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Trivializing the Female Body: A Cross-cultural Analysis of the Representation of Women in Sports Journalism

By Diane Ponterotto¹

Abstract

This paper addresses the question of the representation of female athleticism in the press. By means of a corpus-assisted analysis of sports reporting of the tennis athlete Maria Sharapova in both the English and Italian press, it offers a cross-linguistic description of the stereotyped language reserved for women in sports settings. The study reveals the presence in the corpus of a discursive frame which tends to trivialize the body of female athletes. This frame emerges from two basic discourse strategies, a thematic strategy, which eroticizes the female body, and a metaphorical strategy, which conceptualizes the female athlete as child-like. The study suggests that this type of representation is motivated by sexist stereotyping related to the ideological interests of male hegemony.

Keywords: female athleticism, sports journalism, cross-cultural, metaphor, discourse analysis, feminism

1. Introduction

It is generally held that women are underrepresented in most types of media discourse. In his incisive 1996 study, van Dijk likened 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 1996:16).

The fact that even today women are victims of social marginalization, systematically excluded, as other minority groups, from rights, opportunities and resources normally available to members of society, is evident cross-nationally. The persistence of a gender wage gap in the US is particularly indicative.² Despite the fact that US society self-represents as the world leader in gender equality, the very first bill signed by President Obama after taking office in January

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² "Did You Know That Women Are Still Paid Less Than Men?" White House. Retrieved April 19, 2014, www.whitehouse.gov/equal-pay/career

2009 was the *Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act*³, a law promoting the right, especially for women, to challenge unequal pay.

As will be subsequently demonstrated in this paper for the British and Italian contexts, the media continues to reflect and promote this social exclusion of women. The gender gap in media representation is in fact an amply-documented worldwide phenomenon (cf. the report of the *Global Forum on Media and Gender*, under the auspices of UNESCO, held in Bangkok in December 2013).⁴ In Europe, the discontinuity between the everyday experiences of women and men and the way this gender difference is portrayed in the media is the object of a specific advisory committee of the European Commission.⁵ Detailed reports of gender discrimination in the media are also available for many other realities, such as South Africa (Morna, Mpofu and Glenwright 2010) or Eastern Africa (Tom 2008).

In the area of sports, the invisibility and marginalization of women in the media has received considerable attention. For example, the study by Messner and Cooky (2010) of televised sports reporting in the US over a ten-year span revealed that men's sports received 96.3% of the airtime compared to the 1.6% of women's sports and to the 2.1% of neutral topics. Moreover, what emerged more significantly was the fact that despite the contemporary success of women in all professions and the current drive towards female empowerment, this media marginalization of female athleticism has increased (rather than decreased) over time, a point which motivated the following comment by former American athlete and sports commentator Diana Nyad:

I confess to being shocked to learn that since 1989 very little has changed in the world of televised sports news. As a matter of fact, for women athletes, and fans of women's sports, things have devolved, rather than having evolved. It is frankly unfathomable, and unacceptable, that viewers are actually receiving *less* coverage of women's sports than they were twenty years ago...and that the sports news is still being delivered almost exclusively by men. (Messner and Cooky (2010:3).

Messner and colleagues have continued to monitor this situation of escalating underrepresentation of women in sports and in a recent longitudinal study of American television media state:

We argue that the amount of coverage of women's sports and the quality of that coverage illustrates the ways in which the news media build audiences for men's sport while silencing and marginalizing women's sport. Moreover, the overall lack of coverage of women's sport, despite the tremendous increased participation of girls and women in sport at the high school, collegiate, and professional level, conveys a message to audiences that sport continues to be by, for, and about men. (Cooky, Messner and Hextrum 2013:203)

³ The *Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act*, named after a woman who discovered her employer was paying her less than men doing the same job, and filed a discrimination complaint which arrived at the Supreme Court, makes it easier to effectively challenge unequal pay in the workplace.

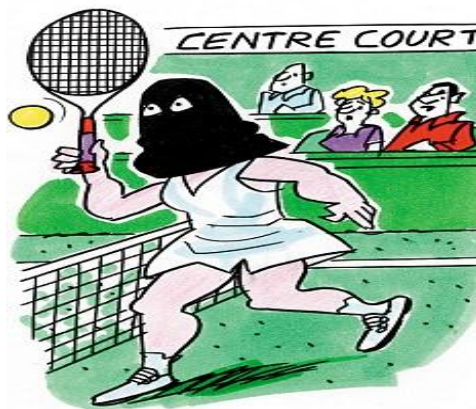
⁴ http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/Events/gfmg_agenda.pdf

⁵ European Commission, 2010, 'Opinion on "Breaking Gender Stereotypes in the Media"', Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, Social Europe, European Commission, Brussels. Retrieved April 19, 2014. http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/other-institutions/advisory-committee/index_en.htm.

Significantly it is to be noted that female athletes often achieve media visibility when they are targeted as sexual objects. For example, in an analysis of coverage of sportswomen in the British tabloid press, Harris and Clayton (2002) found that in a sample of 44 newspapers, the athlete Anna Kournikova appeared in only 27 articles which, moreover, often had little to do with her tennis skills. They note that

In the context of her ranking and early exit from the tournament this clearly highlights how physicality and perceived attractiveness are more highly valued than sporting competence (Harris and Clayton 2002: 397).

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. An example from the British tabloid *The Daily Mail* which, by means of a cartoon, eloquently expresses the choice by the Wimbledon committee to schedule only attractive female tennis players in the central playing courts is reproduced below⁶:



The title of the newspaper article was “*Babe, set and match⁷: Why looks count for more than talent when Wimbledon decides which girls will play on Centre Court*” and the caption accompanying the cartoon was “*When it comes to choosing which women play on Centre Court, good looks count for more than big shots*”.

This study investigates the issue of gender discrimination in the contemporary press through a cross-linguistic lens, using as an example the sports coverage given to another tennis athlete, Maria Sharapova. Through a comparative analysis of the discourse of female athleticism in mainstream newspapers of Britain and Italy, it reveals the persistent tendency in media language to trivialize the female body by representing sportswomen through traditional

⁶ Retrieved from www.dailymail.co.uk, June 29, 2009.

⁷ This is obviously a pun on the routinized formula in tennis competitions: “Game, set and match”.

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. Method

The study adopts a corpus-based approach with a feminist interpretive perspective and uses critical discourse analysis as a general investigative framework. A corpus-based approach to the analysis of discourse entails the investigation of a selected set of texts in the search for data which can support a given hypothesis (cf. Tognini-Bonelli 2001). Following qualitative research frameworks, the argumentation assumes an interpretive perspective implying that the meaning and impact of social patterns can be understood only from some standpoint (cf. Patton 1990:85). The standpoint in this paper is unequivocally feminist, holding that the representation of the female subject in social discourse is filtered through a patriarchal lens. In that sense, the methodology is more precisely that of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a research framework in the humanities and the social sciences which focuses on the relation between discourse and social practices and aims at uncovering the ideological underpinnings behind text representations. Research in CDA targets the ways in which texts harbor ideologically-motivated discourse strategies as well as the ways in which those strategies are discursively resisted and negotiated (cf. Fairclough 2001, 2003, Van Dijk 2008, Wodak and Meyers 2001).

The genre analyzed was newspaper discourse. The corpus consisted of a set of newspaper texts in both English and Italian, compiled from the sports section of mainstream newspapers of Britain and Italy (*The Times*, England and *La Repubblica*, Italy). Thus, for this study, newspapers addressed to the educated public were selected, a choice motivated by the hypothesis that if sexist representations of the female athlete are present in the quality (rather than the tabloid) press, then we could support more forcefully our general assumption: the existence of prejudice towards female athleticism, the persistence of gender-role stereotyping and the ideological intention to sanction and reinforce hegemonic masculinity in professional sports reporting.

2.1. The corpus, organized as two sub-corpora (British English and Italian), contained articles about the female athlete Maria Sharapova over the time span of her presence in tennis competition from 1 January 2003 to 20 August 2009. The English corpus consisted of 15 articles totaling 8,999 words and the Italian corpus consisted of 15 articles totaling 10,665 words. From these two subcorpora, a dataset of descriptive expressions of the athlete were extracted and organized according to two categorical taxonomies as explained in the following section.

2.2. Categorical taxonomies identified in the literature as characteristic of gender bias were then utilized for the application to this specific corpus. They were:

- 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.

By thematic strategy we intend a recurrent discursive pattern which tends to highlight a dominant theme, such as the erotic representation of the female body, which will be subsequently illustrated. By conceptual metaphor, we refer to a specific stance in contemporary Cognitive Linguistics, labeled Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which holds that metaphorical *expressions* are found in language because metaphorical *concepts* are present in the mind (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). In other words, as an example, the expression “She’s foxy” could be said to be motivated by a conceptual analogy associating women with small animals.

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. 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 English and Italian corpora. 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 poses⁸. 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”.

⁸ For an analysis of the patriarchally-motivated use of gender-stereotyped photographs and captions in sports media, see Duncan (1993).

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 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 [e.g. *She lives very much with her senses*]).⁹ 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”.

2.3. The discourse data was then extracted from the corpus both manually and with the aid of electronic content queries suggested by previous research. The data was searched for utterances referencing the categories in the taxonomies cited above. The utterances were then organized in the form of a mapping of discourse functional goals (both thematic and metaphorical) with linguistic expressions. This enabled us to look for common descriptive patterns and eventual cross-linguistic differences.

3. Results

3.1. *The English dataset*

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

⁹ Following conventions in Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the mental analogy (or conceptual metaphor) is indicated in capital letters. The figurative expression is indicated in italics with the word motivating the analogy in bold.

Table 1

Examples of Thematic Strategies in the English dataset of <i>The Times</i> corpus	
The Invisibility 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>

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*).¹⁰

¹⁰ 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

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 sugar¹¹.

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. We would now like to give examples from the English dataset of the taxonomy of conceptual metaphors adapted from Luchjenbroers (1997: 38-40).

Table 2

Examples of Conceptual Metaphors in the English dataset of <i>The Times</i> corpus	
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 Sharapova 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>

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.

¹¹ N. Harman, “Maria Sharapova, tennis still my driving force”, *The Times*, June 22, 2009.

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*¹².

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. The Italian dataset

The Italian dataset revealed similar patterns. The expressions which emerged seem to be motivated by the categories of both taxonomies.

3.2.1. The Italian dataset revealed a heavy loading of the characteristics ascribed to the category, *Eroticizing of the female body* (Harris and Clayton 2002). In Table 3, a selection of some expressions from the dataset with their English glosses is presented.

Table 3

Eroticizing of the Female Body: Examples from the Italian dataset of the <i>La Repubblica</i> corpus	
Italian expressions	English glosses
-certi gemiti, certi rantoli, ...orgasmi	-particular moans, whines ¹³orgasms
- con i sessantacinque chili benissimo distribuiti sul metro e ottantotto da top model	-with her sixty-five kilos perfectly distributed on her 6ft tall top model body
- con le lunghissime, splendide gambe	-with her very long splendid legs
- dal petto delizioso	-with her delicious chest
- dalla boccuccia rosa, ... riprendevano ad uscire gemiti e rantoli, o se preferite “grantoli” ¹⁴	from her little pink mouth - moans and wails, or if you prefer “grunt-wails”
- i gemiti della Sharapova	-Sharapova's moans
- le gambe alte sin quasi alle ascelle, aggressiva come una tigre.	-her long legs which almost reach her armpits, as aggressive as a tiger

¹² S. Barnes, “Sharapova in with a shout after turning up the volume”, *The Times*, June 27, 2007.

¹³ In this Italian dataset, there is an attention to the sounds emitted by Sharapova during competition which are onomatopaeic words similar to the English “moan”, “wail”, “grunt” etc. In Italian especially the word *gemiti*[moans] often carries a sexual overtone, a word sense that the journalist exploits to eroticize these vocalizations explicitly referring to them as “orgasmic”.

¹⁴ The word “grantoli” does not exist in the Italian lexicon. It was coined by the journalist as a combination of *grugniti* [grunts] and *rantoli* [wails], in order to emphasize the sexual nuance which he attributes to Sharapova's vocal emissions. during the tennis matches. A translation of this word is perhaps impossible and even the gloss given [grunt-wails] as a pseudo-compound is at best approximate.

- <i>lo stile Sharapova & C. in passerella a Wimbledon</i>	Sharapova & company style, on the catwalk of Wimbledon
- <i>ma quelle loro emissioni vocali potrebbero ... suggerire analoghe sonorità riservate di solito, ad intimità sessuali</i>	-but whose vocal emissions could suggest similar sounds reserved usually for moments of sexual intimacy
- <i>maglia a maniche lunghe (con scollo comunque provocante)</i>	-long-sleeved sweater (with a provoking plunging décolleté)
- <i>maglietta trasparentissima tipo panciotto, per di più plissettato, dorato, argentato, di prezioso tessuto made in Italy, ha offerto al pubblico desiderio Maria</i>	-a very transparent clinging-type t-shirt, pleated even, golden, silver, made of a rich made-in-Italy fabric, offered Maria to public desire
- <i>petto delizioso</i>	-delicious chest
- <i>sexy Sharapova</i>	-sexy Sharapova
- <i>sulla superba flessuosissima schiena</i>	-on her superb sinuously flexible back
- <i>sulle lunghissime gambe, che sembrano più da ballerina che da tennista.</i>	-on her long legs which seem to belong to a ballet dancer rather than to a tennis player

Moreover, it is particularly interesting to note that in the Italian corpus, the sex-related physical description of the athlete is coded directly in the headline, either explicitly or by innuendo. This is particularly important when we consider the role of the newspaper headline in framing and focusing the text message (cf. Van Dijk 1995). Two examples are: *Colpi e gemiti d'amore per la bella Sharapova*¹⁵ [Strokes and love moans for the beautiful Sharapova] and *Melbourne, il tennis a 40 gradi, la Sharapova rischia di sciogliersi*¹⁶ [Tennis in 40 degrees, Sharapova risks melting].

3.2.2. A strong similarity emerged in the Italian data also for the Luchjenbroers taxonomy, described in the Table 4 below.

Table 4

Examples of Conceptual Metaphors in the Italian dataset of the <i>La Repubblica</i> corpus		
Conceptual Metaphor	Italian expressions	English glosses
Women as animals	- <i>la campionessa mondiale del grantolo (grugnito più rantolo)</i>	-the female champion of grunt-wail (grunt plus wail)
	- <i>aggressiva come una</i>	-as aggressive as a tiger

¹⁵ G. Clerici, "Colpi e gemiti d'amore per la bella Sharapova", *La Repubblica*, June 25, 2003, p. 46.

¹⁶ G. Clerici, "Melbourne, il tennis a 40 gradi la Sharapova rischia di sciogliersi", *La Repubblica*, January 17, 2007, p. 65.

	<i>tigre</i>	
Women as embryos (undeveloped or immature)	- <i>boccuccia rosa</i> - <i>La bionda prende il microfono tra le ditine</i> ¹⁷ ... - <i>suo visuccio carino ma brufoloso</i>	-little pink mouth -The blond takes the microphone between her little fingers... -.her cute little pimpled face
Women as children (at play)	- <i>i suoi urletti sportivi sul prato verde di Wimbledon</i>	-her little sporty howls on the green lawn of Wimbledon
Women as children (not strong)	<i>In campo, la sua bambina mostrava testardaggine ancor superiore al coraggio.</i>	On the court, his baby showed stubbornness rather than courage
Women as children (not bright)	<i>“Non mi faccio mai mancare un dessert al cioccolato”.</i> <i>-nel faccio apparentemente innocente</i>	“I never do without a chocolate dessert” -in her little, apparently innocent face
Women as children (not rational, emotional, sensitive)	<i>Maria Sharapova pronuncerà al microfono le sue prime parole con la voce rotta dalla commozione.</i>	Maria Sharapova will pronounce into the microphone her first words with a voice broken with emotion

3.2.3. There is also a resemblance in the Italian dataset related to the tendency of multiple coding of these conceptualizations as can be seen in the following example:

*Poi ci ha comunicato di **non rendersi conto di grantuolare**. Lo ha sempre fatto, sin fin **da piccina***¹⁸.

[Then, she informed us of the fact that she never realized that she **grunt-wails**. She has always done it, from when she was **a teeny-weeny child**.]

Thus, the athlete is metaphorized as an animal (*grantuolare* - *grugnito più rantolo* [grunt-wail-grunt plus wail]) and as a child: not strong (*da piccina* [a teeny-weeny child]), not bright (*innocente* [innocent]), not rational (*non rendersi conto* [didn't realize]).

¹⁷In Italian the diminutive suffixes, -ino, -ina, -ini, -ine, are often used to refer to the body parts of infants and children, as in *piedino* [little foot], *manina* [little hand], *ditini* [little fingers], *braccine* [little arms].

¹⁸G. Clerici “Colpi e gemiti d’amore per la bella Sharapova”, *La Repubblica*, June 25, 2003, p. 46.

4. Conclusion

This 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 quality press of two very different cultures (British and Italian), 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 cross-linguistic perspective of the study revealed similar patterns in sports reporting in both the British and Italian press. The presence of common thematic and metaphorical strategies across languages, genres and cultures, which 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. Discussion

Many scholars have emphasized the powerful role of the media in orienting ideological processes (cf. especially Fairclough 2001, van Dijk 1998a, 2002, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2009) and among these, several have emphasized its impact on the modelling of gender-specific positions (cf. Duncan 1993, Harris and Clayton 2002, Connell 1995, 2002, Messner, Cooky and Hextrun 2013, Morna, Mpofu and Glenwright 2010, 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.

The trivialization of the female body

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 (*the Times* in Great Britain, and *la Repubblica* in Italy) over a five-year period concerning the tennis player Maria Sharapova. 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 in both the British and Italian sports culture, 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 of both the British and the Italian newspapers, numerous articles featuring the tennis player Maria Sharapova focused on non-task relevant commentary which de-emphasized her athletic ability and highlighted her physical attractiveness and sexual desirability. In some cases, the descriptions could be said to

approach sexually-gratifying male voyeurism (in the British dataset: *a little skirt ... swirly enough to give every photographer a chance for the Marilyn-over-the-grating shot*; in the Italian dataset: *maglietta trasparente tipo panciotta ha offerto al pubblico desiderio* Maria [a very transparent clinging-type t-shirt offered Maria to public desire]). Moreover, in both the English and Italian datasets, Maria Sharapova was 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 “boccuccia rosa” [little pink mouth] in the Italian data, or “Sharapova in full cry” in the English data. 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 pro-active 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 (cf. the cartoon in the introduction).

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:

U.S. 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."

Resisting the trivialization of the female body

Having identified areas of sports journalism in two cultures as the locus of biased gendered discourse, the question now arises regarding possible inroads for resisting this type of discursive discrimination.

The first step necessary to overcome the tendency to portray women as sexually-available objects rather than competent athletic professionals would be the general recognition of the patriarchal design behind this biased representation of the female athlete. Unfortunately, this awareness remains a struggle. Since the media displays "an empire of images" for which "there are no protective borders" (Bordo 2003: B5-B9), it is obviously difficult for the uncritical human subject to withstand the all-embracing, mind-invading, behavior-conditioning power of this world of biased verbal and visual images.

Now, as a response to the objectification of the female body, feminist theory has embraced the concept of empowerment, viewed as the necessity and the will for women, and for the female subject, to move from mere awareness of female objectification to social agency, from passive cognizance to active engagement. And, in fact, a second step is necessary, that of resistance to the "empire of images" which trivialize women and female corporeity.

Undoubtedly, social institutions have a role to play in this effort. Home, school and athletic organizations should become arenas for the promotion of awareness of gender bias in the sports media by emphasizing the relative invisibility of the female athlete and the tendency to minimize her athletic achievements and to trivialize her public image. Parents and teachers especially should emphasize the irony behind the representation of a strong, skilled female athlete in terms of naive childishness and sexual desirability.

However, awareness is insufficient and only an active, incessant resistance to gender bias in language can contribute to gender justice. Messner and Cooky (2010) have noted the contribution to change that can be made by sports organizations if they provide more substantial information to the media about female athletes. They also suggest that media should encourage the presence of female sports reporters and commentators. In fact, studies have found that although there has been an increase in the number of women working in the media, managerial positions (producers, executives, chief editors and publishers) are still held primarily by men, a finding which is statistically higher in many third world countries.¹⁹ (cf. White 2009 and Byerly 2013).

The responsibility of the media has been signalled out in the 2004 UNESCO document on women and sport (MINEPS IV),²⁰ which states, “the diffusion of this positive information will only be efficient if the media invest themselves and accept the idea of quality women’s sport.” Obviously, offensive images like the cartoon reproduced in the introduction of this paper and language uses such as those reported in the data should not be tolerated. And thus more courageous acts are perhaps called for. Of course these will depend on the contextual specificities of the given culture. We can merely suggest for example the creation of intense professional, governmental and non-governmental networking to support policy formation relative to the use of neutral and unbiased language in journalism, as argued by White (2009). We could also deem useful the promotion by feminist activist groups of negative consumer reactions to newspapers which permit discriminatory language. Persistent and/or extreme cases of stereotyped journalistic reporting could be likened to pornography and the feasibility of legal action could be suggested. Given moreover the new communication modalities of internet social networks, far-reaching responses targeting specific sexist operations in the press can be rapidly implemented.²¹

Some interesting initiatives in this direction can be mentioned. For example, the on-line, open-access international student journal *Student Pulse* **dedicated a feature** article to the

¹⁹ The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) reports that throughout the world, so-called “soft” subjects” regarding the private sphere (family, arts, fashion etc.) are assigned to female journalists while serious topics regarding politics, business and the economy are covered by male reporters. (cf. Byerly 2013) <http://www.gsdr.org/gto/o/topic-guides/gender/gender-and-media>

²⁰ The Fourth International Conference of Ministers and Senior Officials Responsible for Sport and Physical Education (MINEPS IV) available at www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/physical-education-and-sport/women-and-sport/

²¹ One could even suggest the promotion of a computer app similar to the “Equal Pay App challenge” promoted in the US by the Obama administration. (cf. www.whitehouse.gov/issues/equal-pay/app-challenge). The “Equal Pay App challenge” invited software developers to use publicly available labor data and other online resources to create applications to educate users about the pay gap and to build tools to promote equal pay. Similarly an “equal gender sports coverage app” could be foreseen with the aim of making data regarding female athletes from all over the world readily available to an international public. www.whitehouse.gov/issues/equal-pay/app-challenge.

question of the sexualization of female athletes,²² thereby sensitizing students worldwide (who moreover can respond and interact through twitter blogs) to the dangers inherent in the media's representation of female athletes:

Through the sexualization of female athletes, the media entrench society's patriarchal structure, which undermines the feminist movement's attempt to achieve gender equality and greater opportunities for women (Liang 2011).

In conclusion, we suggest that due attention should be paid by feminist scholarship and activism to the textual representation of female athleticism, precisely because the sports world harbours and propagates ideologically-motivated, sexist stereotypes. It could be suggested 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 legitimization of patriarchal ideology.

²² <http://www.studentpulse.com/articles/587/2/the-medias-sexualization-of-female-athletes-a-bad-call-for-the-modern-game>

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