



# Sports Media and Race

“Media sport is not an innocent player in society; the ideologies, attitudes, and values that are present in media sport production powerfully shape our understandings of ourselves and others”

*(Bruce, 2013, p. 133)*

## 🔍 Main research question

# How do sport journalists and media audiences give meaning to race and ethnicity?

**Why research this topic?** Televised football can be considered one of the main forms of entertainment nowadays where meanings around cultural differences are (re)constructed on an almost daily basis. As sports media are widely consumed around the world, especially among young audiences, these platforms become an arena where differences between race, ethnicity, gender, disabilities, nationality, among others, are continuously debated. For this reason, it is crucial (for both consumers and producers) to critically reflect on the role of media in (re)producing and challenging power discourses in and through sports talk.

## 📅 Timeline

*Some events that have impacted this research*



This research has been developed mainly in the European context: the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Poland.

## 🔑 Key Concepts

### **Racism:**

The process of exclusion or inclusion based on physical characteristics, consequently reinforcing a hierarchy.

### **Whiteness:**

A process consisting of discourses and cultural practices that sustain White normativity and structural advantage.

### **Sincere fictions:**

Personal mythologies that serve to sustain an internalized image of themselves as being objective and race-neutral.

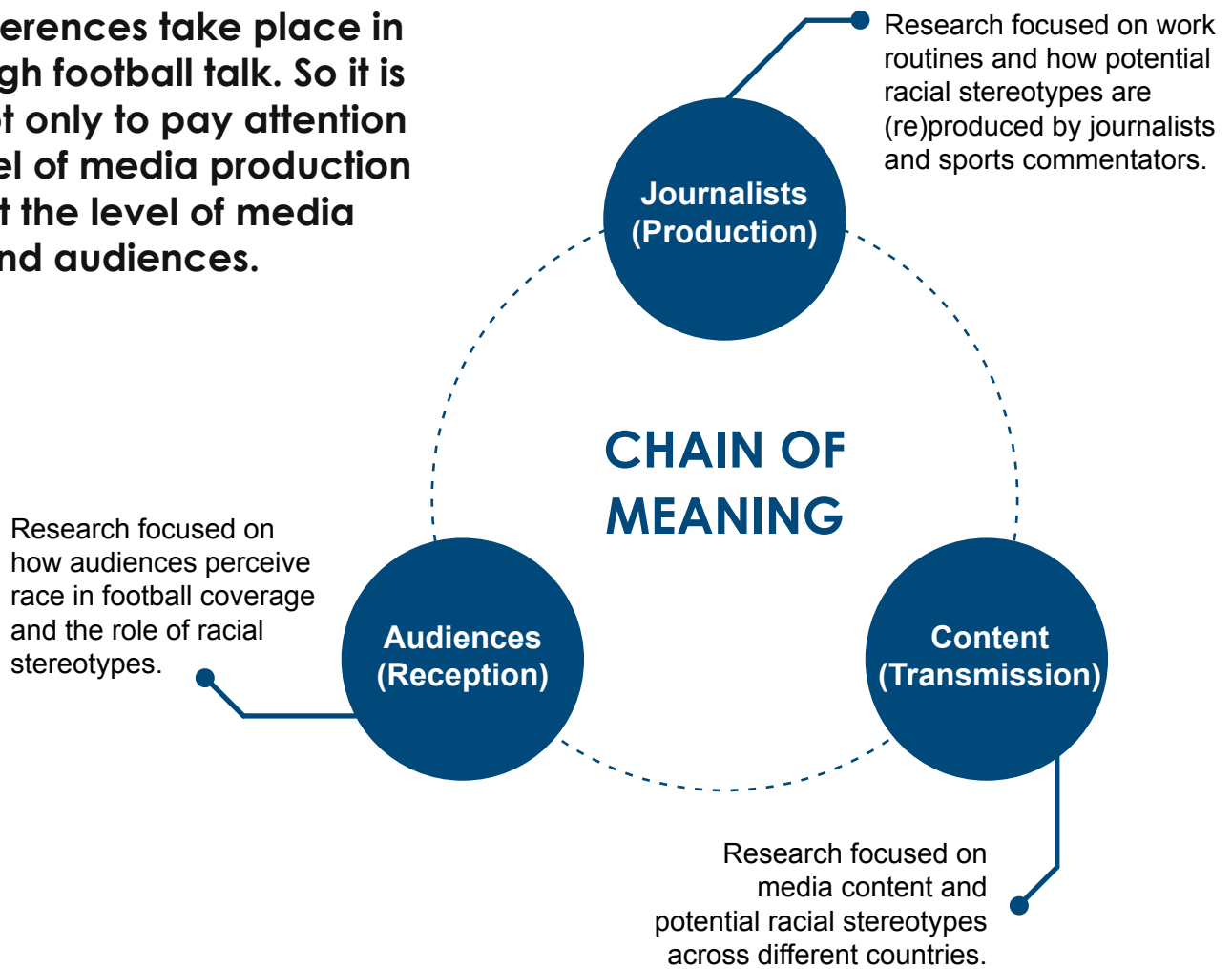
## Looking ahead...

### What could be researched about this topic in the near future?

Online games like FIFA and how online platforms for sports depict players, race, and racial groups.

## Research Framework

The constructions of racial and ethnic differences take place in and through football talk. So it is crucial not only to pay attention at the level of media production but also at the level of media content and audiences.



## Key Theories

### **Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

- Acknowledges racism as endemic in society.
- Centralises marginalised voices and their experiences.
- Challenges colour-blindness and race-neutrality.
- Aims not to only understand but to contribute to change.

### **Critical Whiteness Studies**

- Looks at how Whiteness is centric in society and culture, and in creating potential blindness to privileges associated with White identity.
- Acknowledges hierarchy among different 'types of Whiteness'; (eg.: Western and Eastern Europe).
- Aims not to only understand but to contribute to change.

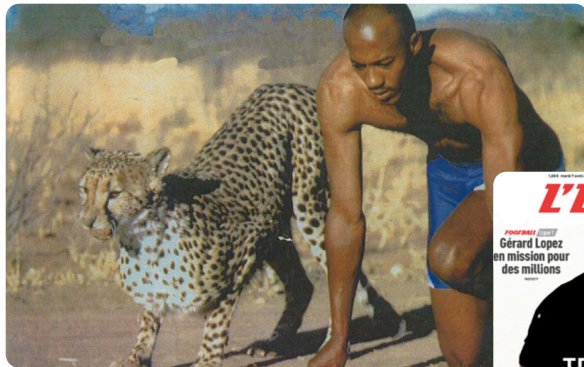
 Take-away #1

## Racial stereotypes get reproduced in football media

Conversations about football tend to overemphasize the physical qualities (speed, strength) of black players, sometimes portraying them with animal-like characteristics. This can lead to the neglect of other qualities related to intellect or leadership.

In contrast, white (male) athletes are associated with leadership, 'the mind', mentality; normative characteristics for positions of power. As a consequence, white athletes remain more often invisible and become the cultural 'norm' against which Black athletes are measured as 'hyper-physical'.

Let's take a look at some examples:



Typical representations of black athletes. These are sometimes accompanied by descriptions such as **“He chases the ball like a puma!”**, used by sports journalists to comment on a game.



More varied representations of white players that include physical attributes, but who are also often represented in roles of **leadership and power.**

 Take-away #2

# Young audiences are key in the reproduction of the narratives stemming from the media they consume

A recent focus group study (2021) with young football media audiences shows how they tend to take a relatively race-conscious perspective in comparison to most earlier studies.

At the same time, football talk appears as a complex space where racialized discourses are rejected as well as accepted, and where meanings given to race and ethnicity intersect with other markers of difference such as culture and nationality.

## How do young audiences reproduce sports media commentary?



Cartoonist: Erwin Suvaal CVIII Ontwerp

**Gibraltar male, 23 years-old**

“But generally, let’s be honest. Black people are physically, not advanced... but they are more, they have better genetics, than every other person. They are faster, stronger, quicker.”

“For example, I am into swimming... you will not see a person of color — I will say it in a bad way— you won’t see a Black [person] in the water, because it appears that because of how they’re built, their bones are heavier... And for example, all of those who run are African. And it’s because the bone structure is harder.”

**White Spanish woman, 18 years-old**

Very often, young people draw on the ‘natural physicality discourse’ to give meaning to Black football players. This discourse stems from sports media but also, other media sources like commercials.

Read more about these studies:

Van Sterkenburg, J. & Walder, M. (2021). How do audiences of televised English football construct difference based on race/ethnicity? *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 21:6, 765-780.

Longas Luque, C., Sommier, M. & Van Sterkenburg, J. (submitted 2022). Talking football: discourses about race/ethnicity among Spanish youth.



## Take-away #3

# Most media professionals are unaware of how they reproduce racial stereotypes

Journalists understand their work and their audiences as focused on live men's football events. It also means that they consider the content that they present as self-evident and 'just' reflecting the games being played.

Consequently, efforts made in the sports world to mitigate the reproduction of racial stereotypes (especially those affecting black players) often do not include the media as a key player in the transmission of these ideas.

## What do sports journalists say?

"I'm describing what's going on and what's happening in the match. So unlikely to get into those sorts of realms in what I do."

"For us, ethnicity is of no importance. The only thing that counts is whether you are a good journalist or not. No, it has no consequences or our policy since I do not think we lack anything so to speak."

"Tonight's show we will discuss the day's footballing topics right across the board and any issues that surround it."

"I always treat a player based on his ability and how he conducts himself... I kind of judge the persona based on their career and the way they play, not the colour of their skin."

"It is said that a black man is also built differently, right? That's why we will see at, for example, men's 100-meter races, yes, they are usually won by black athletes who have different and better predispositions for this sport."

These quotes are extracted from qualitative studies conducted in The Netherlands, UK, and Poland.

Read more:

Van Sterkenburg, J. & Walder, M. (2021). How do audiences of televised English football construct difference based on race/ethnicity? *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 21, 5, 765-780.

Van Sterkenburg, J., De Heer, M. & Mashigo, P. (2021). Sport media professionals reflect on racial stereotypes and ethnic diversity in the organization. *Corporate Communications. An International Journal*, 26, 5, 31-46.

Van Lienden, A., Sommier, M., Kossakowski, R., and Van Sterkenburg, J. Football media production in the Polish context [working title]. In preparation.

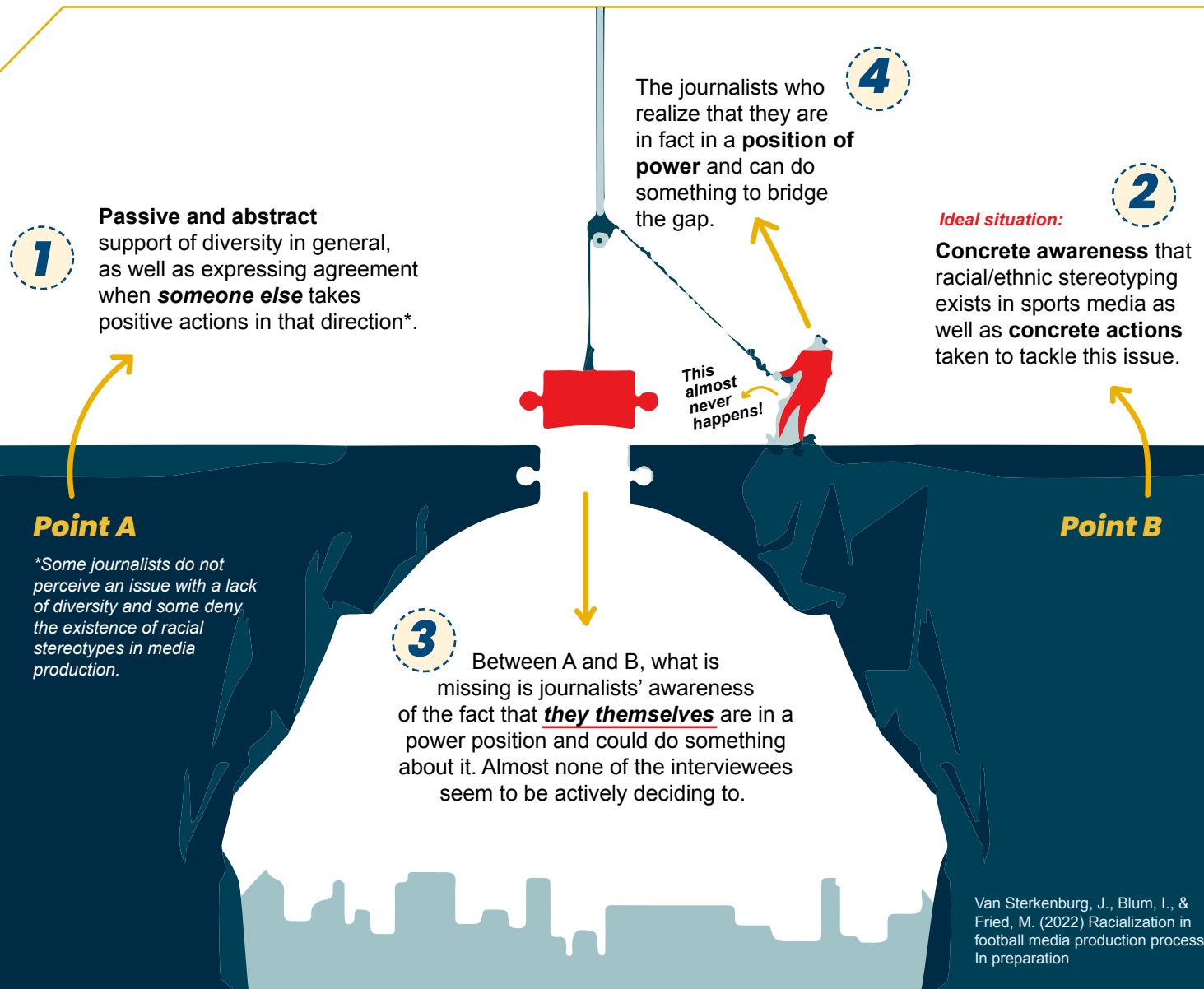
 Take-away #4

## There is a big gap between awareness of racial stereotypes and concrete actions to tackle them

Studies conducted in football media production (NWO Vidi project Van Sterkenburg) show that even though there is an abstract recognition on the part of journalists of the need for more diversity and (by some) an awareness of racial stereotyping, this is not seen as something they can act on themselves.

Usually, others are seen to blame (other media, other sports, other journalists, social media, even Black players).

Here is a simple but powerful illustration of this issue:



 Take-away #5

# Some voices have begun to speak up against racial stereotypes, especially those from women and minority groups, but also football players

Some young people in the audience do identify racial stereotypes. They tend to be very vocal about opposing them, expressing that they ‘do not believe’ in white players being better equipped to occupy positions of power than black players.

On the production side, the media professionals who most identify these stereotypes are women and minority groups. Among other things, their strategies for countering them include revising their own commentary.

Lastly, some football players have started to speak up against this issue as well.

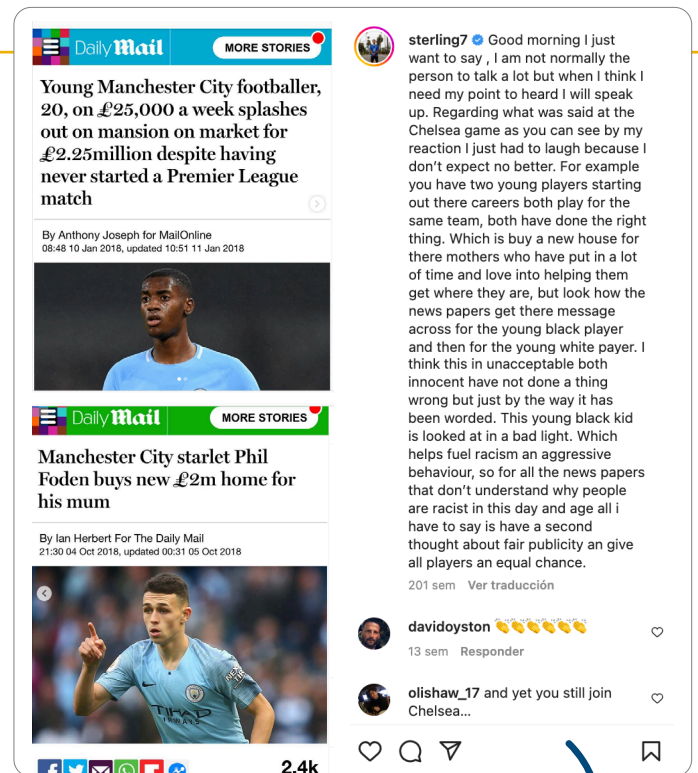
## Let’s take a look at some cases:

“It’s just a bit of a myth the way they think that, if you got a Black African player he probably [is] better in defending because he’s going to be strong, but I think I’m right in saying that there is nothing in science that ever proved that a Black African has got stronger bone density and there is no proof. It’s just a stereotype that is in everyone’s head.”

**White British female, 22 years-old**

Read more about this study:

Van Sterkenburg, J. & Walder, M. (2021). How do audiences of televised English football construct difference based on race/ethnicity? *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 21:6, 765-780.



The screenshot shows a social media post by 'sterling7' with the text: "Good morning I just want to say , I am not normally the person to talk a lot but when I think I need my point to heard I will speak up. Regarding what was said at the Chelsea game as you can see by my reaction I just had to laugh because I don't expect no better. For example you have two young players starting out there careers both play for the same team, both have done the right thing. Which is buy a new house for there mothers who have put in a lot of time and love into helping them get where they are, but look how the news papers get there message across for the young black player and then for the young white payer. I think this in unacceptable both innocent have not done a thing wrong but just by the way it has been worded. This young black kid is looked at in a bad light. Which helps fuel racism an aggressive behaviour, so for all the news papers that don't understand why people are racist in this day and age all i have to say is have a second thought about fair publicity an give all players an equal chance." The post has 201 likes and a reply from 'davidoyston' with 13 likes. Below the post are two news articles from the Daily Mail. The first article is titled "Young Manchester City footballer, 20, on £25,000 a week splashes out on mansion on market for £2.25million despite having never started a Premier League match" and is by Anthony Joseph for MailOnline. The second article is titled "Manchester City starlet Phil Foden buys new £2m home for his mum" and is by Ian Herbert For The Daily Mail. A blue arrow points from a yellow text box to the Instagram post.

In 2018, English Black footballer Sterling used his Instagram account to voice his discomfort with the racism embedded in the Daily Mail, a news portal in the UK.



**Who is it for?**

Sports journalists who want to identify whether they are using racial stereotypes throughout their commentary.

**What you will need:**

- Past reportages you have produced or that you want to analyse
- Pen or pencil
- This template

**Activity #1**

# Finding the patterns in your own commentary

*Individual activity | 30 minutes*

This activity is designed to help you identify some patterns you may be using when commenting or reporting on sports.

- 1** Gather the last 2 or 3 reports (written or spoken) that you have produced.
- 2** Read/listen to them carefully and identify the phrases you use to describe the players. Write them down in the left column.
- 3** Can you identify whether you are talking about white players or black players? If so, write that down in the right column.
- 4** Look for the patterns you use to describe different groups of players and for potential stereotypes within those patterns.

*Commentary*

*Players*


**Any patterns?**

**Who is it for?**

Communication and/or media students. Young professionals who aspire to work in the sports media industry.

**What you will need:**

- Internet connection
- Internet browser
- Pen or pencil
- This template

**Activity #2**

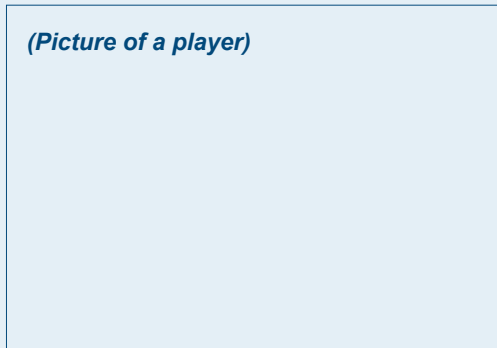
# Analysing media representations of athletes in sports

**Group activity | 45 minutes**

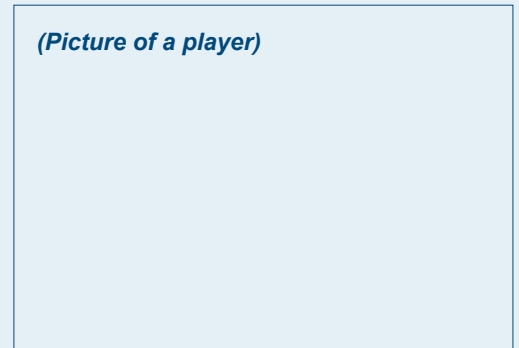
This activity is designed to help reflect critically on the representation of race, ethnicity, gender, nation, or disabilities and understand how these are related to power relations in the media.

- 1 Search the internet for different sports sections of newspapers in your country or in a context of your choice.
- 2 Choose players from different race/ethnic backgrounds and take a look at how they are portrayed or described in the articles (adjectives, metaphors, keywords).
- 3 What differences do you see between how these players are portrayed? Can you identify patterns? What about racial stereotypes?

*(Picture of a player)*



*(Picture of a player)*



*(Descriptions used)*

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*(Descriptions used)*

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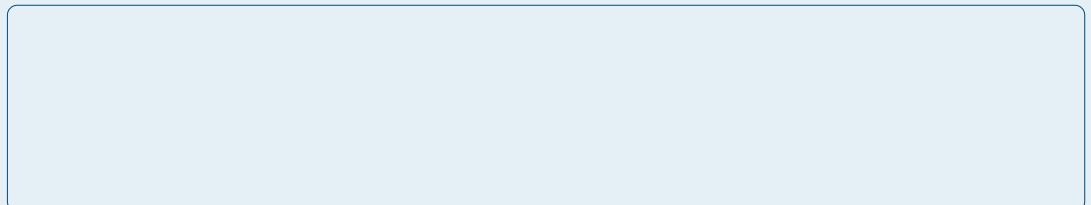
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**Any patterns?**



**Digital Handbook**

# Sports Media and Race

## Acknowledgements

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