Successful, Sexy, Popular

Athletic Performance and Physical Attractiveness as Determinants of Public Interest in Male and Female Soccer Players

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Abstract: This study examines to what extent the public attention directed at individual male and female players of various national soccer teams is influenced by a) their athletic performance and b) their physical attractiveness. The results prove that public interest in athletes depends significantly on performance and attractiveness. However those athletes who both perform strongly and are attractive by far draw the greatest public attention. Against expectations, gender differences do not figure in: Attractiveness of male soccer players is equally important for popularity as it is of female soccer players.

Keywords: attractiveness, gender, public interest, sexualisation, mediatisation

1. Erotic Capital as a Resource in High-Performance Sport

Following Bourdieu’s (1984) seminal theory of class distinction, social positioning in modern societies is based on the distribution of economic, cultural and social capital. As an expansion of the original concept, Catherine Hakim (2010) recently proposed “erotic capital” as a fourth but equally relevant form of capital. Erotic capital comprises elements such as beauty, sexual
attractiveness, physical fitness, liveliness, charm or style. According to Hakim (2010: 499), “in sexualized individualized modern societies, erotic capital becomes more important and more valorized.” It is conceived as an asset in private life as well as in professional contexts of post-industrialized service economies, especially in sales work, managerial positions or the entertainment industry. In affluent societies, erotic capital may thus lead to similar gains in social status and prestige as economic, cultural and social capital, i.e. those resources that originally underlie Bourdieu’s theory of social stratification.

As a matter of fact, social psychologists have conducted overwhelming empirical research which supports the idea that “erotic capital”, in particular physical attractiveness, exerts a strong biasing effect on social life (Agthe et al., 2011; Eagly et al., 1991). Research suggests that attractive people have advantages compared to unattractive people in various social contexts. They are, for instance, regarded as more sociable, warmer, healthier and more intelligent than physically unattractive people (Feingold, 1992; Jackson et al., 1995). They are also trusted more (Wilson and Eckel, 2006). Moreover, attractive people receive more attention and support and they are better remembered by others (Benson et al., 1976; Maner et al., 2007). Even in school, attractive children receive better grades and their academic performance is evaluated more positively (Dunkake et al., 2012). Furthermore, a meta-review of experimental studies suggests that attractive people fare better than unattractive individuals in terms of job-related outcomes (Hosoda et al., 2003). Several econometric studies have also supported the idea that physical attractiveness is of importance in the labour market and has a substantial effect on earnings (Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994; Harper, 2000; Mitra, 2001; French, 2002; Fletcher, 2009; Pfeifer, 2012). However, the causal mechanism behind these findings is not completely clear. According to Hamermesh and Biddle (1994), physical attractiveness can at least in some occupations result in productivity advantages for more attractive employees. This productivity advantage is likely to result from consumer discrimination, given that consumers prefer to deal with better-looking individuals (see also Argo et al., 2008). In addition to that in some occupations physical attractiveness may enhance “the worker’s ability to engage in productive interactions with coworkers” (Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994: 1177). Accordingly, Biddle and Hamermesh (1998) examined the development of wages for lawyers as a profession where good looks might provide productivity advantages in the courtroom. Their study found evidence that physical attractiveness actually served to cause differences in earnings but left unclear whether these differences resulted from consumer discrimination or productivity advantages. The same restriction applies to evidence from the Dutch advertising industry according to which
executives’ beauty served to increase sales (Pfann et al., 2000). In light of these labour market studies, however, it seems convincing that at least in some professions physical attractiveness is of crucial importance and could be transformed into income. Today’s commercialized professional sport sector might be another field in which this transformation of erotic capital into economic capital might exist.

While some scholars have presented evidence that physical attractiveness might also be relevant for the evaluation of athletic performance (Rosar et al., 2010) and that “sport voyeurism” (Guttmann, 1996) may be a crucial but hidden motive of audiences regarding sports consumption, the debate on the role of physical attractiveness in sport has recently been focused on the so-called ‘sexualisation of sport’ (Schaaf and Nieland, 2011; also King, 2013; Knapp, 2013). A basic assumption of this framework is that in high-performance sport, “erotic capital” can be translated into economic capital. Accordingly, athletes who possess more erotic capital are better able to attract public attention and to achieve higher degrees of popularity, which attracts sponsors and advertisers and can thus be converted into earnings. Hence, the sexualisation of athletes may be regarded as a by-product of the ongoing trends of commercialisation and mediatisation of high-performance sport. However, since sport spectatorship and fandom still represent masculine sites (McCabe 2007), which is reflected in persistent sex differences in sport consumption and fandom (Gantz et al. 2006; Wann et al. 2008), in particular female athletes seem to be compelled to offer potential sponsors an additional benefit, namely a sexually attractive body fitting into societies’ beauty standards, which may be perceived as a unique selling point by marketers (cf. Schaaf and Nieland, 2011). Research consistently shows that aside from athletic performance, physical attractiveness is one of the most important factors defining the potential of athletes as endorsers (Cunningham et al., 2008; Fink et al., 2004; Ross et al., 2009).

Commercialisation and mediatisation have, on the one hand, thus opened up new earning opportunities for successful athletes but, on the other hand, require that said athletes comply with the media industry’s conditions. Mass media aim at generating public attention and athletes adapt to this logic. Thus the erotic self-staging of athletes is interpreted as an attempt to assert oneself against the competition for limited public attention (Schaaf and Nieland, 2011). The Russian tennis player Anna Kournikova, who has never won a WTA singles title, but is one of the most photographed and best paid sports celebrities thanks to her good looks, is often cited as proof of this calculation’s success (Harris and Clayton, 2002).
Beyond such individual cases, the present article will pursue the connection between attractiveness and public attention systematically and enquire to what extent a) athletic performance and b) physical attractiveness influences the public interest in male and female national soccer players. Assuming that publicity is a key prerequisite for athletes to generate income, we believe that the present study has the potential to shed light on the transformation process of ‘erotic capital’, i.e. physical attractiveness, into popularity and, in turn, into ‘economic capital’ in the context of professional sport. Furthermore, the article introduces a new but promising approach for measuring the public’s interest in individual athletes: search engine statistics provided by Google. Four hypotheses will be established first, followed by the presentation of our methodology and our empirical findings.

2. Hypotheses

Our ideas on the relevance of physical attractiveness for the popularity of athletes aim to combine different literature. First of all, a more general literature on the role of physical attractiveness in different social contexts is available. Next, there is a solid stock of empirical research on the motives and behaviours of sport consumers. Finally, gender scholars have detected a strong gender bias in sport journalism and claimed that media coverage of women’s sport mainly serves the ‘male gaze’. Although this literature is quite diverse, it nevertheless nurtures the assumption that attractiveness might play a role for sport consumers.

(1) Modern mass media, as well as viewer demand, focuses on first-class competitions and on outstanding athletes who render exceptional performances. Viewer demand increases with the sports relevance of a competition and the athletic quality or reputation of the participating athletes (e.g. Borland and MacDonald, 2003; García and Rodriguez, 2009). Various studies have proven that the presence of stars who deliver exceptional performances plays a decisive role in demand (Berri et al., 2004; Hausman and Leonard, 1997). The public interest in individual athletes is also likely to depend on their respective performance. In particular, occasional consumers or ‘armchair audiences’ are interested in competitions involving sport stars (Baimbridge et al., 1996). Here, we assume that not only demand for sport events is driven by the expected sporting quality of a competition, but that public interest in individual athletes is dependent on their respective sporting performances, too. Thus, we hypothesise:

\[ H1: \text{The better an athlete’s sporting performance, the higher the public interest in her/him}. \]

(2) Research in social psychology and economics has proven that physically attractive individuals have advantages in many areas of life (Hamermesh, 2011; Langlois et al., 2000).
The state of research in this area was tallied in the introduction. As this research clearly supports that attractive people receive more attention from their social environment than unattractive people, we assume that this also applies to public interest in athletes. This effect is amplified due to the media’s selection routines, through which attractive people are also more strongly placed in the foreground. Moreover, rich literature on consumer discrimination in sport can be found which has established consistent evidence that ascriptive characteristics of athletes, such as their racial, ethnic or national backgrounds, leave an impact on consumer demand measured by stadium attendance, TV ratings, all-star votes or sales of fan memorabilia (e.g. Hill et al., 1981; Kalter, 1999; Kanazawa and Funk, 2001; Tainsky and Winfree, 2010). Thus, consumer discrimination based on ascriptive characteristics is a common feature of sport consumption. Given the solid evidence for the relevance of physical attractiveness in quite differing social contexts and the existence of consumer discrimination in sport, it seems fair to assume that physical attractiveness might also play a role in the popularity of athletes. We suppose that more attractive athletes are given more media coverage and exposure, resulting in a greater awareness of the audience for those athletes. Therefore, we hypothesise:

\( H^2: \text{The more attractive an athlete is, the higher the public interest in her/him.} \)

(3) However, we expect to find strong gender effects concerning the relevance of physical attractiveness for public attention. While findings on fan motives suggest that attractiveness plays a role for both female and male sports fans (Madrigal, 2006), experimental research on athletes as endorsers found that the physical attractiveness of athletes plays a more important role for males (Fink et al., 2004; Liu and Brock, 2011). Moreover, even if the physical attractiveness of male athletes matters to female audiences, we assume that their preferences are much less relevant for sport media, since the typical sport consumer is still male. As data from broadcasts of German national soccer team matches show, men are also more likely to watch women’s soccer than women (Meier and Leinwather, 2012). Given the persistent dominance of male consumers (Gantz et al. 2006; Wann et al. 2008), it should not come as a surprise that media routines in sport journalism are guided by the anticipated preferences of male consumers and, therefore, aim to cater to the ‘male gaze’ (e.g. Daniels and Wartena, 2011; Harris and Clayton, 2002; Kane et al., 2013; Rulofs and Hartmann-Tews, 2011). Recent findings also illustrate that female athletes are aware that “sex sells”, and many of them act accordingly: “they clearly internalized the deeply embedded notion that the most effective way to increase interest in women’s sports is to appeal to male fans and to do so in ways that
portray females in a sexually provocative manner“ (Kane et al., 2013: 290). By implication, if female athletes strive to gain media exposure, they have to use their erotic capital in order to meet the selection routines of sport journalism and to cater to the perceived interest of male consumers. Hence, we assume that gender moderates the attractiveness effect:

*H*#3: Any effect of attractiveness on public interest should be stronger for female athletes than for male athletes.

(4) Ultimately, the modern mass media industry represents a “superstar economy“, in which the public interest focuses on very few protagonists, as technological possibilities for global dissemination of media content has created significant economies of scale, from which usually only a handful of superstars profit (Borghans and Groot, 1998; Rosen, 1981). This may especially hold true in the context of professional sports where spectators are longing for outstanding performances and are easily able to judge whether a performance is outstanding or not. Under these conditions, small differentials in talent can translate into huge differences in popularity and earnings. In this respect, sport is a ‘winner takes all’ market where the most talented athletes are enormously well compensated.¹ In line with these assumptions, Franck and Nüesch (2012) are able to show that the association between the market value of a soccer player and his talent is not a linear one. Instead, “additional talent is magnified into larger earning differences at the top end of the scale than at the bottom end” (Franck & Nüesch, 2012: 211). Next to extraordinary talent, media affinity and attractiveness are also among the characteristics superstars must have, for this is the only way a mass audience beyond the typical sport consumer is addressed (Adler, 1985; Franck & Nüesch, 2012). Hence, the greatest publicity is assured to those athletes who posses both extraordinary talent as well as great physical attractiveness. The few superstars who combine both are likely to receive a far greater amount of public attention compared to ‘normal’ athletes. We thus assume an interaction effect from performance and attractiveness:

*H*#4: Particularly the combination of strong sporting performance and high physical attractiveness results in high popularity.

3. Methodology

The popularity of athletes can be illustrated by various indicators. In addition to survey data, specific demand indicators, such as visitor numbers and viewing figures, but also fan article sales figures have been used in sport economics (cf. Kalter, 1999). In the study at hand, the popularity of the celebrity was measured by the frequency with which said person is looked
up on the internet search engine Google.\textsuperscript{2} We collected the Google search requests for male and female players from six national teams for the period of the last men’s and women’s UEFA European Championship in soccer, in June 2012 and July 2013, respectively. In this regard we only considered the search requests coming from the respective national country. Google enables differentiation between web searches and image searches. However, both types of searches are very closely correlated in our sample ($r = .83$). We therefore calculated the mean value of web and image searches. As explaining only popularity differences \textit{within} teams and not differences \textit{between} teams was of interest, we transformed the dependent variable for each team to a value scale of 0 to 100, wherein the most popular player, respectively, was assigned a value of 100 and all other players were put into relation thereto.

For the empirical analysis, three men’s national teams (Germany, Spain, Italy) and three women’s national teams (Germany, Sweden, France) were selected. Firstly, the athletic success at the European Championship was decisive for the selection, so that data on the performance of individual players could be based on as many games as possible. With the exception of France, the respective selected teams reached the semi-final. Secondly, a minimum number of search requests had to be registered. Google only releases data on search requests if the search term lies above a certain threshold. This criterion lead to the exclusion of most women’s soccer teams, as the search volume was insufficient for most female players.\textsuperscript{3}

In order to measure the \textit{performance} of athletes during the UEFA European Championship, we relied on two indicators that seemed appropriate for drawing the public’s attention to specific players: a) We assumed that performance differences could be seen in differing lengths of time on the pitch. At the same time, the frequently used players were likely to draw greater public interest than substitute players. For this reason we utilised the average number of minutes played per game in the UEFA European Championship as an explanatory factor. b) Especially those players shooting goals are put in the media’s spotlight and receive much of public attention, for which reason we also considered the goals shot. Time played and goal success correlate only moderately ($r = .27$), hence both indicators measure different aspects of sport performance. Both indicators, of course, are rather crude measures for the true athletic performance of soccer players. More sophisticated metrics for measuring ‘objectively’ the sporting performance of players might also take successful tackling, chance creation, ball distribution, running speed etc. into account. However, it is questionable to what extent these measures serve as relevant quality signals in the eyes of TV audiences. As econometric
studies suggest (García & Rodríguez, 2009), the majority of TV viewers seem to rely on relatively simple metrics for judging athletic quality. The indicators that are chosen for this study may thus not be the ideal indicators for assessing a player’s true productivity in a match, but they are exactly those ‘quality signals’ that decide which players’ (within a certain squad) receive the most media and public attention during a tournament.

The central finding of the attractiveness research states that people mostly agree on which people are attractive and which are not (Langlois et al., 2000). We measured the attractiveness of a player’s face according to the truth-of-consensus method, the standard approach in attractiveness research (Hamermesh, 2011). The profile pictures utilised were the official player photos from the websites of the national soccer associations, which is why the photos are well suited for comparison within each team. In most cases, they show the face of the player in front of a neutral background. Three male and three female student raters evaluated the attractiveness of each player on a seven-tiered rating scale. The player’s attractiveness score was calculated as the mean value of the six attractiveness evaluations. Inter-rater reliability was very high at 0.89. Here we also transformed the indicator within every team. Accordingly, the person with the lowest evaluation in each team received the value 1 and the person with the highest evaluation received the value 7.

4. Results

(1) The findings show that performance significantly and very clearly influences the public attention the players of a team receive (Table 1). With every minute played, public interest rises minimally. Simply comparing the players who spent 90 minutes on the pitch in every Championship game to those who never played already reveals a tremendous popularity difference. Even more important for public attention, however, are the goals scored. By comparison, the effect of goals (β = .38) is even stronger than the effect of match time (β = .27).

(2) Public attention also depends on the attractiveness of athletes: The more attractive the individual is evaluated as, the greater the attention is. Attractive players are, independently of pitch time and goal success, more strongly in the focus of the public than less attractive teammates. The person on a team evaluated as most attractive is significantly more popular than the person with the lowest attractiveness assessment (Model I). However, the effect of attractiveness (β = .17) is lower than the effect of the two performance indicators.
We had argued that the attractiveness effect depends on gender and that a greater influence on public interest was to be expected for female athletes than for male athletes. We test this hypothesis with an interaction term (Model II). While the main effect for attractiveness remains significantly positive, the interaction effect with gender clearly misses the significance level. Therefore, when it comes to male and female soccer players, the popularity differences depend on attractiveness to a similar extent.

Table 1: Performance and Attractiveness as Determinants of Popularity of Soccer Players.

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<td>Model I</td>
<td>Model II</td>
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<td></td>
<td>$b$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$b$</td>
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<tr>
<td>match time per game</td>
<td>0.19**</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>0.19**</td>
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<tr>
<td>goals</td>
<td>11.53**</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>11.41**</td>
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<tr>
<td>attractiveness</td>
<td>2.53*</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>2.80*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attractiveness*female</td>
<td>-.45</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attractiveness*match time</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>.20</td>
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<tr>
<td>attractiveness*goals</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.92**</td>
<td>.83</td>
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$R^2$ | .33 | .33 | .39 |

Note: OLS Regression with robust standard errors (Huber/White). N = 138. Fixed effects are included which account for minute differences in average popularity between the teams. Significance: *p < .05, **p < .01.

Thus far an additive effect of performance and attractiveness on public interest was assumed. Model III, however, suggests a multiplicative interaction. Interest should accordingly increase exponentially for those players who are simultaneously successful and very attractive. All in all, Model III is significantly better adapted to the data than Model I ($\Delta R^2 = .06, \Delta F = 5.65, p < .01$). Furthermore, the individual effects are plausible: The influence of pitch time on public attention tentatively increased with the attractiveness of a person. Furthermore, goal success has a more positive effect on public interest if the scorer is gauged as attractive. Figure 1 shows the effect of goals on public attention in relation to the attractiveness of the individual. We thereby assumed that the players were on the pitch for 90 minutes in all European Championship games. The interaction between attractiveness and pitch time is therefore included in the illustration and is shown by the differing base level.
5. Conclusion

Public interest in soccer players of different national teams, measured by Google queries during the men’s and women’s UEFA European Championship, significantly depends on the performance on the pitch as well as a player’s physical attractiveness. Physical attractiveness represents a pivotal facet of Catherine Hakim’s concept of erotic capital (2010). Hence, our findings substantiate that erotic capital fosters popularity. And popularity, in turn, is certainly of crucial importance for generating income. The conditions of mediatized and commercialized high-performance sport thus facilitate the transformation of erotic capital into economic capital. What we have shown for professional soccer players may also apply for other professional sports and, supposedly, for the entertainment industry in general.

By far the highest public attention is received by those players who are both successful and attractive. The combination of good looks on the one hand and extraordinary performance on the pitch on the other seems to fascinate the masses. The few athletes who combine both features are among the few ‘superstars’ whose popularity is outstanding. In this respect, our findings provide further evidence that a superstar-effect exists in professional sport, i.e. that the distribution of popularity, but also income or market value is highly unequal among athletes. So far, the results buttress all of our initial hypotheses.

However, our expectation concerning a possible moderation effect of the gender of a player must be rejected. Attractiveness equally affects public attention given to male and female...
soccer players. This surprising result needs certainly further validation in future research and allows for different interpretations:

(1) The absence of gender differences in regard to the relation between attractiveness and popularity may be due to the specific composition of the audiences for outstanding sport events. European and World Cup matches attract occasional viewers or so called ‘armchair audiences’, i.e. audiences who do not follow soccer on a regular basis. These occasional viewers might be motivated by other than pure sporting reasons to watch a game. In particular women – who supposedly are overrepresented in the ‘armchair audience’ – follow sport often for social reasons, that is, in order to spend time with partners, friends and families (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2000; Wann et al., 2008). Hence, the viewership of European and World Cup broadcasts is likely to contain both more female and more occasional viewers who are not primarily motivated by sporting interest but possibly focus more strongly on (male) players’ appearance and attractiveness.

(2) However, the absence of gender differences can also be interpreted as being in line with previous findings according to which attractiveness plays a role for both female and male sports fans (Madrigal, 2006). Wedgwood (2008: 312) even argues that heterosexual desire, i.e. attraction to “good looks and great bodies”, may be a largely neglected but nevertheless important motif of females in particular, to attend sports events (see also Toffoletti & Mewett, 2012). We are, however, well aware that the role of heterosexual desire for female sport spectatorship has been discussed controversially and that such claims have been used to derogate female fans as being solely interested in physical appearance of male athletes (Crawford & Gosling, 2004). However, since our findings suggest that physical attractiveness matters for both female and male athletes, they do not support derogative myths about female spectators and fans but only suggest that female and male spectators alike prefer better looking athletes and are more likely to search better looking athletes on the Internet.

Moreover, our findings imply that if sport spectatorship was less gendered, that is, if women occupied a greater share among sport spectators and consumer fans, erotic capital might become of greater importance for male players, too. In other words, given the realities of fully commercialised sports, the feminisation of sport spectatorship and fandom might not result in less sexual objectification of female athletes but in more sexual objectification of male athletes.

Actually, this idea seems to correspond well with recent changes in general self-presentation habits, especially those of men. Today’s men must invest more in their looks than ever before.
not only in sport but also in many social contexts. “In the 21st century”, Hakim (2010: 504) argues, “men in Western Europe are devoting more time and money to their appearance, and work harder at developing their erotic capital. Men work out in gyms to maintain an attractive body, spend more on fashionable clothes and toiletries, and display more varied hairstyles.” In regard to these trends, professional male soccer players may indeed belong to a cultural avant-garde. In many cases, they may conform to the new ‘metrosexual’ masculine identity, typical for young, well-toned males living in metropolitan areas (Coad, 2008). In fact, this new ‘metrosexual’ masculine role model was mostly shaped by David Beckham, a footballer with unprecedented popularity, and since then it is closely linked to sports culture.

Notes

1 However, it has been argued that the Internet era is likely to diminish ‘superstar effects’ because Internet audiences are much more niched due to the existence of online communities and social networks, which should give rise to a greater variety of products that consumers can consume and purchase (‘long tail’-effect). There is already some evidence on increasing long-tail effects in certain media markets, although this evidence is far from conclusive and requires further research (cf. Brynjolfsson et al., 2010). Since so far no evidence for a long tail effect for sport stars has been presented, it is assumed that the superstar assumption still holds true.

2 Although search engine statistics are a relatively new data source, scholars in various disciplines already have made use of these indicators. For instance, public health studies use statistics from Google for the early detection and the surveillance of the regional spread of influenza epidemics (Ginsberg et al. 2009). In economics, respective data have been employed to forecast cinema admissions (Hand & Judge 2012) and private consumption patterns (Vosen & Schmidt 2011). In his general evaluation of the advantages and limitations of search engine statistics, Scheitle (2011, p. 285) concludes that this may be “an incredibly rich source of data for social science research.”

3 In the three selected countries women’s soccer is rather popular. Consequently, more Google queries addressing the female national players are registered. Despite the general popularity of women’s soccer, public interest in particular players remains highly concentrated: In the women’s teams the 10% of the most popular female players account for 67% of all searches done on Google. In the men’s national teams, search interest is somewhat more equally distributed with 48% of all searches relating to the 10% of the most popular players. This highly skewed distribution corresponds to the ‘superstar effect’ described in the previous chapter.

4 A central insight of research on physical attractiveness is that people’s perceptions of other’s attractiveness are highly similar and divergent perceptions mirror only second-tier differences in taste. Hence, individuals agree (at least implicitly) on the criteria that make a person attractive. As a consequence of this intersubjective consensus, comparatively small groups of raters suffice for generating reliable attractiveness ratings. Six ratings is a conventional number for the assessment of attractiveness. A number of seminal studies conducted by Hamermesh and colleagues use four raters (Biddle & Hamermesh, 1998; Hamermesh & Parker, 2005). Other scholars draw on three (Stelzer et al. 1987), six (Pfann et al., 2000) or eight raters (Zakahi et al., 1994).

5 Unsurprisingly, dedicated female sports fans are bothered when being accused to join sports events not due to a genuine interest in the competition but just to ‘fancy the players’ (Pope, 2014).
References


