

Football Fans, Lesbian Memes and Liminality: Exploring the Media's Mobilisation of Ritual at the 2019 Women's World Cup

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Social Sciences.

I hereby declare that, except where it is otherwise acknowledged in the text,
this thesis represents my own original work.

All versions of the submitted thesis (regardless of submission type) are
identical.

This thesis did not require human research ethics approval.

Madeleine Dove

21st October 2019

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'MD', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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Abstract

The 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup was marketed as a transformative event for women's sport and women's empowerment more generally. Without the ability to attend the event itself in France, most people used traditional media and digital networks to watch and participate in the event. In a mediascape where digital networks allow anyone with a smartphone or internet access to challenge mainstream discourse, I ask how does traditional media mobilise liminal ritual events like the World Cup to reinforce their symbolic power, and how do people use digital networks to challenge it.

This thesis uses two different ritual perspectives to understand the 2019 Women's World Cup: as a liminal ritual event, that through media coverage also contributes to the mythical place of the media in society. I use encoding/decoding theory to understand negotiated co-authorship of the liminal ritual event by users of social media as both a challenge to dominant media discourse, that however also reinforces media power. The media pilgrimages of Australian fans to France exemplifies their investment in both the women's empowerment and nationalism narratives that construct the liminal ritual event, but also demonstrates the inescapable nature of the media's symbolic power.

Introduction: Two Types of Ritual

The moment I woke, I reached for my phone and opened the Optus Sport app. Host nation, France, would be playing women's football powerhouse Norway. I lay in bed in my dark room, my blurry, still-asleep eyes trying to make out one player from another. At least kick-off wasn't too early this time- 5.30am. How many others were gathered around television screens in lounge rooms or at pubs and local soccer clubs, or watching the match on their phone in their office on lunch break or on the bus on the way home? When the match ended (France won, 2-1), I jumped on Twitter. I wanted to know how people felt about the penalty decision. I searched #FRANOR and scrolled. I waited until later to check Instagram- photography uploads normally took a few hours. The snapshots from the ground were incredible. In those images you see the glory and the guts of sport. You see rippling muscles and absolute elation. You also see heartbreak. Often the images are more exciting than the broadcast. It's the side of sport that makes the story. The image I loved most that day is of French players Renard and Le Sommer. The player who almost lost them the match and the player who saved it. Le Sommer is in Renard's arms, a sea of French flags wave behind them. In this image you see the connection, the emotion, the support and the gravity of this moment. It's beautiful.

The 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup was going to be massive. It also happened to fall smack bang in the middle of the limited fieldwork time for my Honours thesis. Caught up in the excitement, enamoured by the possibility of writing a

thesis about my passion, and finally with a justification for my 2am wake-ups to watch football, I felt the event should form the natural boundary for my thesis fieldwork. While Harrison makes a strong case for following the feeling of research, for leaning in to its coincidence, he also notes that good research design is about “the balance between structure and serendipity” (2018, 42). Aside from personal interest and a Twitter feed full of women footballers, there is a theoretical reason for focussing on the World Cup. As a pre-planned, public event with mass popular appeal, the World Cup is a concentrated example of the way that our social world is reflected in, shaped by, and channelled through various forms of media.

Initially, my research methods were essentially a review of the media and social media around the World Cup. I started by emulating studies of the 1999 Women’s World Cup, an event whose success spurred the rapid professionalisation of US women’s football in the early 2000s. Media studies of the event’s coverage focused largely on the active promotion of gender and race ideologies by the American media (Christopherson, Janning, and McConnell 2002; Miller 2001, 127–34; Narcotta-Welp 2015; Shugart 2003). So, I scoured Facebook comments of news articles, read what felt like every article on SBS’ The World Game site, read Twitter threads that were hundreds of tweets long. The data I was collecting was news media, social media about news media, and news media about social media reactions to news media. I soon realised that the discourse around the lead-up to the World Cup was not the promotion of a certain ideology, gender or otherwise, as in the ’99 World Cup. Rather, it was a

dialectical negotiation of many ideas about what sport, women and nationalism should look like. There were hints of change, tension and attempts at their resolution, all within the context of a mediatised public event. These hints in the lead-up to the start of the event encouraged me to use ritual theory to frame my research.

At this time, I was balancing my excitement as a fan and my anticipation as a researcher. I have played football (soccer!) for many years, regularly attend local matches and avidly support Australia's women's team, The Matildas. I wanted to write a thesis about the underdogs who came from behind, surprised the world and won the World Cup. I wanted to write a thesis about the triumph of women who I admired. I wanted this event to change women's sport so badly, that I latched onto the idea that it might be possible. Ritual theory, especially focused on events in the media, allowed for the possibility of social change through ritual action, buoying my hopes for a transformative World Cup.

Unable to detangle my love for the sport from my analysis, all my data collection during the World Cup was undertaken through the lens of the ritual event. I never even considered the possibility that the Matildas wouldn't have a successful World Cup. After a patchy lead-up to the event, and a largely disappointing initial stage, my beloved Matildas were knocked out in the Round of 16. Not only was I shattered, but I also had less time to gather data than I had hoped. I turned my emotional investment to other teams, learning their names and playing positions, the history of their coaches, wanting anyone but the US to win. The

Americans did eventually win, and I made my peace with it (somewhat!), telling myself that they were proof of how far women's football could go if given the necessary investment. It was only after the event ended and my emotions simmered down that I was able to step outside myself and let go of my investment in the transformative power of the World Cup. Hindsight allowed me to see more clearly that women's football hadn't changed drastically in Australia or around the world. I felt that if transformation were possible, it would be a slow burn, not a ritual outcome. Disappointed, and searching for a critical standpoint, I turned to the concept of media rituals and found the second analytical approach that I will be using.

I had to review the data I had already collected through the lens of media rituals. I needed to set aside my romantic notion of change through this event.

First, we must clear our heads of any romanticism in our thinking about mediation; second, we must reject any romanticism in our thinking about 'society'. (Couldry 2003, 136)

I had collected media about the Matildas, the World Cup, and women's empowerment with the promise of change in mind. Through participant observation and scouring online forums, I searched for the cohesion offered by ritual. However, the very same data also offered me a look at the structures and flows of power that the media seeks to obscure.

The difficult thing about the two key theories that I am using is their similar terminology to describe quite dissimilar approaches to understanding the World

Cup. I will do my best to clearly define them using terms that cannot be confused for one another, leaving out some nuance of ritual theory in order to gain a clear idea of what we're dealing with specifically in my field. Ritual theory is web of different iterations of overlapping ideas, deriving and evolving from one another. Both approaches I use draw heavily on classic Turnerian understandings of ritual, with the second approach diverging a little more than the first. While it may seem bizarre to use competing theories of ritual, I cannot seem to separate them with regard to my field. I find each approach fills the gaps of the other, and while it might complicate things to acknowledge a multiplicity of simultaneous events, it is the messy reality of globalization.

Ritual Liminal Event in The Media

The first approach to understanding my event derives from Dayan and Katz's *Media Events* (1996). I will refer to the event through this approach as a *ritual liminal event in the media*. A long name, I know, but I hope that a clear distinction will help us later on. The ritual liminal event approach understands the World Cup as a ritual in the symbolic sense of the definition: that ritual works to promote "social equilibrium, harmony, and integrated collective interest" in its liminal moments (Kelly and Kaplan 1990, 126). This idea insists that ritual is socially integrative, and is a "process through which a shared culture is created, modified, and transformed" directed toward "the maintenance of society in time" (Carey 2009, 33). Dayan and Katz adapt this conception of ritual to a media age. They demonstrate the way that the "festive viewing of television" (1996, 1) allows ritual to transcend geographical boundaries, connecting disparate groups

and individuals to the action, to the ritual centre. Expanding on this, my data will demonstrate how the same is also true through the festive use of social media. Digital networks offer new ways for users to participate in ritual, allowing them to experience and *co-author* (Real 1996) the ritual from geographically disparate places, remaining connected to the ritual centre by technology.

Despite the vast extension of the ritual by the media, this theory is not *about* the media. This is why I am calling the Women's World Cup, through this theory, a *ritual liminal event in the media*- a distinction that will become important later on. This is the type of ritual whose structure resembles the rituals of "tribal or simple agrarian contexts," as defined by Turner (1974, 56). While, of course, some contextual factors change due to the presence of the media and the differing social structures, Dayan and Katz demonstrated that their "media events" share notable aspects with the rituals of Turner's description. Important in these shared aspects is the notion of *liminality*, adopted by Turner from Van Gennep, to describe the anti-structural period at the heart of the ritual. Imagine a ritual structure, at its most basic, to be an event that is *structure – anti-structure – structure*, where structure is normal day-to-day life, and anti-structure is the liminal period. The "essence of liminality," according to Turner, is the "release from normative constraints" (1974, 61). In ritual liminal events in the media it is seen as the interruption of the "rhythm and focus" of normal life, when "festive viewing leads to... alternative possibilities" (Dayan and Katz 1996, 195).

It is within this liminal period that the anti-structure allows ritual subjects to transcend structural relationships with each other; we experience, for that moment, direct human bonds free of distinction of rank. Called *communitas*, this relationship is levelling, it's a "general social bond" (Turner 1977, 96) that overcomes class, race, gender and other structural distinctions by which we organise the social. For ritual liminal events in the media, this bond can transcend physical proximity. The "upsurge of fellow feeling" is "epidemic" for Dayan and Katz (1996, 196), who argue that television harnesses both *communitas* and shared symbols to connect viewers at the periphery to the ritual centre. In its release from structure, liminality offers a cathartic release for participants who (consciously or unconsciously) feel bound by structural life. For Turner, building tension can be released by the reversal or removal of power relations in the liminal period, allowing a return to the status-quo after the ritual free of its previous tension (1977, 200–201). In media, however, the catharsis comes from the sense of completion after a widely publicised lead-up and tumultuous staging process through advertising and news media (Dayan and Katz 1996, 198).

Dayan and Katz's approach was innovative, in that it offered a methodical and comprehensive application of ritual theory to media studies. They avoided the colloquial use of the term "ritual," allowing Turnerian ritual theory to have renewed application in the modern, media-saturated world. However, the ritual liminal event in the media approach does little to challenge existing ideas about what ritual is and how it works in modern society. Our search for critique brings

us to the more divergent of the two approaches I am using to analyse the 2019 Women's World Cup.

Media Rituals

My data are notably connected by the presence of the media. Of course, this is my own doing: I chose to look to and at the media to explain the social aspects of this year's world cup. It was not until my fourth reading of *Media Rituals* (Couldry 2003) that I recognised my very research method was ritual action, relating to the *myth of the mediated centre*. The transcendent value being ritualised at the World Cup was not about women or football, it was about the media and their place in society. *Media Rituals* is not a book about just any type of ritual performed in or through the media. It focusses on rituals *about* the media and their place in our lives. Media rituals in the Couldrian sense are not ritual liminal events as previously discussed, with structural periods, *communitas* and catharsis. Media rituals, as performed in relation to media events are formalised actions "associated with [the] transcendent value" of the media's centrality to modern social life, or the *myth of the mediated centre* (Couldry 2003, 21–22).

Couldry's argument is that media rituals naturalise the media's presence in our lives, situating the media as the place we turn to understand our world and ourselves. By Couldry's reckoning, all media rituals rely on the same two related myths. As in all ritual, it's not important whether these myths are true or not, but whether people believe them. The primary myth embedded in a media ritual is *the myth of the centre*. The idea that there is a social centre, somewhere, that is

the heart of the collective. That, somehow, there are practices, values and event that are the truest expression of ‘us,’ and that we should look to them. This is a construction, real only because we believe and practice it. The myth of the centre is, in Couldry’s words, “at the root of all Durkheimian and neo-Durkheimian accounts of how society holds together through ritual” (2003, 41). Included in these accounts is the ritual liminal event perspective. Note, especially, how Dayan and Katz stressed the importance of the peripheral audiences being connected (by technology) to the ritual centre (1996, 196), that “the broadcast transports us to some aspect of the sacred center of the society” (1996, 8). Ritual liminal events “reaffirm the values of the center which they, together with us, uphold” (Dayan and Katz 1996, 42), allowing us, as ritual participants, to “[break] through the profane and reach the sacred” centre (Real 1996, 48).

For Couldry, these perspectives fail to acknowledge the constructed nature of the centre. He argues that the myth of the centre is what allows the concentration of symbolic power in the media. If we believe that there *is* a powerful social centre, then it naturalises the concentration of symbolic power in one place; the place we assume to be the centre (Couldry 2003, 38–39). *Media Rituals* (2003) demonstrates that, in modern society, the gatekeeper of the place we assume to be the centre and also the place we find the concentration of symbolic power, is the media. Which brings us to the second myth necessary for media rituals, related to the first *myth of the centre*. The second myth tells us that the media’s “natural role is to represent that centre,” because of their privileged relationship to it (Couldry 2003, 45). The second myth, *the myth of the mediated centre*, is

that the media is the truest and most obvious articulation of our social world. That we look to the media to learn about ourselves and our social reality is a bizarre notion when abstracted, yet our belief that the media's relationship to an imagined centre is legitimate "underlies our orientation to television, radio and the press" (Couldry 2003, 2). Of course, digital networks figure in here too; slightly dispersing, but still hoarding symbolic power, thereby increasing inequality. This is, however, an extension of Couldry's argument that I will leave for my data to demonstrate later. What matters now is the clarification of the two types of ritual.

Media ritual action is *any* action that relates to the myth of the mediated centre. It can be as small as adjusting your behaviour when a local celebrity enters the room. Doing so demonstrates that, whether you like that person or not, you recognise the celebrity in the media to be somehow different to everyone else. Media rituals are times where these ritual actions, and celebrities, are formalised and focussed and "where category distinctions and boundaries related to the myth of the mediated centre are worked upon with particular intensity" (Couldry 2003, 47). These media rituals form a wider context by which the media's centrality is naturalised. This wider context is called the "ritual space of the media," the space that dominates our lives as they are media-facing. The values we hold about people in the media, about places in the media, about representations of ourselves and our practices in the media, these are all shaped and governed by the context of the ritual space of the media. When I watch the ads at half-time during the Women's World Cup, and I am moved to tears a Nike

ad, my actions relate to the myth of the mediated centre. I am closer to the centre, more validated, when I feel seen by the media. At that moment, I am not questioning the politics of virtue signalling or the commodification of diverse bodies to sell clothes, I am crying happy tears because the media acknowledges the existence of someone like me. That is media ritual action.

The ritual space of the media is the fabric of big and small media rituals that relate to the myth of the mediated centre. It is the Women's World Cup, and it is asking for a selfie with the local weather man to post to Instagram. It is going to a public screening of Australia's first match where local journalists will be present, and it is the rush of excitement I get when a social media influencer publicly "likes" my tweet on Twitter. Couldry asks researchers to step outside the ritual space of the media, to stop perpetuating the media's concentration of symbolic power. This is his critique of Dayan & Katz, along neo-Durkheimian theories of ritual in the media (Couldry 2003, 9–12); they are too wrapped up in the socially integrative aspects of ritual that they don't critique the media's capacity for symbolic violence.

Simultaneous Rituals

While I acknowledge Couldry's insistence that the construction of the myth of the mediated centre must be examined, I also believe that ritual liminal events have real effects, also worthy of examination. My data from the Women's World Cup demonstrates that a ritual liminal event can relate to social values, like gender roles and expectations, hold promise for social change, and encourage

social cohesion through *communitas* *and* also be a media ritual. If I were to ignore the emotional impact of the event on viewers or athletes, or the context it provided for governance amendment in women's football, or the widespread, public celebration of openly queer women, I would be performing a huge disservice. It is for these reasons that I am choosing to understand my field as a ritual liminal event in the media that acts as both itself *and* as a media ritual that strengthens the context of the ritual space of the media and relates to the myth of the mediated centre.

The ritual liminal event works in its own right, as a ritual relating to nationalism and women's empowerment, with a liminal period and an eventual return to structure. This notion is represented in Figure 1 by the star. However, the event is also a period of intense work, reinforcing the myth of the mediated centre; it is a media ritual. Media rituals are represented in Figure 1 by the grey circles. You can see how the ritual liminal event is wrapped up in the media ritual, relating to both its own mythic narratives, as well as the overarching myth of the mediated centre. This is due to the inescapable nature of the myth of the mediated centre, its pervasiveness represented by the all-encompassing ritual space of the media. Figure 1 demonstrates the way I envisage the two rituals being intertwined, occurring in the ritual space of the media. The presence of the ritual liminal event enables the intensity of the media ritual.

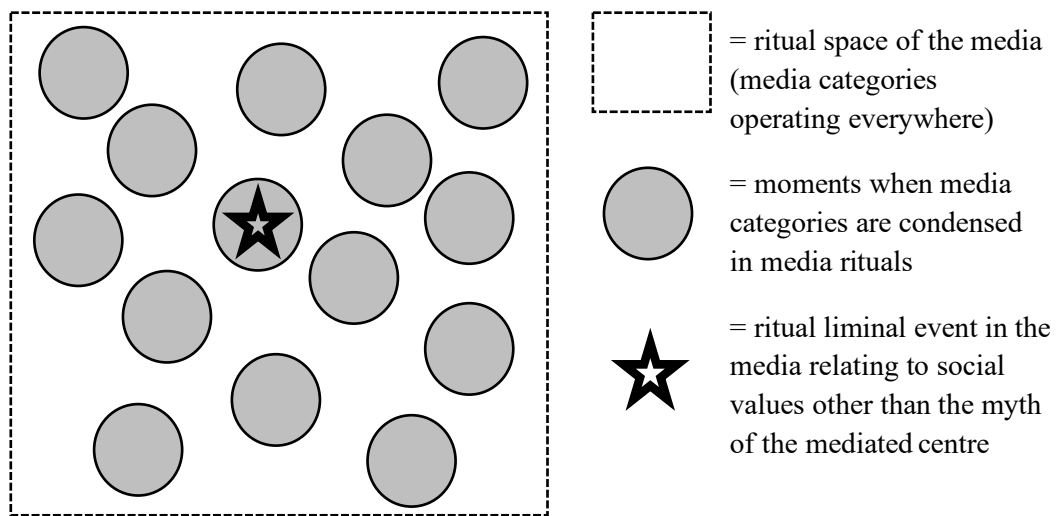


Figure 1 Relationship between 'ritual space of the media,' 'media rituals' and 'ritual liminal events in the media' (adapted from Couldry 2003, 14)

Where Couldry sees weakness in the ritual liminal event approach, I see a tool to understand how the myth of the centre is established. This will be the focus of the following chapter. Couldry's approach to understanding media events leaves behind some of the richest analysis of our social world. By choosing to focus solely on the myth of the mediated centre, he ignores that ritual action can be multi-valent, also relating to other values. The myth of the mediated centre is true because we believe it and practice media rituals relating to it, and while we can try to deconstruct it, it still defines the majority of reality. Acknowledging that ritual liminal events can be transformative in some areas, while still performing media rituals, allows us to acknowledge the efforts and experiences of certain groups and people to challenge discourse and social inequalities in the face of pervasive institutional media power.

In light of this understanding, this thesis will aim to understand the following. How does the 2019 Women's World Cup function as a ritual liminal event in the media, how does traditional media mobilise ritual liminal events like the World Cup to reinforce their symbolic power, and how do people use digital networks to challenge it?

Chapter Outline

All Eyes on France: Ritual Liminal Event Establishing the Myth of the Mediated Centre

This chapter examines the ritual liminal event narratives as portrayed by the media, and adopted by the public. It establishes women's empowerment and nationalism to be the narratives at the heart of the liminal ritual event, and explores the feeling of anticipation attached to expected transformation at the 2019 Women's World Cup. This chapter then examines the way the ritual liminal event in the media lays the groundwork for a media ritual. It explores further, in relation to the Women's World Cup, Couldry's notion of media rituals, including the ritual categories of 'media people/places/things,' 'liveness' and 'reality.'

Lesbians Won the Women's World Cup: Negotiated Positions in Ritual Participation

This chapter examines lesbian meme culture in relation to the 2019 Women's World Cup. Using Real's adaptation of Hall's encoding/decoding, it understands lesbian meme making as negotiated participation in the ritual liminal event. This

negotiation comes in opposition to historical heteronormative reporting of Women's World Cups, and conservative claims to national identity.

Football Fans as Temporary 'Media' People: Absorbing Symbolic Power

This chapter focusses on Australian fans who travelled to France to attend the World Cup. It details their festive participation in the ritual liminal event, and their efforts to challenge dominant discourse through social media and collective action. It examines the crossing of media ritual boundaries by fans, who are temporarily afforded 'media' status in France. Their temporary status allowed them to absorb, for the duration of the event, some level of the media's symbolic power, demonstrated by their small claim to 'naming' rights.

Conclusion: The Rights to Reality

The concluding chapter of this thesis will step out of the ritual frameworks used to analyse the 2019 Women's World Cup. It will consider the implications of the unequal distribution of symbolic power, including the right to define reality and the capacity for symbolic violence. It will also consider future directions for research.

All Eyes on France: Ritual Liminal Event and the Myth of the Mediated Centre

A sea of fans in the distance. Diverse skin colours, diverse kit colours. They wave massive flags above the heads of thousands. It's an image, but you can almost hear the roar and feel the bodies jumping and swaying in unison. It's the culmination of every football game you've ever been to, every sporting moment that's ever made you cry. In the foreground are the players. 14 women, each in their team kit, ready to battle it out at the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup. They stand tall, hands on their hips or their arms folded across their chest. The words read, "Don't change your dream. Change the world." White NIKE swoosh. "Just do it." (Nike 2019c)

This ad is typical of the media coverage and advertising in the lead-up to the 2019 Women's World Cup. They evoke something bigger than just you and I, or a football match. They show us a reflection of society's truth, or at least they claim to. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that way this type of advertising, in the context of wider discourse about women's sport, perpetuates the narratives of women's empowerment and nationalism at the Women's World Cup. I will explore claims of transformation relating to the Women's World Cup, especially relating to women's empowerment. This will include various examples of the way the media prepares the audience for the ritual liminal event to come, involving them in the "active looking forward" period, and how the audience and athletes appropriate the rhetoric of the ritual liminal event. I will then use

the framework laid out in *Two Types of Ritual* to understand the interplay between the ritual liminal event in the media (relating to women's empowerment and nationalism) and the media ritual (relating to the myth of the mediated centre). While a ritual liminal event in the media exists in its own right, it also establishes the basis for a media ritual. I will examine, more specifically, the way that the 2019 Women's World Cup enacts ritual action relating to the myth of the mediated centre.

You ready?

“A billion people tuning in...” We see down the tunnel, through two straight rows of athletes with ponytails and mascots who will walk them on to the pitch. The mascot at the front, a young girl, wipes her sweaty hand on her shorts. Her breath quickens. Dutch footballing star, Lieke Martens, turns to take her hand and asks “Hey! You ready?” They walk onto the pitch hand in hand, bombarded by cameras and cheers. When the rest of the mascots leave the pitch, Martens holds the girl back. “You’re not done.” The whistle sounds and Joan Jett’s ‘Bad Reputation’ fades in as our girl is pulled into an international football match. Martens pulls her along as they weave through Nigerian defenders, winning the ball back each time they lose it. Joan Jett sings, “you’re livin’ in the past it’s a new generation!” Martens scores and celebrates with the girl.

Someone new grabs the girl’s hand now- it’s Amandine Henry, French captain. The girl chants in the dressing room, her arms around the French players. “Aujourd’hui! On a gagné! Oooh oh-oh-oh oooh ooooooh!” Now the

crowd chants, and England's Fran Kirby pulls the girl into an incredible turn, fooling Korean defenders, and lining up for a shot. Another hand grabs the girl, pulling her into incredible, adrenaline-filled football moments, on and off the pitch; photoshoots, media conferences, even as an avatar in a video game. The girl paces up and down the sideline as she assists a female coach. They direct men's side, FC Barcelona. The girl throws Phillippe Coutinho a drink, before he lines up for the penalty. "Gooooooooaaaal! The league's first female coach makes history." The girl is pulled again, this time back into the game. She plays alongside the American team until Aussie, Sam Kerr, steals the ball. "She's on the move!" Kerr takes the ball and the girl's hand. They weave, duck and jump, wreaking havoc on the field- no one can catch them. And then they're fouled.

Instead of Kerr, the girl lines up for the free kick. In the crowd, another young girl grabs the Australian coat of arms on her supporter's jersey, and presses it to her lips. Our mascot girl takes a deep breath and puts her head down. She lines it up, and boots the ball straight over the wall of American defenders. Sam Kerr launches herself into the air, heading the ball into the goal. The crowd roars, Kerr backflips in celebration, and the girl spins around in disbelief, taking in the celebration. We cut back to the tunnel, she is standing next to Martens again; it was a daydream. The girl turns and looks up to her idol. She asks, "Hey! You ready?" She grabs Martens' hand and they step onto the pitch. White text reads, "Don't change your dream. Change the world. Just do it." White Nike swoosh. (Nike 2019b)

This advertisement, titled *Dream Further*, published just days before the 2019 Women's World Cup started, has now been viewed over 2 million times on YouTube alone. A shortened version played at half-time during match coverage, and it appeared on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter too. I've seen it in one form or another at least 30 times, yet it still makes me emotional. It's a powerful piece of advertising, hitting at ideas around the changing notion of women in sport, nationalism in global events and, of course, the pure experience in a stadium of nearly 100,000 people who jump and cheer and roar with emotion. It's a dream that's common to anyone who's ever played sport. The first time I ever attended a rugby match with them, my boyfriend and his friends all agreed that they secretly harboured a hope that, following a freak injury to the start player, the coach would look to the crowd for a suitable front-rower to jump the barrier and join the team. I scoffed at the time, especially considering they were all a few beers deep, and probably incapable of running more than a few kilometres, even on a good day. But, I'd be lying if I said that I don't imagine myself bumping shoulders with the Matildas every time I watch them play. I can only imagine this common dream is at the bottom of the tears that roll for a Nike ad.

The thing is, that for a very long time, this dream has been close to unattainable for women. Many of the current Matildas didn't get scholarships or sponsorships. They worked, studied and played all at once, while young men had their paths paved for them. The theme of doing it tough as a female athlete was very present in pre-World Cup coverage and advertising. Only a month before Nike's *Dream Further* ad, Sam Kerr featured in another piece by Nike.

Structured as a 4-minute documentary/interview, *Sam Kerr: Birthplace of Dreams* (Nike 2019a), appeared first in Nike's IGTV (a video streaming platform attached to Instagram). In the video, she recalls having to quit playing Australian Rules when the boys she played with got too big.

It just sucks that there was no opportunity for me as a girl, and as a kid that's hard to comprehend... being pulled out of the sport I loved. (Nike 2019a)

Sam eventually chose football over Australian Rules, but she isn't the only one whose path was difficult and winding. In a similar video, but published by Women's World Cup broadcaster, Optus Sport, Matildas defender Ellie Carpenter details the sacrifices she and her family have made. In *Sacrifice* (Optus Sport 2019a) we follow Ellie's journey for bigger and better opportunities. She's had to move cities and countries to find opportunity; it just wasn't available where she was. *All Roads Lead to France* (2019b), another Optus Sport video, focusses on the similar story of Steph Catley. Like Ellie, Steph's local clubs just didn't have pathways for girls to follow. She worked long hours in a store, while still at school, to afford the car she'd use to drive to training. Steph remembers the costs associated with travelling across the country to trials, "but it was kind of the only way you could be identified as a player." These videos, simultaneously published on platforms like Instagram and YouTube that facilitate sharing of content appeal to the dream. They appeal to anyone, but especially women, who feel hard done by in the sporting system.

We can tag our friends or share with people we know relate to these stories. Alongside the supportive ‘flexed biceps,’ ‘clapping hands’ and ‘soccer ball’ emojis in the comments of these videos, we find comments like, “@username this is just like you!” from people who identify with and want to share the Matildas’ stories.

Steph, Ellie and Sam are some of the most recognisable names from the Matildas; the few who we’d imagine have ‘made it.’ Before the event to come, it is highlighted by the media and their sponsors that they know women in sport have had it tough, they acknowledge those difficulties. If we imagine the ritual liminal event archetype of *structure – anti-structure – structure*, the media’s acknowledgment of the struggles that women athletes face is a marked acknowledgement of the initial structural phase. This happens in the lead-up to the World Cup, the event whose duration marks anti-structure, or the liminal period. By emphasizing the initial structure, it will make the anti-structure seem even greater by contrast; by reminding us how hard it’s been for these women to make it to football’s world stage, it will make it seem even more impressive when they do.

The media gets us ready for the liminal period in other ways, too. With the knowledge of the existing structure clear in our minds, with stories of struggle and disadvantage permeating advertising and pre-tournament coverage, the media ask if we’re ready for change. It felt as though half of women’s football was asking, “Are you ready?” and the other half were yelling, “Yes! We’re

ready!” *Dream Further* (Nike 2019a) is just one example of the many repetitions and assertions of readiness in months before the Women’s World Cup, but it perfectly encapsulates the appropriation of readiness discourse by the public, and by non-media people and athletes. At the start, Martens questions the unnamed girl, the one we all relate to. “Hey!” -Martens grabs her (and our) attention- “you ready?” It’s unclear what we’re supposed to be ready for, as we’ve never lived it before. It’s just a dream, but it’s a shared one. Through that little girl’s eyes, we see what’s coming. We feel her thrill, hear her breath and, with her, we’re deafened by the crowd. The unnamed girl comes through it, knowing that she’s ready, and now we know that we are too. With that knowledge, we ask our idols, if they’re ready for us to come along for the ride with them, and finally we can ask them if they’re ready too.

This period, before the liminal period, is what Dayan and Katz refer to as the “active period of looking forward” (1996, 7). It allows both audience and broadcaster to prepare for what’s coming. For the ritual liminal event in the media, it is important to note that these events are pre-planned. We get advance notice, especially in the case of events like the World Cups or Olympics, since they occur every four years. Much like elections, they have a sense of rhythm that transcends annual holidays or seasons, and they allow a period of time longer than 12 months by which to measure progress, and of course we expect to see change. The active period of looking forward of the 2019 Women’s World Cup was marked strongly by expectation. The “are you ready?” theme of the advertising and discourse hints at the contrast between this and previous

Women's World Cups. In acknowledging previous Women's World Cups, previous athletes and, most of all, previous struggle, it tells us that this one will be different, and everyone should be ready for it.

It felt as though no one could speak of the upcoming event without first framing it as historic. The upcoming event was pitched as "the biggest festival of women's sport the planet has ever seen..." "hundreds of thousands of tickets have been sold and world governing body FIFA is banking on the women's game taking a huge step forward" (SBS 2019a; 2019b). Sports journalist, Suzanne Wrack, reflects on the undeniable feeling of anticipation:

I knew I would be watching history this summer. After all, it was to be the "biggest ever" edition of the Women's World Cup, a turning point in the development of the women's game and the best showcase of its improving quality. (Wrack 2019)

Wrack's reverence for the coming event is typical of the general journalistic approach during media events, as described by Dayan and Katz. "The journalists who preside over [media events] suspend their normally critical stance and treat their subject with respect, even awe" (1996, 7). Optus Sport expert, Alicia Ferguson-Cook, who herself is an ex-Matilda, was caught up in the wave. Quoted in an article for *The Women's Game*, she said:

It's a special time in women's sport and in women's football in general. I always knew it would be a big year, but it just feels like we've turned a corner. (Bacic 2019a)

As someone with the experience of being in a World Cup squad, of knowing what goes on behind the scenes, Ferguson-Cook would be perfectly placed to provide a critical stance on the event. However, she has appropriated the wider discourse, looking forward to it with anticipation, already celebrating the positive change expected to come.

This type awe-filled approach in the period of active looking forward was not just assumed by journalists whose job is to create hype around media events. “It feels like this is the one... it feels like we’re ready” Australian defender Steph Catley expressed, “as a footballer, you always look to the World Cup” (Optus Sport 2019b). “I think it’s our time, we’ve trained really hard. The last three years have been amazing for us – there’s something about it, so we’re feeling really confident,” echoed Chloe Logarzo, Australian midfielder (Athlete’s Voice 2019). On Instagram, Matilda’s captain, Sam Kerr, looks down the barrel of the camera with a half-smile. Captioned “We’re ready France...” followed by an Australian flag emoji, the post appeared just two days before the tournament (Nike 2019a). It’s like a call and answer. “Are you ready?” the broadcasters, journalists, the organisations who stand to profit ask? “We’re ready” the athletes reply, and as a spectator it’s hard to disagree: the media has been grooming us for this for months.

Communitas: Nation and Women

“What was the mood in the dressing room at half time?” asks a reporter at the post-match press conference. The normally stony-faced Chloe Logarzo grins.

The Matildas came back from 2-1 down against their rivals, Brazil, to win 3-2. Following a shock loss in the first game, this result was much-needed for the Australians, but, for a long time, it looked like it wasn't going to happen. "The Australian mentality is just to be able to come out swinging when our back is against the wall, and..." she smiles sneakily again, "we like a good fight." Logarzo did certainly fight hard. When the Matildas were down 2-0, her determination was clear. She put her head down, set her jaw and pushed her teammates to do the same. She was integral in the three-goal comeback, and won Player of the Match for her efforts.

The press conference turns to Australian coach Ante Milicic, and the reporter reminds him of his comments just a few days ago. "Australians do it the hard way," he said, explaining away their loss to Italy. It wouldn't be the Matildas if they advanced to the next round with flying colours. "That's just Australian football, isn't it?" he asks wryly, before continuing, "hopefully this win tonight brings the country together... it really was an Australian game." (FIFA 2019b)

I'm not surprised that I found narrative and ideas relating to nationalism at the World Cup. Like the Olympics, they are inherently nationalistic, with boundaries being drawn based on national allegiance. I found that, as in the example above, players, coaches, audience members and football experts tended to characterise performances by perceived national characteristics. After the Matildas lost against Italy in their first match, Australian fans concluded that, while Australia could have played better, the Italians were cheats and dived to draw fouls (a

reference to the infamous AUS v ITA match in the 2006 Men's World Cup, where Italy won by a controversial penalty in the dying minutes). In our wins, Australians exemplify the underdog. On the inside of the Australian uniform, Nike printed "Never Say Die," a reference to our fighting spirit; "a reflection of the spirit of Australia [and] The Matildas" (My Football 2019).

At a public screening of the first Matildas match, I noticed that nationalism was an easy way to encourage *communitas*- that sweeping feeling of common humanity present in ritual liminal events:

We were at a local licensed community club with a restaurant, bar and a sizeable poker machine area. The big screen was already showing pre-match coverage, but it didn't seem there were many people interested in the advertised Matildas screening. A young woman, in her late teens, arrived with her dad. She wore a Matilda's jersey and seemed excited. We smiled at each other when she walked in- there were only two other women in the room at the time, and I wanted her to feel welcome. There were no seats left, so she took one from the table of the older men. When they returned, they grumbled about it to her, and she offered them the seat back. They jokingly refused, and asked what she was doing there. The young woman spent at least half an hour explaining in precise detail all about the Matildas, the players, football in general, and who her favourite players are. The men were surprised to see so many people eventually arrive to watch the match- they didn't even know it was scheduled! Her dad didn't interrupt, as she chatted with the men throughout the match, explaining the rules

and what was happening. They all jumped to their feet, celebrating together when Sam Kerr scored the opening goal for Australia.

I was surprised to see the men get behind the Matildas. They didn't know anything about the team, and their quiet evening had been interrupted by a bunch of women's football fans. But, once the national anthem had played, they were on board, never mind that it was women playing, and that it wasn't rugby league. Nationalism was the thread that linked a young female soccer fan and a couple of old blokes, and to see them cheering together was heart-warming. However, as I mentioned before, nationalism in *communitas* is present at the Olympics and at men's World Cups too. What is different here is its co-presence with the women's empowerment narrative, sometimes being overshadowed by solidarity between women across nations.

Michael Real explains myth to be the “analogic reasoning” behind rituals, which are the behaviours relating to myth (1996, 41). The overwhelming feeling is that this event is for women and girls from everywhere, and no matter which nation wins, women win. Nationalism was important for categorising teams and allegiances, but as ritual actors, brands and athletes leaned into responsibility to women.

Defender, Ellie Carpenter is mid-stride. She is looking up, focussed on what is in front of her. Her green and gold Australian team kit moves with her as she runs, her hair slicked back with sweat, and we see the shadows of flexed muscles. She is pure power. In the middle of the image is white text, “Set a record. Then

pave the way for someone to break it.” White NIKE swoosh. “Just do it.”
(Carpenter 2019)

Ellie Carpenter, baby-faced defender for the Matildas, posted this Nike advertisement on her Twitter in early 2019. For a long time, she was the youngest member of the squad, and beneficiary of the mentorship of 20-something women with years of experience. This World Cup would be the first major international tournament that she'd play where she was no longer the least experienced or youngest Matilda. With professional records in Australia and the USA, over 100k social media followers, and a lucrative Nike sponsorship, Ellie has made it. In the upcoming World Cup, as hinted by this ad, her ritual action becomes the empowering of women, and not the woman to be empowered. She participates in the women's empowerment myth through encouraging solidarity between successful and aspiring women, by paving the way for others to break her records. This type of solidarity, the lifting of lower-status people (here, specifically women) by higher-status is typical of *communitas* and the liminal period (Turner 1977, 96–97). The sense of duty expressed, at the sacrifice of Ellie's own record titles, speaks to the comradeship of the anti-structural period.

The solidarity of women during the liminal period sometimes transcended national allegiances at the Women's World Cup. When asked about her favourite moment of the event so far, Australian captain, Sam Kerr, answered that it was Thailand's first ever World Cup goal. “It was an amazing thing to see the emotion for them...it gave me that little bit of extra pride” (Visa 2019b). After

being awarded Player of the Match for Australia, she gave credit to another country for inspiring her. Similarly, after being knocked out of the event, many Australian players celebrated the spectacular moments from other teams. On Twitter, many Australian players liked Tweets and articles about the success of other players and nations, and fans applauded the sportsmanship and skill of women on opposing sides. In an advertisement from Visa, who is FIFA's official partner for the World Cup, we see incredible diversity of girls who share the same idols. The Australian version shows girls playing on grass, concrete and dirt, all around the world, cheering and celebrating. We see a father purchase his daughter a poster (with his Visa card, of course) and she smooths it onto her bedroom wall. It's Australia's Ellie Carpenter, and her poster sits alongside the posters of other women footballers from all over the world. "These are the moments that change the game for good," the narrator tells us (Visa Australia 2019). This ad makes clear that these moments are shared, they are diverse women supporting each other, they are men supporting women, and they are women inspiring women. These ads, appealing to the very myth of the ritual within which they are situated, are emotive. They serve to underline that, during this moment, the structural struggles don't exist, and that women *are* empowered.

The union of the women's empowerment myth with the traditionally masculine domains – of nationalism and sport – exemplifies the cohesive effect of the anti-structural, liminal period. The camaraderie and *communitas* felt powerful, but all liminal periods return to structure eventually (Turner 1977, 94–97). The event

was noticeably transformative, but only for a time, before players went back to their ‘professional’ leagues where athletes still work second jobs, back to their regular contracts that they’d lose if they were to become pregnant, back to their own countries who refuse to fund women’s football equally to men’s. This is where emotion becomes important. If the *communitas* of that liminal period is memorable enough to spectators and participants, they will use it as a reference point for decisions in their own lives. Nike and Visa both announced extra funding for championship athletes during the World Cup, harnessing and participating in the spirit themselves. The Football Federation Australia announced, also during the Women’s World Cup, that they would raise the minimum hourly wage for the W-League to meet the men’s minimum for the following season. These decisions happened in the context of the anti-structural period, proving that, even if *communitas*-induced universal feelings of hope and support for women won’t continue after liminality, they can influence decisions that have real effect.

The Myth of the Mediated Centre

Two days before kick-off of the 2019 Women’s World Cup, FIFA published a promotional video on YouTube, and shared it across their social platforms. “All eyes on France,” it told us, with shots of Paris landmarks interspersed with a young, blonde woman doing freestyle soccer tricks in the streets (FIFA 2019a). The video is nowhere near as emotive as those discussed in the previous sections, but in the context of the hype created by other brands, FIFA need not work too hard. The lead-up to the ritual liminal event in the media would have us believe

that all eyes really were on France, a belief that builds a strong foundation for the other ritual happening at the World Cup. The media ritual doesn't relate to the mythic narratives of nationalism or women's empowerment. The myth that media rituals relate to is the myth of the mediated centre.

The myth of the mediated centre relies on two, related, myths (Couldry 2003, 45). The first myth, the myth of the centre, is established easily and clearly at the Women's World Cup. Detailed in the previous sections, the lead-up to the Women's World Cup actively told us that something important was going to happen in France. This event claimed it would "change the game," (Visa 2019a), establishing the sense that something social is "at stake" (Couldry 2003, 25). "All eyes on France" perpetuates the idea that a social centre exists in France at the 2019 Women's World Cup. With so many millions of people watching and participating through media channels, it has gravity. The sense of centrality is further encouraged by claims of all-encompassing transformation and change. The ritual liminal event was situated as socially central, as having the power of change and transformation that would affect our shared social world. Participation in it feels compelling, if not imperative. This is how ritual liminal events in the media perpetuate the myth of the centre.

Building on the myth of the centre, is the idea that the media has a close, privileged relationship to it. If all eyes *are* on France, it is through the media that they are watching. The media in their apparent omniscience, allow those at the periphery to access the centre. How else could I participate in the World Cup

without flying the France? Even then, it is journalists, not ordinary people who access backstage, dressing rooms, press conferences and photoshoots. Couldry is sure to emphasise the *privileged* nature of their relationship to the centre- the media can always know or see that little but more than the public (Couldry 2003, 45). It is the unquestioned place of the media in our society to be the interpreter, the “obligatory passing point” to access socially central events (Couldry 2003, 47). This is the myth of the *mediated* centre- that the media is the obvious place we look to access our own social world.

It is through ritual categories, that the media rituals work. Actions relating to the Women’s World Cup naturalise the hierarchies of the media ritual categories: media-related people, places and things; liveness; and reality (Couldry 2002, 42–52). That is to say, people, places and things *in* the media are considered above ‘ordinary’ people, places and things. Perceived ‘live’ broadcasts are considered above those that are not. Finally, apparently ‘real’ media content is considered above content that is not. In my field, media people are the athletes, journalists and fans who are at the media place of France, and they are considered more important, legitimate participants than people who watch from their homes. We start to see how notion of the centre, and therefore the periphery, is at play here. The category of ‘liveness’ is perceived in my waking up to watch a match at 2am, when I could just have easily watched it the following morning without checking the score. Watching things as they happen (never mind the slight delay) is more authentic than watching it later. Am I really a fan if I don’t watch it live? The World cup is *really* happening, so we could consider it ‘real,’ more real than

a documentary about a footballer, or a dramatic film about a sports team. The intensive work done on these hierarchised categories during the World Cup is what naturalises the power of the media in our world and the symbolic power they have to construct our reality (Durkheim in Couldry 2003, 2, 13–14).

Media Ritual Action

The condensed action of the 2019 Women’s World Cup was, in line with Couldry’s definition of media rituals, a time where ritual categories and their boundaries were “worked upon with particular intensity” (Couldry 2003, 47). As established in the previous section, the ritual liminal event works to establish the myth of the mediated centre, by claiming social importance and social centrality of the media event. This section will look at some of the individual and collective actions of people both in and out of the media that naturalise the hierarchy of ritual categories. It is this hierarchy that allows the concentration of symbolic power in the media, thereby allowing the media and their centrality to go largely unquestioned; when the hierarchies of media ritual categories are naturalised or obscured, so is the centralisation of symbolic power within the media.

During the 2019 Women’s World Cup, there were two broadcasters in Australia. SBS broadcasts selected matches on free-to-air television, and Optus Sport streamed every match through a subscription service. Both broadcasters created their own pre and post-match coverage, including recaps, analysis, and team interviews. That coverage, while not happening in the stadiums where the matches took place, very clearly emphasised the location of France. For

example, a video by SBS (2019c), a match preview for the France v Korea Republic game, opens with a 30-second montage of the Arc de Triomphe and Eiffel Tower, as well as other Paris landmarks. It also shows the Korean team arriving at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris, and closes with sun setting on the Parisian skyline. While Parisian landmarks have very little to do with the outcome of the football match, they serve to underline a specific point to the viewer: the media is *there*, at the centre, and you are not. Interspersed with intimate interviews with the Korean and French players, and candid footage of the teams, we get an incredibly sense of the privileged access the media has to the social centre. Audiences are comparably peripheral to the media's presence in Paris and their access to athletes. We can only imagine having that intimacy with people and places at the media centre, or to see athletes in a candid setting.

It's important to note that ritual action relating to the media need not actually occur in the media itself. I, myself, was a ritual actor many times during the World Cup, highlighting the way individuals internalise media-related categories in the way we think and act. During one of the Australian matches that I watched with some friends, we paused on a panning shot of the crowd to search for friends who we knew would be in attendance. When we finally found familiar faces, we were so excited: my heart raced as we zoomed in to see them more closely. It felt important to know people in attendance, we felt like real fans, connected a little more closely than anyone else who might be watching. Another friend who travelled to France for the Women's World Cup brought me back gifts. Luggage tags and a wine stopper, emblazoned with the event logo,

were handed out in the stadium at the final. Although I had little need for the gifts, they were symbolic, a reminder that Emily thought of me during her time at the centre. By having a connection to ‘media places, people and things,’ I felt as though I had more of a claim to the event, and to the social centre is represented to me. By seeing Suzy on the television, and by holding on to those souvenirs from the final match, I felt more important than if I been an ‘ordinary’ fan in Australia. My feelings about these moments are markers of my internalisation of the hierarchised categories. I internalised the mythical importance of ‘media’ people, places and things, and tried to associated myself with them in order to be connected to the centre.

This internalisation of the categories is reminiscent of Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, a point that Couldry makes. He quotes Bourdieu, “symbolic violence ... can only be exerted on a person predisposed (in his habitus) to feel it,” demonstrating the way habitus can convert the symbolic power of the media to symbolic violence (2003, 49–51). I can’t help but think of the politics of representation in the modern media. The exclusion/inclusion of certain people or groups from the social world is represented by their exclusion/inclusion in the media. The fight for diverse faces in film and television is proxy for the diversification of social inclusivity. It is through presence in the media that people gain social recognition, a fact that is true only because of our internalisation of the myth of the mediated centre. That internalisation of media-related categories, the predisposition in habitus, makes us vulnerable to exclusion- as determined by the media. It also provides a path to inclusion; when

we see women play sport in the media, we believe sport-playing women should be socially included. Of course, the media are keen to obscure their ability to affect symbolic violence, but the positive effects of their symbolic power became the subject of advertising campaigns leading up to the World Cup. *Change the future they see* (Optus Sport 2019c), featuring a young boy and girl watching women's soccer, suggests the opportunity for social inclusion when children watch women's sport. Implied in this, is the threat of exclusion if the event isn't watched. The implication of symbolic violence shows the cyclic nature of media power, despite the diversified mediascape.

There are other ways, too, that ritual actions took place in my field. In *Media Rituals* (2003), Couldry dedicates a whole chapter media pilgrimages. Later, I will examine the ways that Australian fans travelled to France, and how those actions perpetuate the myth of the mediated centre. Unfortunately, coming to Couldry's theory of media rituals well after the World Cup had finished, my scope for observing media rituals was somewhat. However, the media ritual approach has helped me to retrospectively understand some of the sticking points in my data. It has been absolutely astounding how present sportswear brand, Nike is in women's football coverage. Compared to the men's game, Nike has a monopoly on the biggest women's footballers in the world. A considerable amount of my data originates from Nike's advertisements or social media use. In a diverse media landscape, Nike are active creators of content that is widely shared through digital networks and traditional media forms. By situating themselves as participants on social media, much as an individual would use the

platform, the entwined role Nike play with traditional media and their role in manufacturing ritual media events is obscured. Nike ‘like,’ ‘retweet’ and re-post content from individual athletes, endorsing their voices and opinions, and get the same in return. Their ambiguous role, coupled with non-stop advertisements that appeal to the emotion of the event, situates Nike more gently in our hearts than a heavy-handed approach to advertising. Their advertising around diverse athletes (Carpenter 2019; Nike 2019a; 2019b; 2019c), is more reminiscent of corporate social responsibility than trying to sell a specific product. By bridging the divide between social and traditional media, advertisers obscure the constructedness of both.

Lesbians Won the Women's World Cup: Negotiated Positions in Ritual Participation



Figure 2 Tweet from user caroldenvrs

The multiple-choice format is popular in meme culture, and exists to assert a preferable outcome or option. In the tweet above, user caroldenvrs asks, “who won the women’s world cup?” and selected is the answer, “lesbians” (2019). It features photos of the athletes from the Swedish and American teams kissing their female partners. Memes like this spread quickly through semi-closed networks of LGBTIQ+ people on social media during the Women’s World Cup,

asserting 'lesbian' ownership of an event that was not expressly intended as such.

This chapter draws on Stuart Hall's model of encoding/decoding (2006), and Michael Real's (1996) ritual interpretation of it, to understand ritual participation through digital networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. First published in 1980 from an even earlier working paper, Hall offers a flexible understanding of participation in media culture, despite its age. This chapter will understand the lesbian memeification of the 2019 Women's World Cup (especially the American team) as a negotiated reading of the dominant media discourse surrounding the event. This negotiated reading allows marginalised groups participation in the ritual liminal event through contribution to the women's empowerment and nationalism narratives, while still framing their participation through their lived experience. It also understands the means through which this negotiated reading is achieved- digital networks- as contributing to media rituals, and the overall symbolic power of the media.

Some of the data in this chapter comes from closed Facebook groups. As the name implies, closed groups are only available to members, and, while many of them have hundreds of thousands of members, they are often 'safe spaces.' Posting in these types of groups is hardly private due to their size, between 10,000 and 100,000 members, but to join them you must agree to rules that keep members safe. For this reason, I am adapting some comments and descriptions of individuals and groups. Lesbian, gay or bisexual members of these groups

may not be out, and their sexuality and political beliefs can put them in harm's way. The memes that are made and shared are funny and specific, and so I'll do my best to maintain their context while minimising potential harm and traceability.

Encoding/decoding

Shared by Stuart Hall and Michael Real is the idea that the media present a dominant culture or ideology (Hall 2006; Real 1996, xvii–xix). Hall's theory of encoding/decoding was initially applied to ideas in the media, not specifically rituals in the media. He posits that, contextualised by their own frameworks of knowledge, the media *encode* information or messages- this is the moment of production. The encoded message is then circulated as discourse to the audience, to whom it means nothing until they *decode* it with their own frameworks of knowledge- this is the moment of consumption. Adapted by Real to the context of rituals in the media, the moment of consumption becomes the moment of ritual participation. He calls ritual participants *co-authors*, suggesting that the decoder is an active, rather than a passive, participant in the ritual event in the media (Real 1996, 43–44). Real's adaptation of encoding/decoding is only strengthened in the era of digital networks.

Social media gives voice to the co-author's moment of decoding, making it even more a moment of production than it was before. The phenomenon of live-tweeting sports games, and sharing reactions to refereeing decisions is production in the moment of decoding. The discourse/text produced in the

moment of decoding becomes circulated in the same way the initial production was, often by the mainstream media themselves. The process is messy and dialectical, but allows for many possible interpretations of ideas and discourses, with any internet user able to access a multiplicity of decoding-production moments, or co-authorship. Real notes the similarity between his notion of co-authorship and Jenkins' *textual poaching*- a concept that foreground fans' "process of making meaning and the fluidity of popular interpretation" (Jenkins 2012; Real 1996, 44–45). However, Jenkins himself notes that the fluidity of his theory doesn't allow for the rigid positionality that encoding/decoding does (2012, 34). I note the applicability of Jenkins' approach to broader lesbian interpretations of the World Cup, including fan art and fan fiction, but will employ the framework provided by Hall (2006) to analyse the more patterned symbolism and language in lesbian memes that is done from a decidedly negotiated position.

Hall's encoding/decoding allows for three different types of positions at the moment of decoding. The first position, preferred by the producer, is the *dominant-hegemonic position*. It is where the decoder takes the meaning connoted by the initial producer "full and straight," as intended (Hall 2006, 125–26). This reading allows for the reproduction of dominant ideologies. The second position, of most interest to us, is the *negotiated position*. From this position, the decoder might adopt a different understanding depending on the circumstances. The decoder might use the same framework of reference used to encode the message, leading to a dominant reading, or they could use a completely different

framework, leading to an oppositional reading. For this reason, negotiated positions are often fraught with contradiction, though these are rarely visible. Finally, the *oppositional position* understands the intended reading, but reads in in a contrary way. The oppositional reader “detotalizes the message... in order to retotalize [it] within some alternative framework of reference” (Hall 2006, 127).

The reading of the 2019 Women’s World Cup as a lesbian¹ World Cup is a negotiated reading of the connotative meaning, and occurred widely throughout the world cup in relation to the US Women’s National Team (USWNT), the Matildas, and the event in general. Following Hall’s definition, the reading is fraught with contradiction, as I will explore further in the following sections, but allows readers to read through their diverse experiences while still participating ritually in a socially central event. There is a degree of reciprocity between encoder and the negotiated position of decoder, but also a degree of oppositional reading. The ‘lesbian’ negotiated reading also happens in contrast to, and as a

¹Terms referring to the sexual orientation and gender identity of athletes, their fans and their community vary widely. The most broadly used term by fans and audience members was ‘lesbian,’ but also included ‘gay,’ ‘queer,’ ‘bi(sexual),’ ‘dyke,’ and LGBTIQ+. I’d like to acknowledge that many of these terms carry trauma, and while some members of the community are choosing to re-appropriate them, others prefer not to. I have done my best to preserve the terms used by people referring to themselves and their own experiences. I also note that the erasure of bisexual people is pervasive in the media, and gender identity and diversity in sport is historically exclusive and essentialist.

reappropriation of, historical dominant readings and current conservative politics.

The Lesbian World Cup: In Opposition to Heteronormativity

Pink-haired American captain, Megan Rapinoe stands tall with her arms open wide in a victory pose. American striker, Alex Morgan is on Rapinoe's back, staring into the crowd and grinning. Next to them, midfielder Samantha Mewis jumps in the air, punching her fist in celebration. It's an image of an iconic goal celebration from the 2019 Women's World Cup final, widely circulated following the match, even landing the cover of Sports Illustrated. Plastered over this version of the image is white text. Rapinoe is labelled "me" with rainbow love hearts crowning her head. Alex Morgan, with her arms wrapped around Rapinoe, is labelled "the girl I didn't think I had a chance with." Mewis, jumping in celebration, is labelled "my friend who encouraged me to actually talk to her."

This meme was posted by a member in a closed Facebook group with over 70,000 members, specifically for gay-specific memes. It had over 2000 'likes' or 'love' reactions, and comments on the image included things like "this is the gay USWNT content I came for," and "love me some gay soccer content." It's multi-faceted, like any good meme, referring to the many inside-jokes that occur in the closed-group, interconnected with other progressive Facebook groups. "The girl I didn't think I had a chance with" is a shout-out to lesbians with low self-esteem (a running theme in the groups), and Mewis plays the encouraging

friend, referring to the genre of deep friendships gay and bisexual women form to counter the hostility they confront in the world (another commonly occurring subject of lesbian meme culture).

Interestingly, Megan Rapinoe is the only gay player in the image, but no one in the group cares. Due to the high number of openly gay or bisexual players in the American team, and the close bond the team shares, the whole USWNT have become lesbian icons. In a world that gives so little airtime and appreciation to queer* women, it's unsurprising that a huge public event with so many successful gay and bisexual women would become co-opted as the 'Lesbian World Cup.' A meme, posted in reply to this multiple-choice meme at the start of the chapter, features a screenshot of a someone yelling, captioned "This is a lesbian only event, go home!" The word "lesbian" is very obviously edited in over the original subtitles, a common occurrence in screenshot memes; the more edited, the better. By highlighting the constructed nature of memes and their specificity and producing multiple versions of the same meme format, meme producers tailor content only to people to whom it is directly relevant.

Memes are tricky little suckers. You know one when you see one, but it's hard to explain them. They might be a screenshot from a news clip, or a funny Tweet that's been shared over and over again. Often, they originate on one digital platform, and quickly spread across others. Burton defines them as:

[S]mall cultural elements in the form of images, text, audio, video, or some combination thereof that are repeated and

remixed on a large scale, usually becoming intensely popular and then fading into obscurity in relatively short order. (2019)

They are usually humorous, but contain many levels of cultural nuance. Through sarcasm, rape survivors disclosed their experiences en masse with “Who needs feminism?” memes, and young people describe their feeling of political and cultural powerlessness through memes about anxiety (Burton 2019; Mendes, Keller, and Ringrose 2019). Issues of extreme gravity and social importance are communicated about through repeated symbols and shared internet culture and language. Memes, language and symbols make a complex culture that you have to take time to learn and participate in, helping to keep groups closed to those who don’t conform to their norms and expectations. The specificity of these types of Facebook groups, Twitter hashtags or Instagram bios allow readers to decode-produce, or co-author, together according to their chosen framework of reference. Here, it is the framework of reference shared by audience members who are not heterosexual. This readership is not a passive one. Their active, collective reading from a negotiated position is afforded to them by the nature of digital networks as a place of both consumption and production. That production may be as small as clicking ‘like,’ or as large as creating a meme that is shared tens of thousands of times. Either way, as Real argues, from whichever position the reading is made, there is *some* reaction (1996, 107–8).



Figure 3 Meme posted on Facebook meme page 'Sappho is my mom'

Given that negotiated positions are a mixture of dominant and oppositional positions, let's examine specifically what those are in the case of the 'Lesbian World Cup' reading. Firstly, it conforms in a way to the dominant position, reading the intended meaning by traditional media and event organisers. As detailed in the previous chapter, the World Cup was promoted as a *women's* event, underscored by the women's empowerment narrative. The lesbian negotiated position is also supportive of foregrounding women and their achievements. In these groups, I read many comments along the lines of, "we should call it 'soccer' and 'men's soccer' now," indicating a support for the elevation of women's events. A meme posted on *Sappho is my mom*, a public lesbian meme page on Facebook, indicates support for (gay) women, despite a total disinterest in the sport (Sappho is my mom 2019). In line with advertising

about being an event for *all* women, the meme, pictured in Figure 3, encourages support for women based solely on gender and/or sexuality, instead of on shared interest.

Secondly, these types of negotiated readings also imply a wish to participate in the ritual liminal event, following the women's empowerment narrative. Aside from reinforcing the social centrality of the ritual, they follow the dominant reading of the ritual as socially important. Their active ritual participation implies that members *want* to be socially integrated, or at least believe that they should try to be.

However, the negotiated position also involves a level of oppositional reading. This specific negotiated reading is in direct opposition to the heteronormative tendencies of traditional media, especially where queer identities were erased from cultural narratives and archives (Martin and Keene 2016; Scot 2014; Smith 2016), or in the current discourse, assuming same-sex couples to be friends. Twitter user Molly Hensley-Clancy posted a photo of American athlete Kelley O'Hara kissing her wife after their victory (2019). Sarcastically captioned, "Kelley O'Hara greets a fan after the USWNT's World Cup Victory," it became a running joke. It was a reference to the (now corrected) mislabelling of photos from the 2015 Women's World Cup. On multiple instances, players kissing their wives or girlfriends were incorrectly published as "celebrating with fans." Hensley-Clancy's Twitter post was retweeted over 20,000 times, with humorous remarks like "what a great euphemism," or "I'm a fan, greet me!" It was shared

across Facebook too, most notably in groups dedicated to making hetwashing² memes. “NO GAYS HERE!!! JUST GREETING FANS” an openly gay user commented, with ‘crossed arms’ emojis. Many users tagged (linked to) the group *just GALS being PALS*, referring to the LGBTIQ+ inside-joke ‘Gal Pals’ used “to mock heteronormative media's erasure of bisexuality among women” (Know Your Meme 2017).

Better Than Straight Men: In Opposition to Conservative Politics

Australian Football was left reeling just months before the 2019 Women’s World Cup. With no warning, the Matilda’s coach of five years, Alen Stajcic, was sacked by the Football Federation Australia (FFA) with no explanation. Comments that the public would be “shocked” to know what he had done to deserve the sacking were later retracted, and the only clues left were references to private internal surveys exposing a toxic culture in the Matildas squad. Rumours circulated about double standard for players, though no one would speak publicly condemning Stajcic. There was a huge public outpouring of sympathy for Stajcic on social media; this was the man at the helm during the rapid and successful professionalisation of women’s football. Initially the general attitude was: no professional sporting environment is easy, if you want professional pay, you should expect professional pressures. There were public insinuations from both Facebook commenters and sports journalists that the

² Adopted from the term ‘whitewashing,’ hetwashing is the erasure of queer identities by heteronormative people or media.

reason Stajcic was fired was that the FFA wanted a woman to coach the Matildas for reasons of political correctness, or as a move of affirmative action. Matildas insiders began to speak anonymously to the press, alleging the Stajcic used the term “lesbian mafia” to refer to FFA board members, other national coaches and FFA staff members who had a perceived vendetta against him (ABC News Radio 2019). Following these allegations, the media’s coverage and social commentary balanced out, somewhat in support of the FFA.

Although he denied using the term, “lesbian mafia” became a catchcry for Stajcic’s supporters to critique the FFA for buckling under political correctness, or ‘PC’ culture. Progressive media outlets argued the term contributed to the toxic, homophobic culture of sport, especially for women who advocate for change. However, in a true act of meme-making, lesbian comics and meme-makers embraced the term. “I’d join the mafia for the Matildas,” one joked. Another posted to Twitter wondering how she could join, followed by rainbow



Figure 4 Meme posted on Instagram meme page lesbimemez

pride emojis. By mocking the term intended to critique them, producers of memes relating to the conservative commentary on the FFA and the Matildas decode-produce from a negotiated position, in opposition to conservative politics.

It's important to note that mainstream media is not the point of opposition for decoding lesbian memes. The mainstream Australian media was ultimately supportive of the Matildas, and the choice of the FFA to support a healthy work environment for players. The negotiated position is decidedly in opposition of conservative negotiated readings of the event. With the media in the middle, conservative and progressive negotiated positions fight for mainstream articulation. This is reminiscent of the broader culture wars between liberal and conservative politics, especially the version for which Trump's America is the proxy. On the one hand, conservative values underlie men's rights activism and traditional ideas of nationalism, on the other, progressive political correctness aims to rectify race and gender discrimination with diversity at the fore. Women's World Cup meme-making didn't shy away from these issues, jokingly playing to the Right's perceived victimisation of straight men. Pictured here, again, are World Cup winners Alex Morgan and Megan Rapinoe, sharing the title of 'being better at sex than straight men.' This meme came from an Instagram account dedicated to memes for lesbian and bisexual women (lesbimemez 2019), but appeals to the wider narrative of progressive women and the LGBTIQ+ community in opposition with straight, white men.

Megan Rapinoe, particularly, became the subject of many anti-conservative memes. Following her comments about “not going to the fucking White House” to celebrate if the USWNT eventually won the World Cup, Rapinoe became a symbol of resistance for progressive American fans. Following the pattern of honorific titles of Daenerys Targaryen from fantasy series Game of Thrones, this meme shows Rapinoe as the hero (wizardofaus97 2019).



Figure 5 Tweet from user wizardofaus97

After refusing to sing the national anthem at the World Cup, and allegedly stomping on the American flag, Rapinoe was the target of a lot of abuse from American conservatives. They argued that she wasn't showing due respect to her country in her representative role. More memes, many using the same photos as the meme above, with Rapinoe's arms outstretched in victory, circulated in response to conservative criticism. The popular “winning without Russian help”

caption was a jab at Russia's suspected role in Trump's presidential victory. Also widely shared with mocking comments were screenshots of the moment a conservative journalist was bombarded with "Fuck Trump" chants live on-air.

Memes mocking conservative values, or celebrating the moment Fox News broadcast progressive celebrations, do more than just pick sides. In the context of an event steeped in nationalism, like the Women's World Cup, they challenge dominant ways of practicing national identity. Much like the "lesbian mafia" undermining Australian chances at the World Cup, conservative criticism of Megan Rapinoe as "too political" for an athlete asserts a certain idea of what it should mean to be national representative. The negotiated reading in this instance, occurring in lesbian meme groups and on progressive meme pages, is consistent with the dominant narrative in its agreement of the presence of nationalism at the event. American players still draped themselves in stars and stripes after winning, and American meme-makers idolised mostly players from the USWNT. Discourse surrounding the "lesbian mafia" drew in fans of other sports, their interest being Australia's sporting success, not broader ideas of diversity in sport. Despite meme pages and groups being global, with digital networks connecting geographically disparate users with shared sexuality and politics, users still remained largely loyal to their own nation's team and players. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, no matter how much we support *all* women in sport, the Women's World Cup is an inherently nationalistic event.

Liberal meme-culture and conservative commentary agree on the presence of nationalism in sport, but the oppositional readings come with how it should be practiced. The negotiated position seen in the meme-making above celebrates nationalism practised through protest. Applauding Rapinoe's refusal to sing the anthem, or the USWNT's lawsuit for equal pay as "the most American thing you could do," is in direct opposition to conservative ideas of nationalism. When Australia's Sam Kerr was criticised for her Twitter activism, many Australian fans said things like "get off social media and do your job for the country," as though being an activist is incompatible with being an Australian athlete. In these examples, the media use festive nationalism in the context of the liminal period to appeal to both negotiated positions. Through largely positive portrayal of nationalism (as a cohesive ritual value), the media is able to remain in agreement with both progressive and conservative negotiated readings of the Women's World Cup.

Reincorporating Resistance

By producing content that both contributes through dominant positionality, but also uses a specifically chosen framework of reference- opposition to conservative politics or heteronormativity- to read from an oppositional position, communities can use social media platforms to change dominant understandings. By allowing a more vocal co-authorship, digital networks allow negotiated readings to be consumed by others. Especially in the form of memes, which are intended to be shared and consumed quickly and easily, negotiated ritual participation can spread and change the connotative meanings during the

ritual. The production of discourse on social media relating to the consumption of mainstream media has now become a news item in itself. The flow of negotiated readings back to the mainstream media gives them the opportunity to then become dominant.

While these examples of negotiated co-authorship show possibility for resisting or affecting dominant discourse, the media was able to flexibly adapt to maintain their symbolic power. When mainstream media's symbolic power was challenged by alternative discourse, it adapted to reabsorb oppositional readings. While it may seem positive to see diverse representations of athletes, or to include the Queer reading in dominant media, it serves as ritual action relating to the myth of the mediated centre. By removing their point of opposition, the media include marginalised groups as subject to their symbolic power. The flexibility of the media to appeal to groups that would otherwise be in opposition serves to naturalise their position at the centre of our social world. Referring back to the previous chapter, where I demonstrated the media's tendency to use relatability as the basis for their appeal, this has serious implications for current discourse surrounding representation in the media.

When groups air their critiques and grievances on social media, mainstream media is able to rope them back in before it's too late. Keltie explains the power of dominant media thus:

[P]articipatory practices can create moments of resistance to the dominance of the culture industry, but these moments are not

sustained: rather, they are folded back into industry practices.

(2017, 6)

While meme-making might challenge and change discourse, it doesn't challenge or change where it happens, allowing mainstream media to adopt the seemingly resistant sensibilities and discourse. Traditional media, advertisers and social media are all intertwined these days. Nike and Visa make content and pay to have it aired on television, as well as broadcasting it on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook for us all to see. Advertisers bridge the gap between social and traditional media, and in this case, appealing to ritual narratives. It is hard to resist, especially when advertisers are responsive to oppositional discourse. Aside from the media institutions, themselves, it is in the interest of advertisers that the media (including social media) remain socially central, that they retain symbolic power. The adaptation of advertisers and the media to lesbian meme-making and progressive discourse is reminiscent of a spider weaving her web in a changing environment. Social media users are just bugs, showing the spider how to catch them.

Football Fans as Temporary ‘Media’

People: Absorbing Symbolic Power

There is a social football team who travel the world and play matches everywhere they go. They are mixed gender and varied in age and skill, but united in their love of football and their support for Australia’s football teams. They follow the Matildas and Socceroos around the world, playing matches against local clubs in every host city. In 2019, this team, The Aussie Supporteroos, travelled to France to watch the Matildas and play some friendly matches with communities along the way. They played against local teams all around France, sharing pictures on their social media, critiquing the lack of women playing in French social teams (they aim for at least half their team to be women at any given time), and attending the Matildas matches to cheer loudly along with other Aussie fans.

The community of people who travel to support the Matildas share their journey and experiences with each other and publicly using digital networks. As well as the Supporteroos, there is also the Green and Gold Army who run a tour-agency style package for fans of both the Socceroos and Matildas, and the Mad-Tildas, a less formal group dedicated just to the women’s team. Each group has a Facebook group for members, a page for the public and an Instagram and Twitter account too. There are other contingents, but these three were most prominent at the 2019 Women’s World Cup. The actions of these people can be understood as ritual action relating to both senses of ritual that have already been discussed.

As fans, they are ritual participants in the ritual liminal event, celebrating and co-authoring the narratives of nationalism and women's empowerment through sport. Similarly to lesbian meme-making, the fans used their perspective to resist some aspects of media discourse and provide an alternate voice from the ritual centre.

Fans travelled to support the Matildas- their investment in the team reflecting the ritual liminal narratives of women's empowerment and nationalism. However, by virtue of the event's media status, it became an inadvertent media pilgrimage. By attending the event, fans crossed the boundary between 'ordinary' and 'media' people, and were celebrated in the media in a way that fans at home were not. Through their ritual liminal participation in and around the media, they became like journalists themselves. Their presence in France endowed with the media's symbolic power, but only for the duration of the ritual. This chapter will explore the way that fans used social media to both celebrate and challenge the nationalism and women's empowerment narratives present in the ritual liminal event. It will also look closely at the naturalisation of the myth of the mediated centre by virtue of the media pilgrimage, exploring the ways that fans experienced elevated power, and how the media exploited their presence to enrich its own power.

Raising our spirits with song and beer

When I saw my friend Emily after she returned from France, I wanted the full run-down. What was it like in the stadium? What were the fans like? Did she

meet any athletes? How much cheese did she eat? She described it all to me in detail, including the strong contingent of Aussie fans. “They had so many songs- everyone knew them and sang along!” I considered how awesome it would have been, to be decked out in green and gold, to be cheering the Matildas on with hundreds of other Australians who’d made the journey.

Australian fans who travelled to the 2019 Women’s World Cup were the height of festivity. They were spotted in match broadcasts and news media recaps, the green and gold block in the stands often drawing the eye from the pitch. Where fans at home were festive viewers of television, these fans were festive participants *on* television. It is in these fans that we see the epitome of the ritual liminal event participant. They actively encourage *communitas*, with their uniform appearance and behaviour. They sing together in the stands, and no matter win or lose, drink together after the matches in celebration or commiseration. After a shock loss to Italy, Matildas fans came together at a bar in Montpellier, France. Mad-Tildas organiser Brodie Wales told *The Women’s Game*,

I was super excited to arrive at a packed bar for our post-match function... 100+ Aussies coming together, raising our spirits with song and beer. (Bacic 2019b)

Festive liminality is seen clearly by the fans’ appropriation of the team’s uniform. They wear player kits with curly wigs and coloured zinc on their cheeks. They highlight the team’s official and colours, enhancing the playfulness

of their participation. This is a marker of ritual liminal event participants- they are marked equal by their appearance in the ritual uniform (Turner 1977, 106–7). Committed fans even wore the uniform on days off. Like athletes who have team tracksuits they wear in public, fans wore less conspicuous but still identifiable uniforms. Travelling fan groups posted photos all around France on non-game days, waving the Australian flag and decked out in their green and gold at pubs, museums and markets. The extension of uniform to non-game days extends the liminality beyond just the match to the whole tournament, spreading their festivities to the streets and bars of the regions they visited. While enhanced on match days, the liminal period continues for players and enthusiastic fans throughout the World Cup. Despite their love of the team, I imagine these fans didn't return to their daily lives- to structure- after the tournament in their bright jerseys and curly wigs.

Their green and gold, and their celebration of the 'Australian spirit' through the "never say die" slogan is strongly nationalistic. Leaning into national pride at a women's event is reminiscent of the negotiated nationalism seen in the previous section. The liminal period provides the anti-structure necessary for reshaping what Australian nationalism looks like. Some fans took the opportunity to post on Instagram photos from France of Australian graves dating back to WWI. The feed of #GGArmyontour, the searchable hashtag for the Green and Gold Army in France, portrays a sea of Aussie fans broken up by gravestones and red poppies. In one photo, the statue of an Australian soldier in his recognisable slouch hat, reminds us strongly of the ANZACs, and of traditional ideas of

Australian identity. In other feeds, though, women lead a group of fans singing pop songs re-written with lyrics about the Matildas. In a video of fans in quintessential French street, a woman conducts the Mad-Tildas in song. Two people, dressed as beer bottles, dance at the front.

Waltzing Matildas, waltzing Matildas

You'll come a waltzing Matildas with me

As we stand and we sing for our women in our green and gold

You'll come a waltzing Matildas with me

While support for women and the women's empowerment narrative was present in the festive participation of Australian fans, it wasn't as explicit as much of the advertising and media narrative discussed in *All Eyes on France*. The Mad-Tildas were exclusively committed to the women's team, but the other groups regularly attended men's matches and tournaments too. As mentioned earlier, the Supporteroos were not afraid to publicly condemn gender imbalance, but it was normally in a cheeky way. After a loss at a friendly match in Grenoble, they posted:

Aussie Supporteroos are truly a most inclusive,
intergenerational team with a perfect gender balance. We might
have lost the match 10-6 but we could teach the local all-male
team a thing or two about inclusivity ;) (Aussie Supporteroos
2019)

The Women's Game suggested that active support, for local or national teams, was an effective way to grow the Women's Game (Bacic 2019b). Fan support, even from groups who didn't exclusively travel for the women's game, were overall supportive of the women's empowerment narrative, albeit enacted through nationalism. Their festive nationalism was coupled with support for Australian women, and broader support for the globalist women's empowerment narrative put forth by advertisers, event organisers, and ultimately adopted by the public.

By understanding the motivations for fan travel, will be able to explore the complexity of the ritual liminal event within the media ritual. I will explore the interplay between different ritual actions, understanding fans through Couldry's (2003) notion of 'media pilgrimages' in the section *Crossing Ritual Boundaries*. Before that, though, I will detail an interesting instance of Australian fans using their position of the ground to challenge dominant media narratives.

'Suck on that one'

After losing to underdogs Italy, in the first round, Australia was under the pump to win their second match. They were playing long-time rivals, Brazil, and had suffered not only critique, but abuse for their loss. Individual players were targeted in mainstream media and on social, with sexist and homophobic language was used to describe the team. Nearing half-time, the Matildas were 0-2 down. They'd have to produce at least three goals to stay in the game. In an extraordinary turn of events, Caitlin Foord managed to score for Australia just

before the half-time whistle. The change of momentum was enough for the Matildas to eventually stage a comeback, winning 3-2.

Sam Kerr is still out of breath. She wipes the sweat from her face while the reporter comments, “you must be immensely proud as captain.” Sam seems lost for words, but stumbles through. “We knew we were in it at half-time,” and then her voice lifts and she looks to the crowd. “You know there was a lot of critics talkin’ about us but we’re back, so suck on that one!” She giggles, and we hear cheers from the crowd. She continues on to praise her team, “I love these girls, they’re something else...” The reporter wishes her luck, and she jogs off to celebrate with her team. (SBS 2019d)

This interview was covered in the formal media by headlines like Sam Kerr interview controversy, Australia captain Kerr bites back at critics, and ‘Immaturity’: Sam Kerr causes controversy with post-match spray (Matthey 2019; Reuters 2019; Yahoo Sport Australia 2019). The media quoted and re-quoted her, “suck on that one” comment to critique the team as a whole and their apparent lack of maturity. On social media, it became a reason for critics of the women’s game to latch onto the Matildas, saying that women couldn’t handle the pressures of professionalised sport. “They are there to play football not to whinge about being lesbian martyrs,” one commenter said. Another argued that dealing with abuse and ‘haters’ is part of equality, “I think a more professional approach would have been better... It’s clear [listening to public commentary] has taken their mind off the prize.” Given Kerr’s normally cheeky nature, the

giggle alongside the comment, and the fact that she was still huffing and puffing from the match, not prepared for the interview, it was surprising that even Australian journalists took a critical stance on the comments. In the post-match analysis, ex-Matildas Heather Garriock and Cheryl Salisbury both criticised Kerr for her comments, maintaining that she was young, and would learn to “be diplomatic” with age (Optus Sport 2019e).

However, oblivious to mainstream media’s distaste for Kerr’s comments, Australian fans in France left the stadium praising her words. Only hours after the game, a teammate of mine who had travelled to support the Matildas posted a photo on Facebook. After loving the phrase, “suck on that one,” she’d made a beeline for a t-shirt printing store in Montpellier. She stood grinning outside the store in a navy-blue t-shirt with yellow writing, styled as below.



Figure 6 Depiction of "suck on that one" t-shirt styling

The shirt shows how warmly Suzy along with other Mad-Tildas and Green and Gold Army had received Kerr’s comments. However, amongst the media frenzy surrounding Kerr’s “immaturity,” the t-shirt became famous. Other Aussie supporters got the shirt made, and translated too. Pictured below is a group of

Australian fans with their shirts, celebrating the win over Jamaica (Watkin 2019). Suzy knew her photo was being shared around, but wasn't aware of how far it went. In her words, the shirt became "faintly famous," however I'd argue it was more than that. A video surfaced of Kerr's brother, Daniel, skolling a beer in France with the shirt on (Perth Now 2019), and people told her the Matildas had seen it themselves. Gear retailer Futbol Cult launched their own version, retailing for \$40 AUD, encouraging customers to "wear it for all the haters" (Futbol Cult 2019).



Figure 7 Tweet from journalist Lucy Watkin

The shirt became a symbol for fans of the Matildas who loved the team and the players unconditionally. Where traditional media criticised her, fans were loyal and understanding. Through their festive presence, Australian fans attracted a lot of media attention, and were therefore able to publicise their version of events. The tweet above is from an Australian sports journalist, who was taken by the

hype around the shirts. Australian media couldn't ignore the estimated 1,500 Australian fans who appeared wearing the shirts in FIFA's Daily Highlights and in coverage from other nations (Pender 2019; Chicago Tribune 2019; FIFA 2019c).

Their on-the-ground perspective and sheer numbers allowed Australian fans to resist media criticism. They interacted with players, journalists, fans of other countries, and used social media to spread their dislike of the media's perspective. They demonstrated, to some level, that this was the attitude fans wanted and respected in their captain. The Socceroos coach said of Australian fans, "despite all the negativity around, we are a football family" (Pender 2019). Their love for the team through hardship, and the way Kerr's own brother jumped on board reinforced the familial spirit through nationalism. "She's a true blue Aussie," one Twitter user replied in a thread relating to Salisbury's criticism of Kerr. Another mentioned that Kerr's comment "had an Aussie flair to it that is attractive to supporters" (Optus Sport 2019d). Linden and Linden found similar themes when exploring the motivations of West Ham fans in the UK and Sweden. Fans were supportive for "reasons linked to tradition and family," quoting fans who said that "it's a way of life and a huge part of who I am" and "the club are a representation of the people" (2017, 156).

Also interested in international football fans at World Cups, Linden and Linden argue that fans are "a big part of the 'branding' of teams and countries" (2017, 133). They describe the famous Tartan Army and the Cooligans, the Scottish and

Danish fans, respectively, who left a lasting impression at Men's World Cups gone by. Perhaps the Australian fans understood the 'Australian' brand more closely than journalists or ex-Matildas did themselves. After all, Nike's Cassie Looker did describe the Matildas as "super young, fun and awesome," reminding us that their average age is just 24 (My Football 2019). The playfulness of Kerr, and the energy of the fans is reminiscent of the lyrics of the national anthem, "for we are young and free." And anyway, who knows branding better than Nike? The "Never Say Die" rallying cry, printed inside the collar of the Matildas kit, was posted multiple times on Instagram by fans in France, the phrase that Nike told us would inspire the Matildas, but "also inspire consumers as well" (My Football 2019).

We can understand the motivations of Matildas fans in France through the narratives underpinning the ritual liminal event. Their ritual participation was in the form of Australian versions of the narratives, aligning with Nike's version of Australianness. Where the Australian media deviated, they resisted and reasserted their claim to the ritual myth. A reassertion that, judging by the spread of the "suck on that one" shirt, was popular with a large number of fans in France *and* eventually gained the attention of the mainstream media. However, I am also interested in fans role in the media ritual. Their time in France allowed them to cross ritual boundaries, absorbing some of the symbolic power of the media. The next section will explore some of the ritual actions of the fans and the media, demonstrating how these actions naturalise the category boundaries relating to media rituals.

Crossing Ritual Boundaries

The categories of ‘media’ people, places and things; liveness; and reality are used by the media to hold on to symbolic power (Couldry 2002, 42–52). Through their actions at the 2019 Women’s World Cup, travelling Matildas fans temporarily crossed into the category of the media, thereby absorbing some of their symbolic power. Though fan motivations were not expressly related to the media or in gaining access to its power, the ritual liminal event takes place in the ritual space of the media, where everything and everyone is absorbed into the myth of the mediated centre. Fans inadvertently became media pilgrims, and in their investment in the myth, acted as they believe those at the centre should. They situated themselves as having privileged access to the athletes and the ‘truth’ of the event, demonstrating their proximity and, for a time, becoming journalists themselves. These ritual actions became further legitimisation of the myth of the mediated centre- the myth which allows the media to hold symbolic power.

At the Women’s World Cup, the social centre was commonly understood to be France, meaning that anyone at the event in France is, by extension, more socially central. Their presence at the World Cup in France elevated the travelling fans from ordinary people in a peripheral place, to media people in a media place.

Through media pilgrimages, not only is the abstract nature of the media production system ‘re-embedded’ in an encounter,

for example, with a site of filming or a celebrity, but the significance of places ‘in’ the media is more generally confirmed. (Couldry 2003, 76)

Couldry’s example of celebrity spotting was incredibly prevalent with Australian fans in France. A photo of Matildas Karly Roestbakken and Mary Fowler with some fans in Montpellier’s town square highlights the significance of places in the media.

Karly and Mary look at ease together, their arms slung over each other’s shoulders. Next to them is a fan and her kid. The kid is wearing a bright gold hat, with the same logo as the squad uniforms. All four squint towards the camera with the sun in their eyes. In the background is a town square, bordered by archetypal French architecture. We have no doubt where this photo was taken. Under the photo are comments like “Woohoo!” “super cool!” and “how good is that!?”

While I knew Australian fans were going to watch the World Cup, I didn’t realise quite how excited it would make me to see photos like this. They were really *there*. Despite the fact that I grew up just down the road from Karly Roestbakken, and have seen her around Canberra a number of times, it was the framing of this photo that made it all the more special. Karly had recently been promoted to the Matildas, making her more media-related than ever before. The stunning buildings in the background only served to underline the significance of the location. It wasn’t Canberra, an ‘ordinary’ place, it was the site of the World

Cup. It highlighted how socially and physically distant my experience of the event (watching on my laptop in bed) was to the fans who travelled there. Their closeness was due to the effort they'd made to be there, and I respected that effort.

The status afforded to the travelling fans and France, compared with the ordinary viewers back home in ordinary Australia, is a result of the myth of the mediated centre. Seemingly central people and places are afforded "privileged status in networks of symbolic production" (Couldry 2003, 80). An example of this privileged status, afforded only temporarily to travelling fans, is the "suck on that one" t-shirt. Had I emblazoned the phrase on a shirt, I doubt it would have got any traction, even if I shared it on social media or with other Matildas fans. The act of doing so, in a place saturated with cameras, with the authority of someone at the social centre, is an act of privilege. Their temporarily elevated 'media' status allowed the fans to exercise some of the media's symbolic power in the form of 'naming.'

Couldry argues that the power of 'naming,' is "the real domination" of our era (Melucci in Couldry 2002, 7). It is the power to direct discourse and frame events, the power that Australian fans exercised in a small and temporary way with their t-shirts. They used their proximity to the media to use their own power against them, but it's important to note that, for media pilgrims this power is only valid so long as they remain at the perceived social centre, in our case, as long as the duration of the World Cup. Instead of allowing them their power to

do with it what they will, the media harnessed the perspectives of fans in order to reincorporate their perspectives. One of the Mad-Tildas posted publicly about being treated to lunch in Nice, France by Optus Sport. Reporter Michelle Escobar wined and dined some fan group organisers, who thanked her for the opportunity to provide feedback. Optus Sport hosted the broadcast where Garriock and Salisbury slammed Sam Kerr's comments. The fans wore their "suck on that one" shirts in the photos of their lunch.

Optus Sport's interaction with the fans implies authorised participation as media people. Keltie's (2017) concept of authorised participation allows us to understand the way that fans challenge dominant media in a way that benefits the power of the media in the long run. Authorised participation understands participatory culture as governed by, rather than in resistance to, the structures of the media (Keltie 2017, 133). The media's interest in fans who have something contrary to say is an example of them 'authorising' audience engagement. This encourages viewership over time, and allows the media to present themselves as impartial or balanced. By broadcasting criticisms of Kerr alongside their engagement with fans, Optus Sport is legitimised as a news source, and as 'true' reflection of the social centre. In the end, the fans will go home and lose their elevated status, but the media will sit tight, knowing that they are still the place people look for their social reality- the media retain 'naming' rights.

FAN CAM saw a familiar face dancing at the front of the Aussie crowd. It was always the same faces with the drums, flags and trumpets. Many fans became celebrities themselves, one of them is Fatima. She doesn't have many social media followers herself, but she was interviewed enough times over the course of the World Cup that I won't forget her for a long time. In this video she hits her bongo drum to the beat and directs the chanting crowd as they march to the Stade des Alpes in Grenoble. (The Matildas 2019)

Fatima is, perhaps, the best example of the temporarily granted 'media' status. She is ever-present in the fan coverage from the event, and SBS journalist Ben Lewis even dubbed her the FIFA Women's World Cup correspondent- a claim met with incredible enthusiasm from others (Lewis 2019). Throughout the tournament, aside from interviews with mainstream media, Fatima tweeted and posted on Instagram updates relating to the Matildas, the fan contingent and the event itself. The tweets were informative and journalistic, implying that she welcomed her newfound status as correspondent. She challenged media outlets when they suggested women's goals were too aspirational, and organised meet ups with fans from other countries. Somehow, through her proximity to the event and the Matildas (she's friends with midfielder Tameka Yallop's wife), she became a celebrity of her own accord.

The phenomenon of ordinary people-turned-media people at the Women's World Cup raises two issues; the first is economic, the second is symbolic. Both websites and media companies stand to benefit financially from user-generated

content, especially relating to media events. In times of concentrated media activity, like World Cups, advertisers pay more money and people consume more media. As Keltie, quite aptly, summarises, “user activity within participatory culture creates a surplus value, which is then transformed to economic capital” (Marx in Keltie 2017, 138). Fans’ journeys become media pilgrimages when, like Fatima’s, their activity is oriented towards the media, rather than the event as a ritual relating to other values. Their ‘temporary’ journalistic status is done in the hope of gaining recognition, not money, but it is unpaid labour, producing content that is easily converted to economic capital by Twitter and Facebook, or broadcasters like Optus Sport.

The second issue, the symbolic issue, is the possibility of becoming a boundary crosser. When audiences see a fan cross from being ‘ordinary’ to being ‘media,’ they believe in its possibility. The centre is no longer solely the World Cup, but also the fandom. The belief that, through media proximity, we can elevate our status, is a direct reproduction of the myth of the mediated centre. Audiences aspire to be ritually transported to the centre, their want for validation hiding its construction. Stories of people like Fatima, who use social media engagement and ritual attendance as a platform to gain attention from mainstream media, normalise the notion of the centre and the periphery, encouraging others to look more centrally. In reality, the number of stories is far outnumbered by the billions of social media users. How many will really get their 15 minutes of fame, and what will the media get in return for them trying?

Conclusion: The Rights to Reality

This thesis has used two competing ideas of ritual to examine the 2019 Women's World Cup. In using the combination of ritual liminal events in the media and media rituals, I hope to have demonstrated how the former enables the latter. While ritual liminal events in the media are only socially central because we believe them to be so, they also constitute a large part of many people's lives. The athletes who play, the activists who fight for the right to play, the audiences who feel every win and loss, and the girls whose childhood memories are marked by these events are all legitimate in their experiences. We saw ongoing discourse through digital networks throughout the World Cup about athletes and the media's representation of them. However, ultimately, these audiences did not boycott the event: they negotiated their participation, but they still participated, often in festive ways. This speaks to the centrality of events like this- the desire for cathartic festivities and collective experiences. To both fans and critics, the arbitrary nature of the myth of the centre means little (or sometimes even to me- I still can't watch Nike's *Dream Further* without crying!). It is for this reason that, against the grain of Nick Couldry, I chose to examine the event's centrality to some degree. I acknowledge the apparent hypocrisy, but I couldn't ignore their realities.

I hope that, in choosing to use these two understandings of ritual, I have demonstrated how the social centrality and gravity of the 2019 Women's World Cup allows it to obscure the unequal distribution of symbolic power in the media.

Liminal ritual events in the media provide investment in the myth of the centre, and the media's privileged relationship to it. Where fans and meme-makers used social networks to challenge the expression of nationalism and women's empowerment to be more progressive or less heteronormative, their challenges were ultimately ones of content, and not of structure. In the ritual space of the media, where media power is a vicious cycle, mass media responds to and appropriates resistant discourse in order to maintain their symbolic power. Moments of resistance have been, in Keltie's words, "colonised by... the culture industry, folded back into and transformed into extensions of the industry itself" (2017, 119).

The result of these practices, of media ritual action and the media's colonisation of resistance, is the position of the media as our natural interpreter for the social centre. The media are naturalised as the "centralised system for producing and distributing images, information and opinions" (Couldry 2003, 46). In other words, we believe the media's reflection of us, of reality, to be legitimate. Belief in this myth is so pervasive that, even in our criticism, we seek media approval. Lesbian meme culture criticises the lack of representation of gay athletes, not the fact of representation itself. Australian fans decried the misrepresentation of their captain Sam Kerr, instead of questioning the validity of the media's voice. We push for a media that represents us, and feel vindicated when we get it. The danger here is that, if the media is the place we go to communicate about ourselves and our realities, it then has the power to define them. This, I believe, is the ultimate aim of mass and social media.

While, of course, the media are concerned with making money, the holding of symbolic power is enough. By hoarding symbolic power, the media (including social media) have the power to make central or peripheral anyone or anything they choose. They have the power to construct reality.

Reality is, above all, a scarce resource. Like any scarce resource it is there to be struggled over, allocated to various purposes and projects, endowed with given meanings and potentials, spent and conserved, rationalized and distributed. The fundamental form of power is the power to define, allocate, and display this resource. (Carey 2009, 66)

The power to define is the power of ‘naming’ our central social realities and structures (Couldry 2003, 43). Herein lies the danger of the media’s power. They structure the world as ‘media’ and ‘ordinary,’ ‘central’ and ‘peripheral,’ retaining the power to change those boundaries and definitions at their whim. Anyone can be excluded from the media, and, consequently our social world if the so media chooses. This is the capacity to inflict symbolic violence, afforded to them by the unquestioned role of media in our social world. While the 2019 Women’s World Cup seems a largely innocuous event, it harnessed the power of ritual to obscure its symbolic power and capacity for symbolic violence.

This thesis provides an example of the simultaneous use of two theories of ritual, acknowledging the importance of one and deconstructing the danger of the other. Further research directions might include participant observation of fans at the

media ritual centre, or of athletes, journalists and other 'media' people in their interactions with 'ordinary' people. I wonder how these categories might be bounded by events, whether actions are changed and framed by the formal ritual as opposed to everyday life in the ritual space of the media. Either way, future media research should aim to critique, and not perpetuate the myth of the mediated centre, all the while acknowledging the realities of those whose lives revolve around that myth.

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