutiny of their position as role models - within the tabloid press.

This study lays the groundwork for future empirical research which can help scholars to understand the role that sports representation plays in the press, a much understudied area of examination. Future research could extend the sample frame work to evaluate the peaks and troughs of sports and news coverage over the full football season and compare it with historical coverage. There is also more work to be done on the representation of non-British players, who dominate the Premier League, and whether their treatment, news worthiness and role model status is comparable with British players.

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