

**‘Pink hair, don’t care’: A print media analysis of Megan Rapinoe at the 2019 Women’s
World Cup**

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Introduction

The 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup in France saw unprecedented levels of success for women's football. Football's world governing body, FIFA (2019), described the tournament as a "cultural phenomenon" after revealing that, for the first time, the cumulative television audience for the tournament exceeded one billion people. On average, the live match audience was around 17m viewers—more than double the 8.3m from the 2015 tournament in Canada. Moreover, the tournament's final match – between the United States of America (US) and Netherlands – was the most-watched Women's World Cup match ever, with an average live television audience of around 82m.

During the tournament, the eventual champions – the US, who defeated Netherlands 2-0 in the final – saw their veteran midfielder, Megan Rapinoe, win the Golden Boot (the tournament's highest goal-scorer) and the Golden Ball (the tournament's most valuable player). Off the pitch, Rapinoe – one of numerous 'out' lesbian athletes competing at the 2019 Women's World Cup – also received an unprecedented amount of media coverage for a high-profile disagreement with US President, Donald Trump. Trump first criticised Rapinoe for her failure to sing or put her hand on her chest during the National Anthem. In response, when asked about a potential visit to meet the President, Rapinoe responded: "I'm not going to the fucking White House" (Gallagher, Wright & Kassing, 2021).

In this chapter, we analyse the British print media coverage of Rapinoe during the one-month period of the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup (7th June – 7th July), and the week following the tournament's conclusion (8th – 14th July). With specific focus on three British broadsheet newspapers – *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, and *The Telegraph* – we examine three key themes in our analysis: coverage of Rapinoe's personality, her outspoken nature, and how she was presented as a role model. Accordingly, this chapter builds on other recent research about the coverage of lesbian athletes in the media.

Women's Sport, Gendered Media Coverage, and Megan Rapinoe

Previous research has examined the portrayal of female athletes within sports media with prominence on major multi-discipline events (Bernstein, 2002) or mixed events (Crossman, Vincent & Speed, 2007; Bowes & Kitching, 2019a). More recently, however, there has been a focus on football in various cultural contexts and competitions, including French coverage of the 2011 FIFA World Cup (Ravel & Gareau, 2016); Dutch coverage of the 2017 European Championships (Peeters, Elling & Sterkenburg, 2019); English coverage of the 2015 World Cup (Black & Fielding-Lloyd, 2019; Bourne & Pitkin, 2019; Petty & Pope, 2019), and English coverage of the 2017 European Championships (Williams, 2019). The current research has been able to be conducted because of the increased media coverage, yet more does not necessarily equal better coverage. Interestingly, however, Petty and Pope's (2019) analysis of the 2015 World Cup concluded that, "Perhaps for the first time, media coverage around this mega-event report on sport *as sport*, whereby the gender of the athlete was largely irrelevant" (p. 499). Of the same tournament, Bourne and Pitkin (2019, p. 170) argued that, "Women's football gained significantly more popularity and positivity in comparison to previous research."

While most research has focused on a team's coverage, rather than any particular individual, Megan Rapinoe is an individual who often divides opinion (Frederick, Pegoraro & Schmidt, 2020). She has also been the subject of previous literature focusing on her activism and how this is portrayed by both print media (e.g., Bullingham & Postlethwaite, 2019; Gallagher, Wright & Kassing, 2021) and social media (e.g., Schmidt et al., 2019). Rapinoe is an advocate for speaking out against inequality in a variety of issues, including LGBTQ+ equality, racial injustice, and gender inequality (Bullingham & Postlethwaite, 2019). This activism, however, has not always been accepted or celebrated; Schmidt et al.

(2019), for instance, summarise their findings noting that within US society, “athletes and political stances do not mix” (p. 666).

Yet Rapinoe came to the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup as a leader in the fight for equal pay for the US team, the first white professional athlete to take a knee, speaking out about (and criticising) President Trump, out lesbian (with a high-profile partner—basketball player Sue Bird), and with bright pink hair.

Research has identified that female athletes face gendered coverage in the forms of sexualization (including appearance and sexual orientation), infantilization, ambivalent or extraneous commentary, and trivialization (Bernstein, 2002; Domeneghetti, 2019; Godoy-Pressland, 2014a). While there has been an increase in recent coverage, the increase has tended to be when athletes or teams are either winning or successful (Biscomb & Matheson, 2019; Ravel & Gareau, 2016) showing that women are able to gain coverage if they are successful.

Female athletes have previously been subjected to gendered coverage focusing on their appearance and reinforcing heterosexuality (Harris & Clayton, 2002). This notion of reinforcing an athlete’s heterosexuality led to athletes promoting a ‘heterosexy’ image for media consumption (Griffin, 1998). Furthermore, sport media’s typical preference for feminine-appropriate, aesthetically pleasing sport where femininity can be celebrated is tangible (Crossman, Vincent & Speed, 2007; Godoy-Pressland, 2014a). Indeed, as Bruce (2016) notes, athletes covered by the media tend to be “white, explicitly or implicitly heterosexual, and with lean toned body types that reflect idealized femininity” (p. 372). This leads to athletes either conforming to the feminine ideal or having to ensure that they take part in ‘identity management’ (Harris, 2005). Historically, athletes who fail to ascribe to the traditional feminine ideal are reported differently to those conforming to gender norms. Godoy-Pressland (2014b), for example, writes that, “representing certain talented

sportswomen as tomboys is a media mechanism which assuages male readers' fears about the threat to male dominance in sport" (p. 157). Likewise, Bullingham and Postlethwaite (2019) concluded that more recent coverage of Casey Stoney and Megan Rapinoe moved forward and changed focus, allowing athletes to be portrayed around their contribution and their individuality. Accordingly, it can be argued that Rapinoe – portrayed as a tomboy yet simultaneously challenging the status quo with her activism – breaks this mould.

Changing Times?

Sports media's gendered coverage is largely attributable to it being a traditionally male-dominated institution. In the US, Lapchick (2018) shows that men comprised: 90% of sports reporters, 70% of assistant sport editors, 85% of columnists, 89% of reporters, and 80% of copy editors. While some progress had been made in the hiring of female assistant sports editors, there was a decline in the overall number of female reporters (Lapchick, 2018)—something which could be attributed to the masculine environment of the sports media workplace (e.g., Magrath, 2020). Similar statistics are unavailable in the UK; however, a report in *The Guardian* estimated that women write only 1.8% of sports articles (Martinson, 2016). Moreover, Franks and O'Neill (2016) found that 96% of the newspaper coverage of the London 2012 Olympic Games was written by male reporters. Similarly, in their analysis of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup, Black and Fielding-Lloyd (2019) showed that most reports were written by men. Accordingly, there has been a "general trend of invisibility of female sports journalists in the national UK papers" (Frank & O'Neill, 2016, p. 286).

There is, however, evidence of potential change with respect to amount and type of coverage. While Bernstein (2002) acknowledged that the 1990s was a decade that showed little improvement for women's coverage, subsequent research has been more positive. Significantly, coverage of major women's football events has increased in England. There are

two potential reasons for this: first, the England Women's Team (The Lionesses) are enjoying greater success on the field (Peeters, Elling & Can Sterkenburg, 2019; Ravel & Gareau, 2016), finishing third in the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup, fourth in the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup, and winning the 2019 SheBelieves Cup. Second, Biscomb and Matheson (2019) argue that women's football has become part of "popular culture" in the UK, and, therefore, receives greater media coverage. This is supported by the overall number of journalists in attendance at the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup in France (Domeneghetti, 2019).

But while improvements are evident, this does not equate to quality media reporting. In 2019, however, Petty and Pope's analysis of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup showed a distinct change toward more positive coverage of women's football. They wrote that this might signal, "a hopeful new direction from existing research on...women's football in England" (p. 499). This optimism must, however, be tinged with caution. For example, in their media analysis of elite female golfers competing on a men's tour, Bowes and Kitching (2019a) argued that, despite some positive coverage, there was still evidence of reinforcement of the gender binary. Similarly, an analysis of key organisations' Twitter found a promotion of female narratives, but this was tarnished with gendered framing throughout the competition (Bowes & Kitching, 2019b).

These changes have allowed female athletes to navigate through a changing media dynamic. Bruce (2016, p. 372), for example, acknowledged that "a new generation of female athlete is charting their course through an increasingly open and complex media landscape." This includes significant increases in social media followings; global female superstars, such as Serena Williams and Ronda Rousey, have tens of millions of 'followers' on social media, thus providing extra platforms through which to promote themselves and, oftentimes, women's sports more broadly. Perhaps most pertinent to this chapter, at the time of writing,

Megan Rapinoe has 2.2m Instagram followers and 917.9k Twitter followers. Female athletes are increasingly presented as individuals, and what they bring to the team, sport, or environment (Bullingham & Postlethwaite, 2019).

Methods

We conducted a textual analysis (Silverman, 2001) of print media articles located on the LexisNexis database over the one-month period of the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup (7th June – 7th July 2019). To allow ample time for media coverage of the aftermath of the tournament – such as tournament reviews – we also included articles in the one-week period immediately after the tournament (8th – 14th July). Textual analysis is an unobtrusive tool to measure communication messages (McKee, 2003). It is a subjective approach which permits researchers the opportunity to uncover and interpret implicit and explicit meanings in a range of textual data (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Accordingly, while other recent research on women's sport has adopted alternative approaches – such as content analyses (Godoy-Pressland, 2014a; Petty & Pope, 2019) – textual analyses typically omit numerical and statistical data, instead maintaining a commitment to narrative detail.

Preliminary searches on LexisNexis for newspaper articles or editorials related to the 2019 Women's World Cup revealed thousands of results from English-speaking publications from across the world. When this was narrowed to include the top ten UK newspapers, there were approximately 350 articles. Thus, to provide both a manageable and balanced sample, this was then reduced to include articles from three British broadsheet newspapers across a broad political spectrum: *The Independent*, *The Guardian* (and its Sunday equivalent) and *The Telegraph*. Once duplications and wire reports were removed, a total of 161 articles were analysed for this research.

While some scholars prefer a numeric content analysis of sports media representation gender and sexuality, the majority focus on providing an interpretative analysis of the text itself. This is the approach adopted by others in similar research focusing on the representation of women's sports (Bullingham & Postlethwaite, 2019; Crossman, Vincent & Speed, 2007). Because this approach relies upon subjective interpretation, both researchers worked independently using inductive levels of coding to highlight consistent themes within the articles analysed (e.g., Miles & Huberman, 1984). Once each author had compared notes, we began drawing out the main themes surrounding the print media's narrative of Megan Rapinoe. The analytical methods employed throughout this process ensured the validity of our approach, and the use of independent coding enhanced inter-rater reliability and trustworthiness of results.

Following the completion of our data analysis, we identified a range of dominant themes, some of which are unpacked and discussed in greater detail in the forthcoming sections.

Results

Rapinoe as a personality

In the 161 articles reviewed for this research, it was clear that the portrayal of Megan Rapinoe focused on her image and personality, with reference to her coolness under pressure, and her outspoken nature outside of sport. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Bourne & Pitkin, 2019), there was some focus on Rapinoe's image, although this is likely because her image challenges social norms for example her hair colour. Evidencing this, Caitlin Murray, in *The Guardian*, wrote, "Every reporter pushes forward to get as close as possible to the women with short, pink hair and round, pink-tinted sunglasses" (5th July 2019). Clark Mindock made an interesting connection to an historical activist: "Rapinoe...with circular

sunglasses reminiscent of John Lennon and purple hair” (*The Independent*, 10th July 2019).

Clearly, then, Rapinoe’s hair colour was something which made her stand out from others and was therefore seized upon by journalists.

Alongside this, her personality – both on and off the pitch – was evident in journalists’ coverage. In *The Telegraph*, Jordan Nobbs, a current England player (injured at the time of the tournament), wrote, “I don’t think anyone has matched Megan Rapinoe [in terms of]...biggest personality” (8th July 2019). Similarly, in *The Guardian*, Rapinoe was described as playing football “the way she seems to approach life: with flair, irreverence and supreme confidence” (Caitlin Murray, 29th June 2019). However, it was Rapinoe’s confidence, or – as some suggested: arrogance – that was also noted by some journalists. In *The Guardian*, Arwa Mahdawi wrote:

Women are supposed to keep ourselves small; Megan Rapinoe’s power-pose unapologetically takes up space. It’s not just an acknowledgement of victory, it’s an expression of defiance. It says: I deserve to be here, I deserve admiration, I deserve applause (13th July 2019).

However, the negativity surrounding her confidence appeared to come from male journalists and yet female journalists seemed to enjoy the challenge to status quo. As Yomi Adegoke wrote in *The Guardian*: “Piers Morgan isn't a fan, either. Rapinoe's open-armed celebration after a goal apparently offended him...anyway, the problem, it appears, was less about the celebration and more who it came from” (3rd July 2019). Likewise, Izzy Christiansen wrote, “As Megan Rapinoe said, this is the pinnacle of our sport and we've seen two iconic American players produce iconic celebrations. It’s clever, its impressive and it’s by no means arrogant” (*The Independent*, 6th July 2019).

Her now-famous goal celebration – during which she stands with her arms outstretched in a celebratory pose – also added to her portrayal by journalists. Charlie

Brinkhurst-Cuff wrote, “The image of the US footballer Megan Rapinoe was captured, her arms thrown out to the world, chest proud as a sculpted bust. She had made herself as big as she could, settling in the ultimate power stance” (*The Guardian*, 1st July 2019). It also became clear, though, that Rapinoe could temper her enthusiastic, outgoing nature, and keep calm during key moments of matches. Indeed, she was described as “the most unflappable player,” “cool-as-ice” (Caitlin Murray, *The Guardian*, 7th July 2019), and her penalties were described as “coolly-taken” (Suzanne Wrack, *The Guardian*, 7th July 2019).

Rapinoe as Outspoken

Rapinoe was also portrayed as an activist with a particular cause; indeed, she has become an outspoken role model to campaign for social change. Authors in *The Guardian*, for example, wrote that Rapinoe “often acts as the moral compass of the team” (Caitlin Murray, Gemma Clarke, Shireen Ahmed & Beau Dure, 10th June 2019). In *The Telegraph*, fellow professional Jordan Nobbs wrote that Rapinoe is “a player unafraid of speaking her mind and fighting for what she is thinking is right” (8th July 2019). Suzanne Wrack augmented this image: “She [Rapinoe] is more than just a mouthpiece” (*The Guardian*, 28th June 2019). Martin Pengelly, also in *The Guardian*, linked Rapinoe’s outspoken persona to nationality, describing her as being “unafraid to speak truth to power in the best American way” (1st July 2019). Indeed, her outspoken nature was acknowledged by various journalists, who described her as “one of the most outspoken US athletes” (Luke Edwards, *The Telegraph*, 27th June 2019) and “the outspoken USA co-captain” (Martin Pengelly, *The Guardian*, 9th July 2019).

Accordingly, Rapinoe’s propensity to fight for and support a range of issues was a key factor in the media’s portrayal. In *The Independent*, for example, Clark Mindock wrote, “The co-captain of the World Champion team extolled fans to lead in their own lives and to

take on the challenges of making the world a better place” (10th July 2019). Campaigning for these causes has, therefore, led to her portrayal as a role model.

Rapinoe as Role Model

Rapinoe’s enhanced profile during the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup was acknowledged by the media both during and after the tournament. In *The Independent*, Jon Sharman noted that Rapinoe could have challenged Trump in the US election, “The US Women's World Cup star led the incumbent by 42 percent to 41 in the speculative survey by Public Policy Poll, a left-leaning outfit” (10th July 2019). Writing in *The Independent*, Ben Burrows acknowledged, “Megan Rapinoe is now a household name” (10th July 2019). Similarly, Mark Critchley wrote that, following her success, “Rapinoe has become a national icon” (*The Independent*, 10th July 2019). This role modelling was also acknowledged with her on-field actions. In *The Guardian*, Julie Welch wrote, “If I was a girl now, she’s the woman I’d want to be” (6th July 2019). And, recognising other players alongside Rapinoe – such as Lucy Bronze and Rose Lavelle – Sean Ingle wrote that they acted as “fantastic role models” (*The Guardian*, 8th July 2019).

Some sections of the media – including Kitty Wenham in *The Independent* – acknowledged that everyone has a responsibility to ensure sport is an inclusive environment. Such was the influence of Rapinoe during the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup, Kitty Wenham even wrote that she was “everyone’s crush of the hour” (*The Independent*, 12th July 2019). Interestingly, however, she also noted some trivialisation around the language used by heterosexual fans, and the potential damage this may have: “You can acknowledge that Megan Rapinoe is an attractive, powerful and accomplished women without trivialising queerness... You can admit that you love, admire and adore your friends, family and heroes without having to specify that you don’t want to date them.” Thus, there remains the need for

the consideration of language around the admiration of openly lesbian athletes by heterosexual women.

It is clear from our analysis that Rapinoe created a large platform at the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup—something which was also documented by sections of the media. In *The Independent*, for example, Mark Critchley wrote, “How Rapinoe chose to use her enhanced profile will probably have more impact on the image of women's football than the actions of any other players” (9th July 2019). Similarly, Jack Rathborn further acknowledged Rapinoe's impact: “Rapinoe has reiterated her thoughts and emphasised the importance of their status and the role they can play in society” (*The Independent* 27th June 2019). This is, perhaps, the first-time female team sport athlete has become a role model that transcends the boundaries of the pitch.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the British print media coverage of the Golden Boot and Golden Ball winner (and winner of the tournament), Megan Rapinoe. Rapinoe received an unprecedented amount of media coverage throughout the course of the tournament, not least because of her high-profile Twitter fallout with President Trump, but also because of her willingness to stand-up for broader socio-political issues. Adopting a textual analysis of coverage during the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup and the week after the tournament we analysed 161 articles in British broadsheet newspapers, *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, and *The Telegraph*.

Our analysis revealed a range of interesting findings. First, we showed that, congruent with previous research (Griffin, 1998; Harris & Clayton, 2002), sections of this coverage centred on Rapinoe's appearance and personality. Departing from older research, however – which documents the media's preference for a feminine-appropriate, aesthetically-pleasing

image (e.g., Crossman, Vincent & Speed, 2007) – this coverage instead focused on Rapinoe’s pink hair (and Lennon-like sunglasses), and the effect this had on making her stand out as a key player, both on and off the pitch. This was an important process in coverage of her personality an activist off the pitch while maintaining a calm, but ruthless, approach on it. There was also positive coverage of Rapinoe’s ongoing willingness and commitment to support broader social change. Thus, it can be argued that Rapinoe has been formally recognized by the media in her role as an activist—as has been addressed in recent literature (Bullingham & Postlethwaite, 2019; Frederick, Pegoraro & Schmidt, 2020; Gallagher, Wright & Kassing, 2021; Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoraro & Spencer, 2019). Finally, given her role as an outspoken activist, and an increasingly successful athlete on the field, it is – perhaps – unsurprising that Rapinoe was referred to and presented in the media as a role model. Descriptions of her as “iconic” and “a household name” across the world is clear evidence of her rising stock.

In many ways the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup will be remembered as being the most successful women’s football tournament to date, particularly due to the significant increase of media coverage. However, the tournament will also be remembered for other reasons, too. Players became role models for their behaviours, both on and off the pitch, which was recognised by the media. Rapinoe, and others, found this growing platform the place to challenge authority and campaign for positive social change and there was a willingness for the media to report it. Accordingly, the focus on one, specific athlete both supports and builds upon other recent research which shows positive coverage of women’s football (Bourne & Pitkin, 2019; Petty & Pope, 2019). Yet Rapinoe can be seen as a polarizing character (e.g., Frederick, Pegoraro & Schmidt, 2020) due to her unmitigated approach for justice and her demand for attention while she has the platform and the

spotlight, more research is needed on specific athletes' presentation in the media is required to further test this hypothesis.

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