**Footballer, rich man, celebrity, consumer: Media blindness and the denial of domestic abuse in the Stephanie Ward and Danny Simpson case**

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**Introduction**

At 1.30am on 29th December 2014, Stephanie Ward made a 999 call from a house in Manchester in which she could be heard crying and shouting for her attacker to get off her (Scheerhout, 2015). Officers arrived at the house, with one later commenting that he could hear Ward screaming as soon as he exited the police van (Scheerhout, 2015). Her attacker was Danny Simpson, a professional football player. In a newspaper report of the officer’s evidence in court, it is stated,

PC Gareth Hughes said that as he approached the house in Worsley, the screaming stopped and changed to the sound of ‘someone gasping for breath and struggling to breathe’. He told the court he found Simpson in the living room, next to the Christmas tree, “straddling her with his hands firmly around her throat”. The trial heard Simpson, who lives in Eccles, had no idea she had called the police and was “startled” when they burst in (Scheerhout, 2015)

Simpson was arrested and charged with common assault. His employers, Leicester City Football Club, suspended him. Simpson pleaded not guilty and claimed that he hadn’t throttled Ward, arguing that he was simply standing over her as she sat on the sofa and was attempting to take shoes off her that he had bought her for Christmas, claiming that he didn’t think she deserved them (Slater, 2015a). The Judge did not accept his account, stating that it was unworthy of belief (Slater, 2015a). Simpson was found guilty and sentenced to 300 hours of unpaid work. Ward had not given evidence against Simpson in court and issued a statement after his conviction,

I am devastated by today's outcome for Danny, our family and our daughter Skye. I am not a victim at all. Danny is a kind, loving father and despite our ups and downs he is a good person who I love and respect…I gave an interview saying he did not assault me. My statement was dismissed at court. This verdict will put more strain on our family. I now have no faith in our police or judicial system. (Slater, 2015b)

Ward and Simpson had been in a relationship described as ‘intermittent’ since 2006 and their daughter had been born in July 2011 (Simpson v Mirror Group Newspapers Ltd, 2016: 8). The December 2014 assault was not the first violent incident connected to their relationship. In February 2013, Simpson’s father was found guilty of assault following an incident involving Ward and her mother Gillian (Bainbridge, 2013). Simpson said that he would appeal his conviction for the December 2014 assault – however he did not. He was suspended from playing for Leicester City and faced a formal disciplinary process, the outcome of which was not made public. Simpson resumed playing for Leicester City in September 2015 and went on to make 30 appearances in the 2015/16 season – the year the club won the Premier League. In May 2016, Simpson applied to be re-sentenced after completing just 145 of his 300 hours, arguing that it was not feasible for him to complete the work due to press intrusion (Butler, 2016). Simpson’s sentence was changed to a 21-day 10.00pm – 6.00am curfew, which involved wearing an electronic tag. Simpson appealed, his legal team arguing that this would interfere with his work commitments – an end of season party and trip to Thailand organised by Leicester City’s owners after the club had won the Premier League (Butler, 2016). His lawyers further argued that the tag would create “real difficulty with pre-season tours…he may not get a visa to the US, all of that has an effect on his future employment prospects” (Osuh, 2016a). The appeal was successful, and the curfew was lifted. Simpson signed a new contract with Leicester City in 2016, which will keep him at the club until 2019.

The above case does not stand alone. In recent years there have been many reports of violence against women amongst English and Welsh professional footballers. In 1998, television presenter Ulrika Jonsson was assaulted by Stan Collymore in a Paris bar during the World Cup football tournament. Sixteen years later, Collymore took to Twitter to minimize his violence, arguing that her ‘claims’ he punched and kicked her in the head were untrue, “I struck Miss Jonsson with an open hand. Once. A man punching and kicking causes serious damage. No bruises. So how? Luck?” (Robinson, 2014). In another case, Sheryl Gascoigne described years of abuse at the hands of Paul Gascoigne during the 1990s, highlighting the denial that was characteristic of others’ reactions to the abuse,

Whenever there was a scene in a restaurant or wherever, management would ignore it. Paul, you must remember, was God in Italy. And then, later, the football establishment here were dreadful. After that holiday in Gleneagles, when I had two broken fingers and a huge lump on my head, the Rangers physio was told to patch me up and say nothing (Ferguson, 1999: 20).

In 2015, Gascoigne faced charges in relation to another woman, his ex-girlfriend Mandy Thomas. He pleaded guilty to harassment after sending her abusive text messages, tweets and calls after their relationship ended. In 2009, Marlon King was jailed for 18 months after being convicted of sexual assault and actual bodily harm against a woman in Soho bar. King had a record of violence against women. A conviction for two common assaults followed an incident in which he chased two women through Soho in 2003 with a belt wrapped around his fist; and in 2009, he was convicted of threatening behaviour after slapping a woman’s bottom and then spitting at her when police arrived on the scene (Smith, 2009). In January 2018, Jonathan Flanagan was sentenced to a 12-month community order after his conviction for common assault following an attack on Rachel Wall, in which he kicked her after he had pushed her to the ground (Perraudin, 2018).

These cases have stimulated popular debate not just about the behaviour of professional footballers but also about social and cultural responses to their deviance. Whilst they have generated countless column inches, academic interest in gender-based violence amongst English professional footballers has been somewhat thin on the ground. Research focusing on other sports however – particularly in the US and Australian context – is significantly more developed. We aim to contribute to this body of literature through our analysis of news media sense-making in relation to the case of Stephanie Ward and Danny Simpson. Drawing on Penfold-Mounce’s (2009) concept of deglamorization, we explore the key themes to emerge from news media coverage of the case, considering the nature and extent of portrayals of Simpson engaging in penance, public declaration and victimhood. Furthermore, we argue that these representations reveal ‘media blindness’ to domestic abuse - a concept we develop following Felman’s (1997) ‘judicial blindness’ regarding the trial of another domestic abuse perpetrator and sportsman - OJ Simpson.

The paper begins by considering the literature focusing on violence against women perpetrated by professional sportsmen and scholarly work considering reactions to and representations of their crimes. Following on from this, we outline our methodology prior to presenting our findings. In the discussion, we consider these findings considering the existing literature, attempting to both broaden and deepen the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that criminologists can draw upon in making sense of professional sportsmen who commit violence against women.

**Sportsmen and Violence Against Women**

There is a considerable body of literature exploring cases of sportsmen who engage in violent and sexual offences towards women (see for example Benedict, 1997, 1998; Brown, Sumner and Nocera, 2002; Nelson, 1994; Volkwein-Caplan and Sankaran, 2002). This work emerged in the 1990s and focused largely upon the US context. One study identified a range of explanatory factors for sexual violence against women among male student athletes including sports as a site for the performance of masculinity, a lack of accountability in the athletic justice system and a sense of entitlement via ‘big man on campus’ syndrome (Melnick, 1992). Others found student athletes vastly overrepresented as perpetrators of sexual violent crimes (Crosset, Ptacek, McDonald and Benedict, 1996; Fritner and Rubinson, 1993;). Several studies identified a relationship between sexually aggressive behaviour and participation in sports (Boeringer, 1996, 1999; Koss and Gaines, 1993; Murnen and Kohlmman, 2007; Sawyer, Thompson and Chicorelli, 2002). Messner has argued that sports culture is saturated with values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that promote the objectification of women (Messner, 2007). Scholars have also condemned the apparent ease with which some athletes have been able to return to their sport after a conviction for violence. Benedict, writing in relation to domestic abuse by sportsmen in the US context - argued that “the traditional credentials of heroism – courage, bravery, honesty and self-sacrifice – are being replaced with visibility, wealth and fame…Americans display an unusual willingness to overlook deviance when it involves beloved athletes” (1997: 217). In a piece reflecting upon cases of athletes convicted of domestic abuse offences, Owton and Lazard have more recently argued,

What sort of messages do we give the younger generation if we allow people who have been convicted of abuse to continue to be sporting heroes and celebrated on a world stage where they continue to hold power and be glorified? Does this merely serve to trivialise the seriousness of domestic abuse and violence against women...it's clear that we still have a long way to go for the public to recognise the seriousness of domestic violence (2016).

In relation to English football, several studies have shed light on the presence of misogynistic behaviour around the game. Burton-Nelson (1994) argued that players, fans and clubs accept a form of masculinity that emphasises toughness and aggression, whilst women are deemed inferior, demeaned and humiliated. Such values have long characterised behaviour on football terraces and in places where games are screened. Researching the 1990 World Cup, Williams and Woodhouse describe an “unholy triumvirate” of “birds, betting and booze” (1991: 86), which form part of a normalized *casual sexism*. It could be argued that existence of women – “birds” - in the same triumvirate as services and products – “betting and booze” – serves to subsume women within the developing consumerism that had begun to saturate the game during the 1990s. Fifteen years later, little appeared to have changed when Jones’ (2006) research with female football fans documented the persistence of this behaviour. She highlighted the sexism women experienced as spectators - which included the ridiculing of their opinions, verbal and physical harassment.

Moving beyond the casual sexism of football spectatorship to encompass women’s experiences of abuse at the hands of their partners specifically, Kirby, Francis and O’Flaherty (2014) explored the links between the FIFA World Cup football tournaments and domestic abuse. They argued that incidences of domestic abuse increased in England on the days that the national team played in the tournament. The authors claimed that a combination of factors around the event – the English team’s performance, weekend games, consumption of alcohol – served to “concentrate the risk factors into a short and volatile period thereby intensifying the concepts of masculinity, rivalry and aggression” (Kirby et al, 2014: 13-14). Reflecting on their research with survivors of domestic abuse and football fans in Middlesbrough during the 1990s, Radford and Hudson tell of a time of football mania when considerable public and private investment was made in the local club. They argue that a “’nasty’, ‘brutish’ culture of masculinity predicated on football” (2005: 192) transcended match day and the spaces of the stadium and the streets, leaking into the private sphere of the home. The economic success or failure of the town and community became linked to that of the club and the lack of appropriate responses to football violence and domestic violence, granted permission for these behaviours. One key example they highlight was the club’s signing of Paul Gascoigne – whose history of violence against women is noted in the introduction of this paper.

Of crucial importance in shaping the image of professional footballers like Gascoigne is the coverage their transgressions receive in the mainstream media – the focus of this paper. As Ruddock argues, how media tell stories of such transgressions feed into wider social views about who footballers are and how they should behave, “The media practices of players, clubs, sponsors and the public invest footballers with cultural values...Media storytelling becomes integral to how society defines right from wrong” (2016: 192). Media portrayal of footballers who engage in domestic abuse is important because these representations come to form part of the loops and spirals of culture in which values, attitudes and beliefs around violence and abuse are learned, shared and reproduced (Ferrell, Hayward and Young, 2008, 2015). This has significant repercussions for how the public conceptualise offending, victimization and justice. This is further explored in the next section, which considers the literature around representations of sportsmen who transgress.

**Sportsmen Offenders – Media Portrayals of Celebrity Transgression**

Given the high profile and value of the game, professional footballers quickly attain celebrity status. Through their success on the pitch and their lucrative commercial sponsorship deals, they become household names, admired not just by fans of the game but by followers of celebrity culture (Cashmore, 2014). Football players are now a particular type of role model, “not that football players are guiding lights of morality, or shining examples of honesty, goodness and uprightness, but that they are persuasive advertisers who shape the buying habits of aspirational young shoppers” (Cashmore, 2016: 144). Celebrity status is not just about performance on the pitch but equally – and arguably even more – about what they do beyond the game, particularly that which relates to consumption, be that the products and services they endorse or the extravagant lifestyles they lead.

The notion that footballers in particular – and sportsmen more generally - are now a different type of role model is a pertinent one to consider when studying those who engage in deviant and criminal behaviour. Whenever a high-profile sportsman is accused and / or convicted of a criminal offence, it makes headlines. Stories about the deviance of sportsmen – especially when it is related to their intimate relationships – are considerably newsworthy, including elements of sex, violence and celebrity (Jewkes, 2015). The criminal proceedings against Oscar Pistorius for killing his girlfriend Reeva Steenkamp in 2013 made headlines around the world. So too did the 1994 deaths of Nicole Brown and Ron Goldman, for which Nicole’s ex-husband OJ Simpson was found criminally not guilty (but civilly liable). However, it is important to note that these are *exceptional* cases, propelled into the spotlight by the celebrity status of the offenders, which hinges on their sporting successes – Oscar Pistorius as an Olympic and Paralympic sprinter and OJ Simpson as a decorated NFL player. Many women who are abused and / or killed by their partners do not make the news – because domestic abuse is so common that it is *not* considered newsworthy (Boyle, 2005).

Penfold-Mounce develops the concept of the *rogue celebrity,* “celebrities who gave 'gone wild', becoming associated with or found guilty of crime or deviance” (2009: 82). She talks of *deglamorization* that occurs when a celebrity’s rogue behaviour contrasts with the image that they are known for but notes that this is highly variable. For example, Penfold-Mounce contrasts musician Gary Glitter, whose convictions for child sex offences destroyed his reputation, with boxer Mike Tyson, who continued a successful boxing career after his conviction for rape. Penfold-Mounce also notes how image transgression can serve as a career *boost*. Citing the example of former professional footballer Vinnie Jones - who was convicted for assault against a neighbour – Penfold-Mounce highlights how this reinforced his “bad boy” image as he went on to star in several gangster films. For some celebrities, engaging in criminal or deviant behaviour become part of their status and special allowances are made for them when they transgress. The so-called ‘rock star lifestyle’ provides further examples of this. Liam Gallagher – the lead vocalist in the band Oasis during the 1990s and 2000s – was banned for life from Cathay Pacific flights following a 1998 incident when, passengers complained that he and his party allegedly threw food, smoked on the flight and made threats against the captain when he challenged their behaviour (Davies, 2001). He has also been arrested and faced charges for assault following violent incidents - including a fight in a Munich bar (Vincent, 2015) - but has never been criminally convicted. Gallagher’s behaviour towards women – being unfaithful to both of his wives with other women who went on to have his children (McLean, 2017) – have simply reinforced the image of the rock star.

For those criminal celebrities aiming to minimize their deglamorization, Penfold-Mounce identifies three key strategies. The first is *penance* and consists of accepting responsibility, taking punishment, serving a sentence where relevant and perhaps voluntarily engaging in behaviour change - for example through participating in rehabilitation programmes. The second strategy – *public declaration* – is an immediate response to contain the situation limit its severity by either confessing, denying or defending one’s actions. The third strategy to minimize deglamorization is *victimhood –* in which the celebrity portrays themselves as the real victim. They will not admit responsibility or seek forgiveness and will locate blame elsewhere – with the media, the invasion of their personal lives, their victims and the criminal justice system. Victimhoodalso involves appealing to other social roles – most notably as mothers and fathers whose children are suffering through the attention being given to their transgression.

The case of boxer Sugar Ray Leonard displays all three counter-deglamorization strategies – but only in relation to elements of his criminality. In 1991, he admitted to physically abusing his wife Juanita, threatening to kill her and taking drugs. In their analysis of the subsequent media coverage, Messner and Solomon (1993) argue that the focus quickly shifted to the drug abuse element of the story, glossing over his domestic abuse and where it was noted, presenting it as the secondary issue *caused* by drug and alcohol abuse. Humanizing Leonard and stressing the pressure that society places upon its sports stars created the conditions for compassion and sympathy. Simultaneously, Juanita’s victimhood was minimized and denied through neutralizing language (phrases like “physically mistreated” replaced more graphic descriptions), a critical tone about her “claims”, and an incorrect application of a causal explanation between Leonard's drug abuse and his violence towards his wife - when even *he* had not made such a claim. In so doing, Leonard became the victim.

The Sugar Ray Leonard case and others like it are illustrative of news media representations of domestic abuse more generally. Reporting takes the form of snapshots of isolated incidents and single cases, which serves to obscure the wider phenomenon of violence that domestic abuse represents (Monckton-Smith, 2012). The narratives used in reporting such cases tend to blame the victim and offer excuses for the offender (Boyle, 2005). Victim-blaming has been noted in many other cases in sport. In her consideration of reporting of sexual assault around the Australian Football League (AFL), Toffoletti (2007) noted a tendency to blame predatory female ‘groupies’, the focus upon *their* transgressions of proper femininity. In addition, Toffoletti highlighted how male players were presented as wayward individuals, the exception rather than the rule, which, in effect, abstracted the cases from the broader context of the “gender power relations that play out in Australian football culture and the systems of value that inform how women and men are differently positioned in the Australian sporting landscape” (2007: 435). Waterhouse-Watson (2016) reached similar conclusions in her consideration of sense-making around AFL players’ transgressions. Media discourse and popular imagination position players narrative identities as loveable rogues, pseudo-religious figures and role models, which, Waterhouse-Watson argues, excuses their behaviour from three angles,

…footballers are elevated religious figures and role models (who would not do anything terribly wrong), but simultaneously national heroes whose misbehaviour is ultimately forgivable and children who cannot be expected to know any better (2016: 71).

Of additional relevance to sense-making around sportsmen who transgress is *judicial blindness* – “a consistent failure to condemn and punish inappropriate behaviour conducted by celebrities in the same way that the average citizen committing similar acts may be” (Penfold-Mounce, 2009: 167). Felman (1997) explored judicial blindness in the trial of OJ Simpson for the murder of his former wife Nicole Brown and Ron Goldman. Felman argued that the trial occurred at the intersection of a range of key contentious social issues – race being heavily prominent following the previous Rodney King case – and that the jury were essentially blinded, the trial itself denying the trauma that it was supposed to remedy,

…the jurors look but do not see. They do not see the beaten body. They look at pictures of Nicole’s bruised countenance but declare they cannot see either the husband’s blows or the wife’s (the victim’s) battered face. The jurors…(are) the *trial’s failed eyewitnesses*. (Felman, 1997: 763, *emphasis in original*)

It is suggested that there is a deference to celebrity criminals not just in relation to the outcome of a trial but also the type of sentences received if convicted and whether those sentences are fully served. This is particularly the case if the sentences contain an element of community service and are designed to be carried out in public – often eliciting complaints that their fame leads to them being mobbed or photographed. Judicial blindness may go some way to explaining why the prominence of gender-based violence within and around some sports is not accompanied by criminal justice or other outcomes. For example, Waterhouse-Watson (2016) noted that more than 20 cases of AFL footballer sexual assault have been made since 1998, involving at least 57 players and staff but that only a handful have received any sanctions.

The evidence presented thus far suggests that sport can often be the context for the performance of aggressive forms of masculinity, in which a spectrum of misogynistic behaviours have become normalized and inconsequential. For sportsmen whose domestic abuse has come into the public spotlight, they have often successfully drawn upon counter-deglamorization strategies and neutralizing narrative identities to maintain their favourable public image and healthy incomes. Misogyny in English football ranges from gender-based insults among fans during games to clubs’ denial of players violence. In addition, football clubs have been slow to condemn domestic abuse more generally. Only two football clubs – Bristol City and Exeter City - have officially pledged their support for the Women’s Aid *Football United Against Domestic Violence* campaign (Women's Aid, 2017). All of this takes place within a consumerist landscape in which the consumption of products and services becomes inextricably interlinked with the culture of the game (Dixon, 2016).

There is a significant lack of detailed analysis of individual cases of Premier League Footballers convicted of violent offences against women. The victimization of women like Rachel Wall, Sheryl Gascoigne and Ulrika Jonsson highlighted in the introduction lack a robust academic framework appreciative of the national context of English and Welsh professional football. As such, there is little scope for scholars and victim advocates to make use of such cases to identify and better respond to the wider drivers of misogyny in this context. We believe this is a missed opportunity and intend to begin filling this gap in the literature. Within the next section, we outline our approach to analysing media representations of the Stephanie Ward and Danny Simpson case.

**Approach to the Study**

We decided to adopt a single case study approach to exploring mainstream media representations of domestic abuse in English Premier League football. Given the paucity of research in this area, the single case study offered an opportunity to conduct an in-depth enquiry, identifying interrelated key themes through connectedness with the particulars of the case (Simons, 2009). We selected the case of Stephanie Ward and Danny Simpson because Simpson is one of the only recent examples of a Premier League Footballer convicted of a violent offence against a female partner. Whilst other players have been arrested, some have not faced charges and others have been charged but subsequently found not guilty – not an unusual occurrence in cases of violence against women involving professional sportsmen, where convictions are consistently at very low levels (Benedict, 1997; Waterhouse-Watson, 2016). Unlike the OJ Simpson trial discussed by Felman (1997), Danny Simpson's trial *did* result in a rare legal outcome in this context – a conviction. As such, it provides an interesting case to explore in relation to judicial blindness and deglamorization (Felman, 1997; Penfold-Mounce, 2009). In addition, whilst Danny Simpson has not achieved the same professional or commercial status as players like David Beckham or Wayne Rooney, he has a significant following beyond the game. He has long been a regular character alongside reality television figures and soap stars in the tabloid press, where articles make frequent reference to his personal life, the expensive cars he owns and the exclusive nightclubs and restaurants he frequents. He embodies a celebrity culture in which "Ideas like restraint, prudence and modesty have either been discredited or just forgotten...replaced with impetuosity, frivolity, prodigality. Human impulses like these were once seen as vices; now they are almost virtuous" (Cashmore, 2014: 341). Domestic abuse has not yet achieved the status of other social problems (Monckton-Smith, Williams and Mullane, 2014). As such, analysing media portrayals of cases like these is an important step in revealing and critiquing contemporary narratives around violence against women in consumer capitalist society and beginning to think about the ways in which news media can contribute to ways of seeing (or not seeing) domestic abuse.

We searched for UK national newspaper articles via the Nexis database in which Simpson’s arrest and conviction were mentioned. Our search terms included “Danny Simpson”, “Stephanie Ward”, “attack” and “assault”. After the removal of duplicates and other content that was not of relevance to the study, we ended up with a sample of 93 articles. In terms of the time captured by our sample, we set the earliest date when news of the incident broke in January 2015 and went up to 30th June 2017. We decided to extend the coverage period as long as was possible because the case continued to make the news long after Simpson’s conviction and we were interested to explore how sense making around it evolved over time.

Our approach to both data collection and analysis was guided by Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA), which can be described as a methodological sensibility rather than a strict process (Altheide, 1987; Altheide and Schneider, 2013; Ferrell et al, 2008, 2015). ECA acknowledges the importance of context, enabling us to treat the newspaper articles as socially and culturally embedded texts, inextricably linked to the broader structures that form the backdrop to the case. ECA sees texts as fluid, connected and continuous rather than firm, unitary and discrete. As such, ECA enables transgressive situations to be located within larger flows of meaning (Ferrell et al, 2015). The ECA approach is appreciative of messiness and complexity, starting with the expectation that meaning must emerge from the data rather than be systematically extracted from it (Altheide and Schneider, 2013). ECA is therefore well suited to researching in contexts of contested meanings like those which we anticipated would exist around this case. Whilst ECA allows for some pre-structured categories, it is not rigid in its application. Therefore, whilst we were interested to explore ideas like deglamorization and judicial blindness (Penfold-Mounce, 2009), victim-blaming (Boyle, 2005; Toffoletti, 2007) and narrative identities (Waterhouse-Watson, 2016). ECA enabled us to identify additional concepts that emerged as we analysed the texts - allowing the data to unfold around each case. In addition, ECA is needs-led in terms of the tools and techniques that are used to capture meaning - therefore we were able to use quantitative measures like descriptive statistics to develop a sense of extent and scale and qualitative techniques like thematic analysis to explore nature and context. Within the next section, we present our key findings.

**Findings**

*Footballer first, abuser second.*

All 93 articles referred to Simpson’s identity as a footballer. This often included his current and past clubs and the position he played in. Further descriptions focused upon the perceived *success* of Simpson as a footballer. In nearly three out of ten articles (28.0%, n=26), Simpson is referred to as a “star”, for example “Premier League star”, “Leicester star”, “Foxes star”. The articles conveyed his commitment to the game and to his club. In an interview conducted in his home, the journalist describes “sitting in a large front room shorn of adornments apart from a replica of the Premier League trophy he won under Ranieri” (Winter, 2017). A small number of articles referred to him in negative terms - three calling him a “brute” (Bennett, 2017; Ryan and Warrander, 2015; Veevers and Wilkins, 2015), three describing him as a “thug” (Mullin, 2015; Ryan, 2015; Wells and Veevers, 2016) and one referring to him as a “woman beater” (Williams, 2016). He was only referred to as an “abuser” in three articles, two of which were authored by the Chief Executive of Women’s Aid. However, even some of these articles kept a connection to his profession. Wells and Veevers (2016) refer to Simpson as a “footie thug” in the main body of the text but the headline of the article terms him “Leicester Ace”.

An opinion piece by Sanghani (2016) referred to him as a “swaggering brat” in the headline – after first describing him as “Leicester City’s Danny Simpson” - and a “pathetic brat” in the body of the text. However, this depiction of a brat evokes a childlike conceptualisation of Simpson, serving to minimise his responsibility for his actions. Descriptions of Simpson as a “bad boy” (Cross, 2016; Farmer, 2016) and “bad boy footballer” (Jackson, 2016) further reinforced the child-like image of him and seemed to suggest that his criminality had added another dimension to his celebrity. Having considered the characterisation of Simpson within the articles, it was clear that his identity and status as a footballer wholly overrode his identity as an individual who was charged with – then later found guilty of – a serious violent offence. *The abuser* was not an identity that gained any traction and is largely absent from news media reporting around the case – in effect trivializing and minimizing his offending.

*Football as victim***.**

Just as Simpson was characterised with reference to football, another prominent theme in the coverage was the continued focus on football when considering the impact of his offence. In articles where Simpson was quoted, he spoke in terms of what the club and fansthought of him, “I'm thankful to them (Leicester City) and the fans. I know a lot of fans at the time were disappointed in me. I let *them* down” (Winter, 2016, emphasis added). He emphasised how determined he was to stay at Leicester, even when the club did not want him, effectively conveying that he wanted to redeem himself as a *footballer*, not making any reference to addressing his violence. Simpson also attempted to minimize and neutralize his offence in interviews he gave – not referring directly to his crime and always bringing the focus back to football,

I thought it was time to get my head down and try to cut out *unfortunate events off the pitch*, whether it was *my personal life or whatever*. It's all coming together at the right time for my life on and off the pitch.' (Wheeler, 2016, emphasis added)

I hope *that [conviction and community service] stuff* isn't affecting the chance for me to have a call-up for England. Yes, I've made mistakes, I have to live with it now. The image I have - ask anybody at any club I've played for. I'm an honest, hard-working lad who's bubbly in the dressing room. I'm a winner (Winter, 2016, emphasis added)

A similar tone was adopted by others, notably the BBC in defending their decision to invite Simpson onto the panel of the BBC television programme Question of Sportand a Match of the Dayspin-off. The BBC statement was quoted in multiple articles and emphasised that Simpson had “been invited on based on his footballing knowledge and experience” (see for example Williams, 2016). Again, Simpson’s identity as a footballer had eclipsed his status as an offender.

The concept of winning in relation to his sentence was clear within the coverage. One article described Simpson’s behaviour during the Leicester City Premier League celebrations, “During the celebrations, defender Danny Simpson lifted his leg to show he was not wearing a tag. He had *successfully* appealed against it after assaulting his ex” (Parker, 2016, emphasis added). The language used emphasised football related outcomes rather than the criminal justice outcomes - having his curfew overturned meant that Simpson could “join his team mates at an end-of-season celebration” (Willgress, 2016) and “attend the end of season party” (Osuh, 2016c). This paints a picture of Simpson as victorious, as having won against the legal system by appealing his sentence and ensured that he was back with the team, where he was entitled to belong. The emphasis on football in relation to the impact of Simpson’s offence served to present the sport as a victim of his crime and ensure that Simpson’s identity as a footballer was further bolstered. This in effect ensured that his status as a convicted violent offender – and his victim – went largely unseen. As Ward noted in an interview, “Through our relationship, protecting his career was the most important thing” (Cottle, 2016).

*Wealth and celebrity.*

Simpson’s wealth was a prominent theme throughout the coverage, particularly in the tabloid press, which placed a heavier emphasis upon his material wealth than his achievements on the pitch. He was frequently described with reference to how much money he earned – for example “the £35,000-a-week player” (see for example Jackson, 2016). There were 19 references to Simpson’s weekly salary throughout the articles in the sample. In addition, there were also 13 mentions of the value of his car – “a £200,000 Lamborghini” (see for example Norton, 2016). Simpson’s home a “£420,000 five-bedroom house in Worsley” (Duell and Norton, 2016), was only mentioned four times, perhaps because of its relatively modest value compared to the multimillion pound homes of other footballers. Reference was also made to the type of experiences that Simpson’s wealth enabled him to partake in, for example nights out at expensive locations. Simpson’s presence in celebrity circles was often alluded to within the articles, which described his nights out with team mates and dates with women who had a high public profile,

The pair enjoyed dinner at the Colony Club with Danny’s team members before a select few – including Jamie and Rebekah Vardy and Wes Morgan headed out in Mayfair…Danny proceeded to carry on the party with his pretty companion at Libertines nightclub (Lawrence, 2016)

Simpson’s wealth was framed within a rags to riches tale by some journalists. Portraying him as a working-class hero, an article discussing Simpson and his former teammate Danny Drinkwater describes the ‘success story’ of the two, “In many ways, the two Dannys constitute a hopelessly romantic feel-good story” (Taylor, 2016). Simpson is presented as overcoming adversity despite the odds,

Born in Eccles, Manchester, Simpson's journey has been hard at times, overcoming obstacles, and learning from mistakes. "My mum had me when she was 16," he says. "Mum worked hard in a bookies, a pub, an insurance company, and took me training and to games. She and my dad split up when I was young”. He had a tough life where he grew up in Moss Side. “I met my dad later on in life… From a young age, I've had to be determined and hungry. I was ten, went to City. They said no. I went to Liverpool. They said no. I went to United, the team I support. They saw something and said yes even though I was tiny”. (Winter, 2016)

The impact of Simpson’s wealth and celebrity status upon his ability to serve his sentence was covered extensively within the articles. Whilst much of this coverage was incredulous at the fact Simpson had avoided serving his full sentence, this was framed in terms of his celebrity and wealth as opposed to his status as an individual convicted of a domestic abuse offence. Articles that referred to the need for him to change his abusive behaviour were few and far between and the notion that he still posed a potential risk to others because his violence had not been addressed was largely absent from news media discourse. This reinforced the nature of the crime against Ward as a one off. When such references were made they were often within the context of opinion pieces or articles citing advocates for domestic abuse victims. It was Simpson’s status as a wealthy celebrity that endured. All articles in our sample were articles that referred to Simpson’s assault of Ward. That these articles also referred to Simpson’s wealth and celebrity was significant. They could not simply frame him as an abuser. The judgements made about Simpson in these articles were judgements of a young man with too much money who needed to be humbled and put back in his place. They weren’t judgements of a violent abuser whose offending behaviour needed to be addressed.

*The consumption of women.*

We have referred above to the numerous mentions of Simpson dating women in the context of his wealth and celebrity. However, additional themes emerged when exploring this coverage further. Simpson’s relationships with women were often portrayed as successes or wins. One article referred to him dating three women as a form of success,

Randy footie star Danny Simpson has scored a hat-trick off the pitch by romancing three model beauties. In very quick succession the Leicester City defender, right, has been wining and dining glamour girls Miriam Simpson, Zarah Mapa and Rebecca Fox… A source said: "Danny is officially a single man so he can see as many girls as he wants. But it's impressive if not admirable that he managed to have three models on the go in very quick succession”. (Armstrong and Brankin, 2016)

Women’s physical attractiveness and bodies were frequently and explicitly referred to. One described a “glamorous brunette” with a “slender frame” (Tufft, 2016). Another inferred that women’s bodies were an important asset in securing a place in Simpson’s affections, “Ashleigh certainly proved why she's won the heart of the £35,000-a-week footballer as she flaunted her impressive curves in a patterned swimsuit” (Freeth, 2016). The articles did not objectify Simpson’s body in this way. Those commenting on his physicality tended to compliment his style and dress sense, for example “Danny also opted to wear all black for the night out, donning skinny jeans and a plain t-shirt” (Lawrence, 2016).

The lavish goods that Simpson bought for his girlfriends also featured in the coverage, one article referred to a Balenciaga designer handbag (Armstrong and Brankin, 2016) whilst the coverage of Simpson’s testimony in court often referred to a pair of expensive shoes he had bought for Ward that he didn’t think she deserved (see for example Bond, 2015). The emphasis on the claim that Simpson paid for such items reinforced the depiction of the women in his life as parasitic gold-diggers. One report about a statement Ward made to the press described her as “Speaking outside her £350,000 house in Worsley, *which is owned by her former partner”* (Joseph, 2017, emphasis added). This theme again emerged in coverage of a January 2017 Twitter exchange between Simpson and Ward,

The row began when Simpson tweeted on his 30th birthday: 'When you FUND your exes (sic) whole life and can't even get a happy birthday message off your child. What a world we live in lol #happybirthday.' (Chan, 2017)

In the same way that Simpson was often described a buying luxury items for his girlfriends, they too were framed as luxury goods for consumption. Women were frequently described using possessive language, creating a sense of ownership and emphasising that their identity was anchored on his, for example, as “Danny Simpson’s new WAG” (Cross, 2016) and “Danny Simpson’s mystery lady” (Tufft, 2016). In an interview in May 2016 about her relationship with Simpson, Ward also alluded to the themes of ownership, possession – and additionally - disposal,

It looked like I had everything to the outside world - big house, nice car, footballer boyfriend - but us women are disposable to players. Because of what they earn, nobody will never challenge their behaviour and they're treated like Gods. (Cottle, 2016)

*Simpson as a child and father - ‘growing up’.*

The coverage of Simpson’s sentence drew on the theme of *growing up*. He portrayed himself in vulnerable and child-like terms, referring to his sentencing hearing he is quoted as saying, “Standing in that box, with the judge there, and he's got the power to send me away for six months, I was *frightened*. They could see on my face I was *scared*” (Winter, 2016, emphasis added). Journalists framed his offence in terms of immaturity, presenting the club’s manager as the firm parent disciplining the wayward child, “the *social shortcomings* of the Leicester players are countered by the easy charm of manager Claudio Ranieri who has *cleaned things up* since his arrival last July” (Hardman, 2016, emphasis added).

Within the coverage, Simpson frames his feelings about his offence in terms of *regret* rather than remorse*,* “I regret it. I regret putting a lot of people through that, obviously my ex, my little girl, family, friends, the club. I apologised” (Winter, 2016). His use of language is noteworthy, he uses the past tense *apologized* rather than the present tense *I apologize* or *I am sorry.* In addition, he doesn’t expand upon this statement, nor mention Ward by name - she is clustered in with a group of other people affected by his offence. As such, this serves to dilute Ward’s victimhood and maintain the focus upon Simpson and his perceived process of change. He is often quoted as feeling “humbled” by helping those less fortunate than him, essentially portraying him as having matured from a teenage-like self-centredness into someone more thankful for his privileged position,

That's helped me grow. I was in this football bubble - wake up, go training, go home - and it broke that. It made me think. It humbled me…On my day off, I'm used to being free, shopping, being lazy, playing FIFA… I'm now in a charity shop eight hours a day… I was working twice a week with people with mental health problems. We'd look after them, play bingo, do jigsaws, get them cups of tea, help them to the toilet. They are the happiest people I've ever met. Some had really serious problems. Some don't have any family. Some aren't too sure what day it is. It made me appreciate life. (Winter, 2016)

This conveys the focus of Simpson’s concern on being a more gracious celebrity footballer rather than a repentant abuser. Simpson’s fatherhood was frequently included within the theme of maturity with an emphasis on his daughter being proud of his footballing achievements. Describing her presence at a seminal moment in his footballing career, he states,

She calls me Champion now not Daddy! It's a good age. She's clever. She knows Daddy has football, and she knows what we did last season. She was there at the Everton game and lifted the trophy. She'll be able to look at that in however many years, probably when I'm not even here, and show her kids and grandkids and say, "Remember when Leicester won the league? I was that little girl there with my daddy on the pitch". (Wheeler, 2016)

In relation to Simpson’s offending, it was not just what the news media included in their reports that was of interest to us – it was what they excludedtoo. There was a distinct lack of acknowledgement of other law-breaking that Simpson had engaged in or had a connection to – for instance a 2011 conviction for speeding and the 2013 assault on Ward’s mother for which his father Peter Samms was convicted. Only one article referred to these incidents, and even this example minimized the latter offence, describing Samms’ actions as the aftermath of his son’s “bust up with Miss Ward” (Norton, 2016). In addition, the coverage did not explore Simpson’s decision to abandon his appeal against his conviction and as such attached no meaning to this, it became another unseen element of the case. These omissions serve to present Simpson’s conviction for common assault as a one-off, exceptional event. In all this coverage – and lack of coverage - the serious and violent nature of Simpson’s offence and potential risk of future offending is painted out of the picture. The story is reframed from one of a violent abuser who may still pose a threat to others to one of a spoiled child who has been on a journey and learned a lesson about grace and humility. Simpson emerges in a strong and favourable position, transforming the image of a self-centred bad boy footballer into one more akin to a lovable rogue who has learned from his mistakes.

*Victim as aggressor.*

We have already noted the way in which Ward’s status as a victim was passively deniedthrough omission. We also noted a more active denial of her victimhood through representations of her as an aggressor. This began in the descriptions of Simpson’s attack on her in December 2015. The context of the incident was described as a “heated”, “drunken” row, and included points like “The *pair*, who had *both* been drinking” (Scheerhout, 2015, emphasis added) and “…*tempers* flared when *she accused him* of texting another girl” (Bond, 2015, emphasis added). This way of describing the incident dilutes Simpson’s responsibility and places a focus on Ward’s behaviour. Victim blaming can also be seen in the way the articles used quotation marks to describe Ward during the incident. Using quotation marks around words like “terrified”, “throttled” and “crying hysterically and cowering” suggests that even after Simpson’s conviction these were *claims* rather than truths.

Following Simpson’s conviction, newspapers often referred to the fact that Ward had not given evidence in court and quoted the statement that she had made, which contrasted with her earlier statement to police. Very few of the articles expanded upon this, simply reprinting the statement, referring to it as “her stunning defence of the Premier League footballer” (Wareing, 2015) and leaving the reader to draw their own conclusions. As such, her actions lacked explanation and context – particular in relation to evidence that many victims adopt rational and justified strategies for keeping safe that contradict wider expectations of what the ‘perfect victim’ looks like (Monckton-Smith, Williams and Mullane, 2014; Pain, 2014; Van Wijk, 2013). One of the few exceptions to this rule was an article authored by the Chief Executive of Women’s Aid, which contextualised Ward’s behaviour as common amongst abuse victims and explained why they often decided not to give testimony in court (Neate, 2015a). Whilst this article had the potential to shed light on the bigger picture of domestic abuse, it did not achieve this aim given the scale and extent of victim-blaming and omission of context throughout the rest of the coverage. Simpson’s testimony in court was often quoted in newspaper articles. He drew upon idealistic depictions of family and created the impression that Ward was to blame for being aggressive towards him and shattering this illusion of the perfect family that *he* claimed he had enabled. It was notable that there was very little in the way of counter narrative or challenge to this type of quote,

Giving evidence, Simpson said: "As a mum and dad if we can be amicable for our little girl we want to be. We opened presents together as a family on Christmas Day and it was nice… I also spent a lot of money on her Christmas present on shoes for her and I was saying I wanted them back. From me trying to get the shoes I took a hit off her. I remember her foot kick at me as I was grabbing the shoes” (Bond, 2015)

The relationship between Simpson and Ward in the time after his conviction was the topic of several other newspaper articles. In January 2017, several pieces reported upon a “Twitter row” between the two (Brankin, 2017; Joseph, 2017; Chan, 2017). The articles included claims from a friend of Simpson that Ward wanted another child with him and suggested that she would drop her ‘big money demands’ for maintenance in return (Brankin, 2017). The articles also quoted messages in which Simpson appeared to accuse Ward of denying him access to their daughter. Ward is portrayed as predatory and parasitic, which in effect, paints her in the role of the aggressor and Simpson as her victim.

A small number of articles recognised Ward’s identity as a victim – particularly those making reference to her charity work with Women’s Aid. One article cited comments she had made on Twitter, suggesting a confidence and awareness of her victimhood and that of others,

Today is PROOF every woman should take out the precautions they are offered by police after domestic violence. I was offered a restraining order and I refused as I didn't want it to affect Skye. I deeply regret this. No man should be able to bully or lie about a woman online (Chan, 2017)

However even within articles where Ward appeared to be reclaiming her legitimate status as a victim, other narratives were present. One noted an incident at a Birmingham hotel. There were no further reports about this incident in any of the later coverage, suggesting that no further action was taken in relation to the alleged act,

Premier League ace Danny Simpson's former girlfriend will be questioned by police over a bottle attack that left another woman with a blood-soaked face. Stephanie Ward, who told last week of her hell at the hands of abusive ex Simpson, was accused of lashing out at Heather Jackson. (Armstrong, 2016)

The articles referred to in this section actively present Ward as blameworthy, aggressive and predatory, often focusing upon her actions. They portray Simpson in contrast as a passive victim of her deviance. Even when Ward’s status as a victim is recognised, it was often accompanied by victim blaming and problematisation of her behaviour.

*Discussion and Conclusions*

Within this study, we aimed to explore news media representations of the Ward and Simpson domestic abuse case. It was interesting to note that the story transcended the “news” sections. It’s inclusion in the sports sections of newspapers clearly demonstrates that players’ off-pitch behaviour is considered relevant to discussion in a sports context. In addition, the categorisation of the case as a *celebrity* story in other newspapers suggests that footballers now have a following that extends beyond football enthusiasts to encompass fans of celebrity culture (Cashmore, 2014). Their behaviour outside of the game is relevant to their identities as sportsmen and as celebrities therefore what happens off the pitch is now widely reported upon by the news media.

Our findings supported earlier studies that claimed sportsmen convicted of violent offences continue to be portrayed as stars by news media (Benedict, 1997; Owton and Lazard, 2016). Even in the coverage that was critical of his behaviour, Simpson was presented as a footballer first and foremost. Even when he was characterised in terms of his offending, this too was associated with his status as a footballer, for example he was a “footie thug” rather than simply a “thug” and the term “abuser” was so rarely used that it was not part of the news media vocabulary around the case. In our view, this does serve to devalue domestic abuse, treating his conviction as an inconvenience both for his own career and for the club. Therefore, in considering the extent to which Simpson was deglamorised (Penfold-Mounce, 2009), we argue that the offence did *not* result in any significant deglamorization of Simpson by the news media. At the most, the offence represented a temporary crack in his veneer that was quickly filled by portrayals of perceived adherence to the counter-deglamorization strategies, which we consider in the following paragraphs.

With regards to penance*,* news media did not portray Simpson as having admitted responsibility for what he had done to Ward. Indeed, during his trial, news media reported his consistent denial of his offence and after the trial did not offer any comment upon Simpson’s decision not to pursue an appeal against his conviction. However, he was presented as sorry for the effect of his offence on the club and the club’s fans. In terms of accepting his punishment, news media expressed incredulity at Simpson having challenged his uncompleted unpaid work – in so doing drawing attention to the presence of judicial blindness (Penfold-Mounce, 2009). Despite this, the depictions of him as humble and mature having served someof his sentence served to assist Simpson in limiting his deglamorisaton. In relation to engaging in behaviour change, the need for Simpson to address his violence was not a prominent theme in the news coverage. Instead the emphasis shifted to behaviour change in terms of being less spoiled, less of a “brat” and more appreciative of his privileged position. Waterhouse-Watson’s (2016) argument that professional sportsmen are often portrayed as children who don’t know any better is of relevance here. News media presented Simpson’s post-offence transition from child and bad boy footballer to another key narrative identity identified by Waterhouse-Watson (2016) – that of the loveable rogue. Loveable rogues, Waterhouse-Watson (2016) argues, are ultimately *forgivable.* Simpson’s presence within a team who went on to win the Premier League served to elevate his status among football fans. Therefore, it could be argued that in terms of penance, even though Simpson was not portrayed as having taken full responsibility, accepted his punishment without challenge or changed his offending behaviour – news media presented him as repentant through suggesting that he had matured and grown up, becoming a better footballer and a more gracious celebrity.

In terms of public declaration*,* Penfold-Mounce (2009) described how celebrities often respond immediately to limit the severity of impact through confessing, denying or defending their actions.  *­­­*As noted above, news media reported upon Simpson’s immediate and consistent denial that he attacked Ward. He was portrayed as having maintained this denial and even when he was found guilty, did not change his account or pursue the appeal he announced that he would make against the conviction. The public declaration that came later in a newspaper interview, where Simpson expressed his regret (Winter, 2016) – served to maintain the narrative of denial in reporting upon an apology not for what he had done but for the process that had followed it. What was interesting about this case was the reporting not just of the offender’s public declaration but also that of the victim. Ward’s statement withdrawing her allegations was simply reprinted without comment - these reports were devoid of context and expert opinion of domestic abuse advocates or scholars.

Drawing on the third final counter-deglamorization strategy of victimhood(Penfold-Mounce, 2009),news media supported the locating of blame elsewhere and the portrayal of Simpson as the victim. Victim-blaming (Boyle, 2005) was evident across the coverage. News media presented Ward as a parasitic gold-digger – like what Toffoletti (2007) saw in the AFL context where female “groupies” were depicted as predatory. Criminologists often refer to the concept of the ideal victim (Christie, 1986) – individuals who are readily assigned victim status and afforded sympathy when they become the victims of crime because of their perceived innocence and vulnerability. Ward never achieved ideal victim status. Her framing as an aggressor was achieved in a variety of ways – the use of quotation marks to question the legitimacy of her account, the emphasis on her behaviour in reports of the attack and later confrontations and the presentation of Simpson as a virtuous family man. Even later reports that referred to Ward’s work for Women’s Aid contained content that sullied her reputation. Previous research had emphasised news media’s tendency to portray domestic abuse as one-off incidents (Monckton-Smith, 2012) and this was certainly the case here. This also supported the representation of Simpson as the victim by largely omitting any reference to previous offences in which he had been involved. All of this had the effect of presenting Ward as the problem and her behaviour as having *driven* Simpson to attack her. Simpson’s identity as an abuser was essentially denied and as such, so was any need to address and change his abusive behaviour. What emerges from all of this is *media blindness.* News media portrayals embody a *denial* of the trauma of domestic abuse.

Simpson did not have to try very hard to counter his deglamorization because by and large, he didn’t experience it. His transgression in assaulting Ward had not contradicted his previous news media image to any significant degree. He was considered a bad boy footballer who drove fast cars and dated multiple women. Our findings in relation to Simpson’s *consumption* of women are particularly significant here. Making sense of this involves broadening the conceptual frameworks of our understanding beyond patriarchy and misogyny to encompass the broader structural frameworks in which they thrive. When framed in terms of consumption, media portrayals of Simpson’s violence towards Ward does not diverge from his existing brand – one built on expectations about the role and function of women in his life. Throughout the coverage of the Ward and Simpson case, women were portrayed as consumer items, as symbols of economic success alongside luxury goods, prestige cars and expensive leisure activities. They are objectified, earned, owned and possessed. As such, they fulfil a role in the imaginary of consumer capitalism which increases the significance of toxic masculinity within a context where misogynistic values, attitudes and beliefs provided fertile ground for the increasing objectification of women and denial of their status as victims of men's violence (Benedict, 1997). The rewards available to Premier League footballers like Simpson enable them to become extreme consumers– not only of products and services but of other people in general and of women in particular. Women are additional props that help deliver a convincing performance of success. Women are only given agency when it is perceived that they have failed in this role – by threatening to reveal their partners as abusers – an identity that exists beyond the boundaries of the celebrated bad boy footballer. News media present this agency in the form of the vindictive and parasitic gold-digger seeking a piece of the footballer’s wealth – wealth that they are presented as not entitled to. As such, news media portrayals of the case denied status to the domestic abuse, it was simply a plot device in a bigger story about celebrity culture, wealth and entitlement.

The legal outcome in this case – that of a conviction for common assault – strongly suggests that Simpson knew what he was doing, knew it to be wrong, but chose to behave in this way.However, news media did not focus upon his criminality but upon Ward’s perceived deviance in transgressing expectations about who women in football circles are and how they should behave. The “unholy triumvirate” of “birds, betting and booze” described by Williams and Woodhouse (1991: 86) around the 1990 World Cup has evolved into something altogether more sinister. In denying Simpson’s criminality and amplifying Ward’s deviance, news media engage in fetishist disavowal, described by Žižek as follows,

This forgetting entails a gesture of what is called fetishist disavowal. 'I know but I don't want to know that I know, so I don't know'. I know it, but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so that I can continue acting as if I don't know it. (2009, pp 45-46)

For news media to confront and challenge Simpson’s behaviour would be to confront and challenge the structural conditions in which his behaviour is enabled. This structural context is one in which news media survive, thrive and deny domestic abuse. For these corporations, celebrities like Simpson are valuable cultural products. His behaviour off the pitch creates a spectacle, which becomes fodder for the tabloid press. These stories about Simpson are themselves consumer products. For most people whose lives do not embody his rags to riches myth, those left behind by late capitalism and forgotten by the liberal elites seek solace in celebrity culture (Cashmore, 2014).

Misogyny around football has long been recognised (Burton-Nelson, 1994; Jones, 2006). However, this misogyny is perpetuated through representation. Given the considerable influence of news media, the consequences of this are far reaching. If news media continue to be blind to the trauma of domestic abuse perpetrated by footballers, portray women as objects, demean those who reveal their partners for the abusers that they are, and feed the hunger of a society immersed in celebrity culture, it will continue to support the structures that enable and minimize domestic abuse. In the same way that the jury were the *failed eyewitnesse*s in the OJ Simpson case (Felman, 1997), the news media were the failed eyewitnesses in the Danny Simpson and Stephanie Ward case. Media blindness perpetuates the continued denial of domestic abuse, "a trauma cannot be remembered, when, in the first place, it cannot be grasped, when, as these trials show, it cannot even be seen. Rather than memory, it compels a traumatic re-enactment" (Felman, 1997: 766).

In terms of what can be done, more research evidence is needed to reveal and challenge these practices – particularly in relation to news media representations of the violence of professional footballers, an area largely neglected by scholars of gender-based violence to date. Further study is also required to investigate the degree to which readers accept, internalise and reproduce these portrayals. Whilst mainstream news media is a powerful force, so too is social media, which critical voices have successfully engaged in recent years to confront abuse and its denial – seen for example through the #MeToo social media hashtag, where people self-identify as victims of sexual violence. A key priority for such efforts should begin with the use of language and terminology. Just as news media have used language to minimize and excuse the violence of professional sportsmen, so too should the critical counter narrative. We must begin to frame these offenders as abusers who just happen to play football as opposed to footballers who “misbehave”.

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