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## **Branding women's football in a field of hegemonic masculinity**

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this article is to identify discourses and practices which are entrenched in women's football and define the conditions in which it operates. The empirical material is based on a discourse analysis with examples taken from web pages of clubs and the teams, with other more interactive sites like discussion forums and guest books also being analysed and discussed. The theoretical approach is based partly on discourse theory, but also on*

*two approaches intended to be combined and used continuously in the analysis: brand management and hegemonic masculinity.*

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### KEYWORDS

Brand- discourse - football - gender - hegemony - masculinity

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### INTRODUCTION

On 26 December 1921, 53, 000 people were at Goodison Park watching a spectacle that later 1  
would often be referred to as the peak of women's football, when Dick, Kerr Ladies beat St  
Helens Ladies 4-0. Later that year, the FA implemented a *de facto* ban on women's football;  
on the official website of the FA the following is to be read today:

1921: The FA bans women from playing on Football League grounds...the game of  
football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged (FA, 2009a)

The ban was of immediate effect and was considered by many newspapers to be a sensible 2  
course of action. As a result of the ban, the Swedish magazine *Idrottsbladet* made a U-turn in  
a press item that differed from its formerly rather positive writings on the culture of women's  
football:

The English FA has come up with a brilliant idea - to ban the clubs from making their  
football fields available for the playing of football between ladies. In England and  
France the ladies have started to play football in an alarmingly high extent, and in  
England they consider that it has gone too far, for football is not a game for ladies.  
The weak female body hurts from hard body contact. Hence the ladies should not  
participate in football but instead engage themselves in swimming, land hockey and  
other more noble sport disciplines (Andersson and Radmann, 1998, p. 63).

Other newspapers delivered their opinion in the same spirit as the Swedes. One Scottish 3  
newspaper, for example, expressed its full approval of the decision:

The action of the Football Association in passing a resolution considering the game  
unsuitable for females would appear to have a good deal of support. Even among  
women generally, the playing of football by the sex is far from being popular... A  
proposal to form a football club for the women of the staff of Messrs Selfridges went  
before the Athletic Committee, but was rejected due to lack of support... In America  
girls are not allowed to play unless they have been medically tested and the  
gymnastic instructor is always a qualified medical man. The trouble is that the type of  
woman who wants to play football here won't be medically examined (Williams, 2003  
p. 33).

The ban that The FA issued failed to blast women's football out of existence. Yet it was not until 1971, when The FA lifted the ban, that the culture of women's football could start to grow in its modern form (FA, 2009a). 4

What started out as so called Comical Matches and was subjected to a ban is a part of the sport today with great signs of a higher degree of acceptance and participation, both juridically and socially. The juridical aspects of this appear more obvious than the social aspects; there are rarely any legal prohibitions and girls and women can play in organised forms just as men. However, the social acceptance is primarily indicated by the increased numbers of licensed players, other than that it is hard to assure a higher degree of acceptance. But women's football is growing and in some parts women's football is clearly commercialised and show a steadily increasing financial turnover. This development is most likely to have had a significant impact in both reproducing and changing the social structures of women's football. The aim of this article is to identify the discourses and practices entrenched in women's football that have had an impact on its conditions of operation. This is analysed through four different cases with the following research questions in mind: 5

In which ways are the teams and the players marketed and presented in pictures and in text?

Does the empirical material hold text or pictures that can be interpreted as a discursive effect of male hegemony?

## THEORETICAL DEPARTURE

The framework is based on two theoretical approaches, and one method of analysis. The use of the brand management perspective is motivated by the character of the empirical material which is a way for the clubs to market themselves and share information. Further the specific values and characteristics of football as a social environment can be analysed from literature on hegemonic masculinity. The method of analysis is discourse analysis. 6

### THE BRAND MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

Football clubs need strong brands to survive in the competition. Not many clubs in women's football have so far been able to develop strong brands in a global context. This is an important process in the development of women's football. The basic idea of the forming of a strong brand is the same both for companies and sport clubs. Melin (1999, p. 125-128) describes the process of brand building based on a set of activities created by the brand possessor. The term *product attributes* alludes to the clear characteristics of a product, i.e., which concrete values the product communicates and if it is able to give the consumer a surplus value. Important attributes can for example be the quality of the product and its logotype. By *brand identity* Melin means what the brand stands for and what makes it unique, the identity could be expressed as its *raison d'être*. Brand identity is a complex part of the competition and hard to measure. However, in a market where competition rapidly increases this should be an interesting aspect in the competition, both for companies and clubs. 7

Examples of methods for clubs to gain a unique brand identity could be to use famous players in their marketing, to appear in specific contexts or to create an image of the consumers of the specific product. But there is a significant difference between the two first activities: while product attributes gives the consumer an actual *raison d'être*, the brand identity rather gives the consumer an emotional *raison d'être*. The *core value* of a company or a club is optimised if it can form a foundation for the positioning and marketing communication of a brand. The core value should communicate the brand's primary advantages over the competition. When it comes to *positioning*, the main advantage in the competition between brands is if a brand can build up a specific and favourable positioning in relation to the competitors. A good positioning on the market, from the perspective of a football club, can for example be built up by a characteristic way of playing, a professional organisation or good facilities. The aim when trying to position a brand is to gain advantages in aspects of brand knowledge, brand associations and brand loyalty. The process of positioning takes its starting point in the actions of the possessor of the brand. The brand possessor creates its position on the market based on its own way of acting. The term *image* has a clear connection with positioning; a determining difference is that the image is created by the consumer's subjective apprehensions of a brand. In a sense you could say that image creates positioning, that 8

positioning creates image, and that the creation of an image takes its starting point with the consumers. *Marketing communication* is an important tool in reaching out with all of the activities that have been mentioned, not least in the form of commercials which the brand possessor should aim at giving a character of their own. *External brand loyalty* can be separated from *internal brand loyalty*; the latter is a fundamentally central activity for players, coaches, leaders and administrative employees in a football club when developing the brand as opposed to being why the consumer chooses the brand. In other words, one could say that justifying a brand in the consumers' world demands that the brand possessor knows what its own brand stands for and how it should be developed.

### HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Football has a male tradition, a tradition that even today has an effect on the relative commercial strength. Some would object and call football more equal than ever, others would claim the opposite. Regardless, football is male-dominated and can be seen in a context of male hegemony: 9

The theory about hegemony means that there is a continuous power struggle in society and that this struggle primarily takes place with culture as a weapon. When one group in society has the power over what others should think you could call it a hegemonic position, i.e. monopoly on the culture (Lalander and Johansson, 2002, p. 37) 10

Hegemony in this definition refers to culture which makes it interesting to use in this study since culture is flexible and a changing process. Söderström (1999, p. 138-141) writes about processes that are forming cultures in gyms. He argues that there are significant differences both between the ways women train, and also between how men and women use their body as a cultural expression. Women apprehend the gym as a masculine environment. The weights are markers for the individuals positioning in the context. Through the weights men can compare, compete and demonstrate their strength to form a hierarchy, women do not participate in this competition in the same way. Instead of using free weights, which are the most significant markers in the male competition, women tend to use machines more frequently. 11

Another difference is that women tend to focus more on doing the movements correctly and therefore do not train as close to their maximum performance level as men do. The differences can be seen as a result of which ideal bodies are dominant and given most space in Western civilisation. Söderström says that there is, to some extent, room for women to develop their bodies and their strength with the purpose of competing in bodybuilding or athletic fitness. Bodybuilding produces different types of female bodies that deviate from the ideal and can upset the conventional definitions of sex identity. 12

Johansson (1998) identifies the male bodybuilder as the top symbol of masculinity in the gym context. This is the predominant stereotype but it does not automatically mean that everyone wants to look like Arnold Schwarzenegger did at the height of his career as a bodybuilder. The masculinity that the bodybuilder represents is hegemonic, yet not everyone wants to look like him and he is he in the numerical minority at most gyms; then why is he hegemonic? To explain this, Johansson (1998, p.147-148) refers to Connell, who describes the concept of negotiating masculinity by which he means no one can walk away unaffected: 13

Many of the characterisations that are distinguishing for the culture of bodybuilding: discipline, rationality, strength and initiative are also features that return in an everyday male praxis. In that sense there's no unfathomable gap between hegemonic- and negotiating masculinity. If you for a moment release the thought of the bodybuilder's body as an anomaly and instead studies the training technique and the lifestyle that is related to this body, you will soon find out that there's a connection between a more comprehensive male rationality and the mental attitude that develops within the frames of gym culture.

Söderström (1999, p. 142-145) mentions that the dominant female ideal has changed from slim, to slim and strong with well defined muscles. His study shows that women want to build muscle, but not in a way that threatens the positions of males and females at the gym, but more in a way that harmonises with the female ideal. It is easy to say that women wanting 14

more muscles is an expression of a weakening of the differences between the sexes, but since it is a result of a female ideal it, if anything, strengthens the differences. However, Söderström refers to Klein when saying that neither masculinity nor femininity is passed on by heredity but only is a social definition and extremely complex (Söderström 1999, p. 142-145). When discussing football one can say that the values of hegemonic masculinity from the gym culture are of great use when trying to be a good football player, whether you are a man or a woman. It takes discipline, target orientation and asceticism to get results and improve. The body needs a disciplined regularity to be able to perform.

Söderström (1999, p. 142-145) writes that these features can be seen as something that the body demands to enable performance at its highest possible level. This would mean that you adapt your training to a male hegemony with values like discipline, target orientation and ascetics. Yet, this is not necessarily an expression of an overtaking of a fundamentally masculine ideal. 15

#### *D DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AS THEORY AND METHOD*

Phillips and Winther-Jørgensen (2002) describe Laclau and Mouffe's view on discourse. They mean that our social world should be understood as a web of processes in which meaning is created. However, meaning can never be fixed and is therefore constantly floating in the social field. This unstable social structure creates a struggle over the creation of meaning, but also a struggle over definitions of identity and society in its constant process of modification. Our social world is built in infinite complexity. The relationship between language and reality can be seen as arbitrary. The world does not say by its own how it should be expressed. Instead we give the world meaning by using social conventions in which fixed objects are connected with fixed signs. This means that the word 'car' does not have a natural connection to the vehicle we refer to when using the word. Our understanding of the word car is instead created by the convention of a car as a vehicle with four wheels, tyres and a steering wheel. This is a point made by Saussure and says that the separated signs meaning comes from its relation to other signs; a sign gets its specific value in the context by being separate from other signs. 16

Saussure's point is a part of structural linguistics which is a tradition that has received criticism, not least from Laclau and Mouffe. One could say that they advocate a variant; the creation of meaning as a social process is about fixating meaning *as if* there was a Saussurian structure. In social contexts we try to fix the meaning of the signs by placing them in fixed ways. This, according to Laclau and Mouffe, is impossible. However, certain meanings can be so conventionalised that they are being perceived as natural (Phillips and Winther-Jørgensen 2002, p. 25-27). Phillips and Winther-Jørgensen (2002, p. 49-51) argue that there are a number of terms that can be used as tools in Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis, first of all *nodal points*, *master signifiers* and *myths*; these are all social organisers of meaning. Examples of these social organisers can be given in the following way. Nodal points organise discourses and one example can be Fair Play. Master signifiers organise identities, for example man, and myths organise a social space, for example modern football. 17

The points of meaning are connected through the space between them, the concept of *chains of equivalence*. Fair Play is given content by its relation to gentleman, public schools and other fields with discursive significance. By following the chains of equivalence you can clarify individual and collective identities but also maps of the social room (in this case football). A social field like modern football is worldwide and complex but is to a high extent, like for instance in Scandinavia, linked to Europe and England, masculinity, fair play and the forming of strong character. The discourses of modern football largely exclude a number of important aspects (such as those relating to women) even though these phenomena form a significant part of football, and sport. This is why modern football, can be seen, partly, as a myth. Some would oppose values that are linked to football in certain parts of the world and say that men's football is not at all as masculine as for example rugby or ice hockey. Furthermore it is possible that people in nations with less connection to England than the Scandinavian nations would not link modern football to England and Fair Play at all, but instead think of Brazil, Joga Bonito and the Favelas of Rio De Janeiro. The myth of what modern football should be like is constantly floating and different discourses are constantly struggling over filling it with content. A myth can therefore be called a floating signifier. The unfixed social conditions can create antagonism between discourses; if one is predominant one could talk about a 18

hegemonic relation.

## TRENDS IN THE MARKETING OF WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

In this part four different cases from the empirical material will be analysed. They all highlight 19 problems in the specific context and also represent challenges on hegemonic masculinity in football. Besides, they are interesting cases in terms of branding, marketing and the channelling of information.

### CASE 1 - FULHAM

In the FA Women's Premier League in England, only three out of 12 teams are totally 20 independent, the other teams are parts of clubs with a strong organisation and a long male history. A club like Fulham has had huge problems in managing the Ladies' section. During the years 2001-2004 Fulham was a power-broker and together with Arsenal the most successful among the English teams. Fulham peaked in 2003 when they won the national Premier League, the Premier League Cup and the FA Women's Cup. It was in the spring of 2000 that the chairman of Fulham FC, Mohammed Al Fayed, made the Ladies team fully professional and led Fulham Ladies into its successful years. Today the situation is different. Before the season of 2006-2007, Fulham FC decided to withdraw its Ladies team from the Women's Premier League. At this time Fulham Ladies had already changed from a professional into a semi-professional team. This is from a discussion forum on the subject:

Fulham's website states: 'The Club continues to be committed to delivering every opportunity 21 for girls to participate in football, but as no other plans to develop the women's game on the league stage are to be implemented in the near future, it feels that it has no other option but to withdraw funding from its Ladies team at this stage.' Just what the FA needed after it has tried to increase the number of teams in the Prem Div. The FA need to start giving each team in the Prem (max would have been 12) a sum of money to help them through the season. £10-15,000 is still only a total of £100-150,000 per year. This is just embarrassing. How can these clubs function on the basis of a race night here, and a quiz night there. To hire a coach is £500 per week. The FA are doing a really good job with the grassroots of women's football i.e. centres of excellence, etc, please don't go and ruin all that good work, with clubs going out of existence because they can't afford to keep the cost of the club running. Birmingham this year have showed that it can be done without playing wages and expenses but you still have to pay for ground, coach, kit etc, and just this bare minimum is probably a minimum of ten grand (Ivblue 2006).

The person behind the signature Ivblue seems to be anxious and caring about Fulham Ladies. 22 But he or she also presents Fulham Ladies in the role of victim, and points to the FA as the only potential saviour. The official reason for Fulham stopping its funding of the Ladies' team was that it had not proven to be financially viable. In Ivblue's construction the best way to finance women's football would be to use what men's football generates and distribute it to the female teams via the FA. The Birmingham example is a small opening for the possibility of self-financed female clubs but is in the end stated as most unlikely to occur. There are dimensions of conflict in the text. The grassroots of women's football in England are considered a success and in relation to this the sums of money given to the elite is 'embarrassing'; at the same time it is considered most unlikely that a female club could stand on its own with these given conditions. It is possible to find many examples in the empirical material that communicates the same thing to the reader: women's football hold a *raison d'être* but lacks in conditions. Someone has to help, and save women's football.

Is this an expression that says women's football as a product is not good enough? Or is it that 23 history has far too much of a paralysing impact? Are men's physical abilities decisive? These are common ways to explain the relative strength of the male and female game; I believe that they are all in their own way wrong.

Instead I would like to draw attention to social construction based on hegemonic masculinity. 24 The starting point is that no discourse can be definitively established; there is a constant struggle over meaning, and what a discourse should be filled with. Meaning creates identity and when two identities block each other antagonism arises. For example, you can normally both be a professional football player and a heterosexual man; yet, if you are a male professional football player and at the same time homosexual the identities are on collision

course. The combination of the identities football player and woman to some extent has an antagonistic relationship. My interpretation is that there is a hegemonic intervention that to a great extent creates a fix between heterosexual men and football; this is socially constructed in a way that makes people perceive this relation between the sport and the performer as the most natural.

Discourses are floating and differdepending on the context; the relational number of 25 independent clubs could partially be a sign that says something about the strength of this hegemonic intervention in each nation. Let us focus on an issue raised by Phillips and Winther-Jørgensen (2002): *what are the social consequences if the one or the other wins out and hegemonically pins down the meaning of the floating signifier?* To some extent football and masculinity are hegemonically linked, football is to a high degree perceived as masculine and it is 'natural' for a boy or a man to play football; if you are a boy, football could even be seen as a way of developing yourself into being a man. This connection is partly based on the distance of football to other sports with different hegemonic relative strengths, like equestrian sports or gymnastics. It is for example 'most normal' to be involved in gymnastics if you are a girl or a woman. In Sweden men's football and women's football are both competing for the same sponsors and stakeholders, there is in some sense an antagonism, and a solution to get away from the constant struggle is to maintain a hegemonic masculinity that keeps women's football pinned down. One of the social consequences in the extension is that men's football to a high extent has better conditions concerning training facilities and finances. On the other hand teams and clubs in women's football can take advantage of the public debate on gender equality and perhaps receive a lot of attention and financing as a consequence.

#### CASE 2 - KICK LIKE A GIRL

The American club Saint Louis Athletica advertises for an event on its webpage called *Kick Like a Girl* 26. This is a screening of the documentary film with the same name by Jenny MacKenzie. The advertisement tells us that the film will be shown on HBO and that the club will put it up on a big screen at the home stadium Vetta Soccer Dome on May 27<sup>th</sup>. In this context there are two perspectives to analyse from without. From a brand management perspective one can see several positive aspects. First of all the creation of an additional meeting between the brand possessor and the consumer is positive. In football this meeting primarily is formed when spectators attend a match, but in this case we see a meeting outside of that frame. Second is that you can fully secure the quality of an event like *Kick Like a Girl*, in contrast to a football game you know what will happen. The unique character of sport as entertainment is that the quality of the game is insecure and all you can do as an organiser is to secure the quality of the event surrounding the game.

All of the clubs (brands) in Women's Professional Soccer (WPS) are young in their current 27 contexts and are in a vital process of settling the content of their brands. In the case of Saint Louis Athletica, the event *Kick Like a Girl* is one of many it arranges which could play an important role in creating a successful brand capital, not the least by giving the brand a unique identity. The brand gains identity through positive meetings between the brand possessor and the consumer. One aspect in building a strong brand identity is to labour towards creating strong connections between the brand possessor and the consumer. Melin mentions two possible ways for this to happen: through creation of relationship and through creation of culture. By the creation of relationship Melin (1999, p.125-128) means that it is an expression of strength to be able to create different types of relations to the consumer. By culture is intended to mean that the brand identity is affected by organisational standards, values and other reflections from the club and what it stands for.

The trailer of the documentary *Kick Like a Girl* is available on [Youtube](#) and forms an 28 interesting case study. The documentary is about a girl's soccer team called *The Mighty Cheetahs* which after two undefeated seasons playing girl's teams has started to play in a boy's division. Consider the following selection of quotes:

When I told the boys we were playing, they were like... you know, girls can't play in a boys' division (Girl in the team).

We are playing girls, we are gonna cram them, and then at the end they cram us

(One of the boys in an opponent team).

My immediate reaction was, these poor boys, if they beat us they were supposed to, if they lose it is really embarrassing (Mother to one of the girls).

Some of the parents, they would find out that their team was losing and they would yell out, you're losing to girls, do you know these are girls!?! (Father to one of the girls)

I'm not gonna be one of those girly girls who puts on lip gloss every day... and goes to ballet every day (Girl in the team)

When I hear someone say like, you kick like a girl! Or, you fell like a girl! It really just wanna make me say like well, I am a girl (Girl in the team).

Areas with male traditions, like football, have changed, creating insecurity over male identity. 29  
The quotes that are highlighted from the trailer Kick Like a Girl are all signs of a challenge against the hegemonic relation in the context. The absolute challenge of the relative strength was actualised when the girls started to win games against boys' teams. When one boy told one of the girls in The Mighty Cheetahs that 'they could not play in a boys' division' he probably did not count on the girls winning games. What he said can be interpreted in two ways, either he thought that the girls would not stand a chance, or it is an expression of what he has learned, and a social construction that he has created based on the information he has been given; football is an area where boys set the conditions. One girl's mother expressed that the boys were in a lose-lose situation and also put them into the role of victims; 'these poor boys.' When the girls made their entrance in the area of football, where the boys felt secure, it possibly created insecurity of identity among the boys because of the challenge in the hegemonic relation. Some of the quotes indicate that the insecurity among the boys both affected and were affected by their parents (or significant others).

When football started to develop in its modern form in Europe and primarily in England it did not officially include women. The prohibition by the FA excluded women to a significant degree, at least in its extension. You can view the connection between the prohibition and male hegemony in football from two perspectives. Either the prohibition was exclusively a result of the relative strength between men and women in the context of football from past times. However, the additional effect could be that it was an action from an authority that in itself continuously imposes the relative strength between the sexes in football. Either way, the relative strength in modern football has always been to the advantage of men. Different processes, practices and surrounding discourses constantly struggle over the fixation of meaning in a discourse. 30

Phillips and Winther-Jørgensen (2002) mention that structures we take for granted, where the structure of football could form an example, can be built up partly by political processes that later result in social consequences. The authors highlight a few examples: the group 'immigrants' and 'crime' can be connected in certain contexts. For instance, there is a significant connection between 'immigrants' and 'crime' in the Swedish daily press. In this case a mythical relation is created when the identity of immigrant and the identity of criminal are connected to each other. This can be compared with the distinction between football, and women's football. The sport 'football' and the group 'men' are socially constructed as being naturally connected to each other, which defines football as 'naturally' masculine. An important connection to this reasoning is a point of view that Phillips and Winther-Jørgensen express. They mean that what we perceive as 'natural' can be built up by political processes (like the prohibition by The FA), together with social processes, and not by social processes alone. Due to this line of thought one can just imagine the impact of the ban that the FA constructed. 31

According to Laclau and Mouffe, antagonism can be fixed by hegemony; one group pins down the meaning of the floating signifier. The opposite of hegemony is deconstruction (Phillips and Winther-Jørgensen, 2002, p.48). The meaning of the term deconstruction in this context is really interesting when looking for signs of economical and social advancement of women's football: 32

Hegemony is the contingent articulation of elements in an undecidable terrain and deconstruction is the operation that shows that a hegemonic intervention is contingent – that the elements could have been combined differently. Thus, deconstruction reveals the undecidability, while the hegemonic intervention naturalises a particular articulation. 33

As mentioned, the highlighted quotes from the trailer of *Kick Like a Girl* can be interpreted as an effect of male hegemony in football. But the situations in which they are being said, with a girl's team challenging the relative strength, can be interpreted as an indication of deconstruction of the antagonism. This is not indicated primarily because of the fact that the girls can beat the boys; the point is that they are not trying to legitimate themselves or other girls playing football, they just play without expressing that the possible differences between boys and girls matter. At the same time the girls waver when being exposed to questions about girls in football. One girl says that she 'won't be that girly girl that puts on lip gloss every day.' She distances herself from what she thinks is too girly. Another girl says that when people say that she kicks like a girl she wants to respond with 'well, I am a girl.' This girl is affirming that girls can be girls in the way they want, and still play football. One can interpret the standpoint of the first girl as a way of saying that she does not want to be a 'feminine' girl in the stereotypical way. 35

### CASE 3 - LDB FC MALMÖ

One club in the Swedish top division emphasises its image as 'feminine', based on its opinion of what is feminine. A few years ago, the club LDB FC Malmö, constructed a marketing strategy that is unique among the teams in this study. The strategy was partly forced by the present economic situation at the time, but was largely a way of challenging the 21<sup>st</sup> Century's dominant team, Umeå IK, who even outrivaled the men's team of their club. This was not seen as anything positive by the club but it is possible that the lack of competition in the city has been a factor in the success. Umeå IK is interesting because it is one of very few clubs in women's football that in its city is the largest and most successful club. 35

The club LDB FC Malmö is financially dependent on the company behind the brand LDB, which is a producer of skin care products. LDB FC Malmö as a club has great breadth and markets the club in a versatile way. One part of its marketing is by highlighting the characters of the players and showing what a football player in the team is like: 36

22 MENTORS WHO STAND FOR EMPOWERMENT. We live in an age where appearance is everything. But beauty is not only skin deep; body and soul must also harmonise. We must not forget the soul. With its 22 ambassadors, LDB FC Marketing is pursuing a form of femininity that recognises the whole woman. Look after your body but never forget your soul. Train until you feel good, eat good nutritious food, and look after yourself and your nearest and dearest. When you feel good on the inside it shows on the outside (LDB FC for life website).

This construction of a perspective on life seems sensible and healthy. The problematic aspect of the marketing of LDB FC Malmö is the construction of a specific image of what a woman who plays for the team is 'like'. However, from a brand management perspective the strategy so far has proven to be very successful since the revenue from sponsorships has increased dramatically. New dimensions have been embedded in an existing brand and have created brand values with a greater breadth. For instance, the players in the team are involved in a project against AIDS in South Africa which most likely creates an emotional *raison d'être* among the consumers. Yet, it is possible that consumers to some extent question the real intentions with marketing campaigns like this one. The webpage does contain a lot of information about the team. Yet also, to a great extent, focuses on the corporation managing the marketing, and different projects outside the frames of football. The clearest product attributes, which have arisen since the creation of the brand in its current form, are femininity, health, and social engagement. When saying that players in one environment are 'feminine', it excludes persons that do not harmonise with this constructed image. This has led to criticism of the image of LDB FC Malmö. No one can question the success of the club when speaking of generating media interest, good financial conditions, and above all created a club with a high profile in women's football in Sweden. Whether it is a good way of equalising the relative strength in football is harder to say. 37

#### **CASE 4 - SEE EXTRAORDINARY**

The empirical material shows that the American league at this point is the most successful 38 when speaking of consumer interest and financial stability. Amongst a lot of stars in the league, Marta Vieira da Silva in Los Angeles Sol shines the clearest. On the webpage of LA Sol, a happy and exultant Marta together with the logotype of LA Sol forms a big header. Next to the picture of Marta it says 'MARTA Three-time FIFA player of the year.' Through the webpage you can order a 'Marta Bobblehead' which is a little doll or figure that looks like Marta. There is also an advertisement for 'Soccer Day in LA' with Marta and Landon Donovan from Los Angeles Galaxy as the main attractions. But the highlighting of star players, which is a significant part of marketing in men's football, especially in Europe, is also initiated by the head organisation of WPS. For instance the head organisation of WPS has initiated an advertising campaign called *See Extraordinary* which is a series of film clips with the biggest stars in the league. The players involved in the campaign are Angela Hucles, Rachel Buehler, Abby Wambach, Hope Solo, Natasha Kai, Lindsay Tarpley and Shannon Boxx. In one of the clips you can see the American international Abby Wambach displaying her drive and power. Aesthetically, the Campaign has similarities with Nike's Joga Bonito Campaign. The film clips of the players accentuate the players' extra-ordinary skills or values. There is also a video with all of the players performing at the same time. It is of great relevance to highlight the skills that each player displays, each specific skill is clarified in the clips.

Angela Hucles, midfielder for Boston Breakers – finesse and timing

Rachel Buehler, defender for FC Gold Pride – sacrifice and desire

Abby Wambach, forward for Washington Freedom – drive and power

Hope Solo, goalkeeper for Saint Louis Athletica – focus and instinct

Natasha Kai, player for Sky Blue FC – energy and flair

Lindsay Tarpley, forward for Chicago Red Stars – intensity and force

Shannon Boxx, midfielder for Los Angeles Sol – control and strength

The accentuated skills/values labelled on five out of the seven players focus on mental and/or 39 physical strength. It is interesting to connect this to one conclusion that Söderström (1999, p. 150-151) makes; training in gyms defines and chisels masculinity and femininity but the gym is one unique environment where this is still possible. Furthermore, Söderström means that the clear distinctions between male and female from earlier societies are in a process of being erased. The social structures in the postmodern society are complex, and it is harder than before to legitimise positions or behaviours on 'fixed' structures since these are unstable. When social structures to a higher degree floats around, the possibility to put a label on a symbol as either masculine or feminine decreases.

Are power, instinct, force and strength exclusively masculine features? The players in the 40 Extraordinary campaign do not seem to think so. The advertising company does not seem to think so since the strong and well defined leg muscles are carefully highlighted in several of the clips of the players. However, the expression of women's mental and physical strength in the advertising campaign does not have to say much about a possible change in the relative strength between the sexes in football. Like Söderström mentions, the changing of the female ideal does not automatically mean, for instance, that the relative strength in football is being affected.

#### **KEY ISSUES AND CONCLUSIONS**

The public debate is often characterised by the image of women's football as a problem. A 41 few professionals in powerful positions have raised the question of why is it not more successful? In the same sentence some of them ask whether it would help if the players wore different clothes? Of course one should raise the question of why women's football has not been fully successful if the aim is to develop the product and the sport. Yet, one also has to analyse the question of why from different perspectives, and if the situation really can be labelled as a problem since women's football started to develop relatively late. One Marketing

Director in a Swedish top league club told me that gender equality was the most successful argument when negotiating with potential financiers. Therefore the person in question frequently used this argument since it was being perceived as the most effective.

The market to a higher degree stands by men's football because it attracts larger crowds, 42 generates more money and therefore is an interesting product to invest in. So, is it wrong and unjust that men can become professional football players and women mostly cannot? In one sense it is not unjust, since in reality this is something that financially is primarily decided by the market. On the other hand a lot of literature on the subject, and this article, point at a historically anchored hegemonic relation in football which is based on the idea of men as superior. Should we not have got past that by now? Social processes are floating but viscous and do not change easily. This article has shown examples that represent a challenge in the hegemonic relation. Yet, the easiest way to measure the development of women's football is to look at the size of attendances, financial turnover, and the number of professional players. It has shown to be a lot easier to profile the players and the teams on a national level in the nations of this analysis, and this is most likely the case in many other nations too. It is a tendency that national success can generate engagement and identification faster than in a local or regional context. Local and regional engagement is to a higher degree historically conditioned.

The key issue in the developing process of women's football is that the market realises the 43 value of the product. It is for instance a problem when the most senior administrator of football, Sepp Blatter, truly believes that women play with lighter balls and have different rules when they do not; and at the same time he says that the future of football is feminine.

When scanning the empirical material I found that a lot of information and advertisements 44 are characterised by the idea of legitimising women's football. It is based on the same assumption as the marketing director of one Swedish club did have; 'you support male teams so you have to support us too.' How can this be an argument in a businesslike context? Is the *raison d'être* of women's football that women can play football just because men do? This is a problematic situation since many companies use their sponsorship of women's football as a way of saying: look at us, we represent equality. The problem is even bigger when clubs take advantage of this hidden rationality with the purpose of bringing in financial capital. A specific challenge for a football club in a women's league is to present itself as a good choice for the consumer, and not as an alternative to men's football.

The hegemonic relation in football is not 'natural' but socially constructed as a way of fixating 45 an antagonistic relation between the sexes. The rules and the social structures of football with separated teams from young ages most likely affect the antagonistic relation. In this area a shift of the administrative and social structures can be seen. It is more common for girls and boys to play together or in the same divisions at younger ages. Perhaps this is the most interesting structural development in the sport at grassroots level. However, that would have to be the subject of a different article. The key conclusions gleaned from this article are, firstly, that there is an existing hegemonic intervention that constantly struggles to fixate the group heterosexual men and the sport football; this is socially constructed in a way that makes people perceive this relation between the sport and the performer as the most 'natural.' Second, the Clubs would, from a long-term perspective, win both economically and socially by communicating the values of the game, and the values of football, instead of trying to legitimise the fact that women play football. Finally, expressions of women's mental and physical strength do not in itself necessarily have an effect on the relative strength between the sexes in football. Yet, an image of players as physically and mentally strong says something about their passion and commitment to be the best in their sport; this can be interpreted as a vital part of the levelling of the relative strength.

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### LINKS TO UNIFORM RESOURCE LOCATORS (URLS)

Ivblue 2006 Fulham Ladies - Oh Dear. Available 2009-05-19, <http://forum.football.co.uk/about9473.html>

The FA (2009a) Women's Football – A brief history. Available 2009-05-11, [http://www.thefa.com/GetIntoFootball/Players/PlayersPages/WomensAndGirls/History\\_of\\_womens\\_football.aspx](http://www.thefa.com/GetIntoFootball/Players/PlayersPages/WomensAndGirls/History_of_womens_football.aspx)

### ORGANISATIONS

<http://www.womensprosoccer.com/>(U.S.)

<http://www.damfotboll.com/lankar/lankar.asp>(Sweden).

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FA\\_Women%27s\\_Premier\\_League\\_National\\_Division](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FA_Women%27s_Premier_League_National_Division)(England).

### FILM CLIPS

Kick Like A Girl

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1BzwQR6ops>

LDB FC for life

<http://www.itsawomensworld.se/ldb-fc-for-life/spelarna-ar-mentor>

See extraordinary

[http://www.womensprosoccer.com/video/index?pid=EZz\\_8TzdW2I5zaqQ4AC6un4FBJSnqem9](http://www.womensprosoccer.com/video/index?pid=EZz_8TzdW2I5zaqQ4AC6un4FBJSnqem9)

<sup>1</sup> The article is part of a wider research project on women's football as a product. This article is a summary, highlighting certain examples from this work. The project will result in two essays which both broadly have the same theoretical approach. The first one is a discourse analysis of webpages, forums and guestbooks of women's football clubs in England, Sweden and the US, the other is based mainly on interviews with marketing directors in top-division clubs in Sweden.

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