



**'Plastic' or 'Fantastic' Brits?  
Identity Politics and English Media  
Representations of 'Team GB'  
during London 2012**

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**Keywords**

National identity

Identity politics

Established-outsider relations

Britishness

Mediated patriot games

## Abstract

This article focuses on the dynamic relationship between media-sport and national identity in the context of the London 2012 Summer Olympic Games. Specifically, attention is given to the construction and representation of members of 'Team GB' in the English press in the build-up to and during London 2012, against the backdrop of contemporary British identity politics. Sporting passions can reflect prevailing moods of the wider geo-political climate and often may even reinforce or engender these social currents. A qualitative content analysis is used to examine the ways in which the narrative of 'plastic Brits' was (re)constructed and represented through images and texts within the English press during London 2012. A cross section of 6 daily English newspapers was subject to this interpretive analysis from 3 August 2012 (the day of the opening ceremony) through to 19 August 2012 (one week after the closing ceremony). We offer three main emergent findings from our analysis of the press coverage: (1) while present in advance of the Olympic Games, the 'plastic Brit' narrative was largely absent during the Games themselves; (2) performances by 'plastic' members of 'Team GB' were de-amplified in covert discourses pertaining to established-outsider relations: 'plastic Brit' successes were celebrated, though not as much as those by 'true Brits', whereas 'plastic Brit' 'failures' were generally relegated to the sidelines; (3) hosting the Games and showcasing the country to the watching world encouraged journalists and politicians alike to (re)interpret and attempt to make sense of modern Britain.

## Contributor Notes

Emma Poulton did her PhD in Sociology of Sport at Loughborough University and is a lecturer in the School of Applied Social Sciences at Durham University. Her research interests centre upon media representations of sport and national identity, football fan cultures, and football-related violence. She has published in a range of international journals and is co-editor (with Martin Roderick) of *Sport in Films* (2009, Routledge).

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This article focuses upon the dynamic relationship between media-sport and national identity in the context of the London 2012 Summer Olympic Games. Specifically, attention is given to the construction and representation of members of 'Team GB'<sup>1</sup> in the English press in the build-up to and during London 2012, against the backdrop of contemporary British identity politics. This is marked by the contested nature of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK), with the Scottish First Minister, Alex Salmond, from the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) calling for independence from the Union, while sections of the euro-sceptic UK continue to struggle to find a post-Empire geo-political status.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Team GB' is the brand name adopted by the British Olympic Association (BOA) in 1999 for the Great Britain team that competes at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games. It is comprised of athletes from the UK, plus the three Crown dependencies (Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man) and all but three of the fourteen British Overseas Territories. This moniker is somewhat controversial due to its focus upon Great Britain, at the exclusion of the other contributing nation-states. Indeed, the 'back-to-front' grammatical labelling of 'Team GB' could be seen as a 'plastic' invention itself, borrowing heavily from 'Team USA' and 'Team Australia' respectively.

A further characteristic of concurrent British identity politics is an on-going debate over what constitutes 'Britishness' in multicultural Britain today. Indeed, the tension between those who advocate that 'newcomers' should adhere to British traditions and those who emphasise a respect for the richness of the diversity of modern British culture underlies much of the press coverage we examine (for further discussion of this see Fenton 2007; Kumar 2010; McCrone 2002). Some of these sentiments were reflected in the tone of the pre-Games reporting, much of which was generally sceptical about hosting the Olympics due to escalating costs and security concerns, as the UK tried to cope with the global recession and repercussions of the euro-zone debt crisis.

Whannel (2002:23) explains how, 'National belongingness is inscribed into discursive practices which seek to mobilise national identities as part of the way in which our attention is engaged with a narrative hermeneutic. We want to know who will win it and 'we' hope that it will be our 'own' competitor'. However, for Great Britain, this was complicated at London 2012 by the make-up of 'Team GB', with some of its members having 'acquired' British citizenship as 'dual nationals', through serving the minimum

residence period, or through marriage. These sportsmen and women were labelled 'plastic Brits' by their critics in the English media, instigated by the right-leaning *Daily Mail* newspaper, renowned for its traditionally conservative values and concerns about multiculturalism and immigration. This label, questioning their authenticity as 'British', was underpinned by a belief that: 'Plastic Brits are Using Team GB to Fulfil their Own Olympic Dreams' (Samuel 2011).

Whether in success or defeat, sporting passions – or what we have termed elsewhere 'mediated patriot games' (Maguire and Poulton 1999; Poulton 2004) – can reflect prevailing moods of the wider geo-political climate and often may even reinforce or engender these social currents. Consequently, it is important to understand the contemporary socio-cultural and politico-economic climate, which is currently characterised by glocalising trends. Elite labour migration is an established feature of the sporting 'global village' (Maguire 2008). This migration primarily involves athletes, but also includes coaches, officials, administrators and sports scientists located within a wider sports industrial complex. While the *Daily Mail's* Des Kelly

(2012) refers to this as 'athletic tourism', this movement of 'workers' occurs both within and between nations and continents on a global basis, facilitated in part by the growing flexibility of the transnational labour market (Maguire and Falcoux 2010). Although migrant athletic labour has been a feature of global sport for some time, its frequency and extent has grown in complexity and intensity over recent decades (Maguire 2008; Maguire and Falcoux 2010). This study is therefore theoretically contextualised by the interdependent concepts of identity politics and the processes of globalisation. It is within this process and sociological framework, underpinned by the work of Norbert Elias – which has also been utilised elsewhere (Lee and Maguire 2011; Maguire and Burrows 2005; Maguire, Poulton and Possamai 1999a, 1999b; Maguire and Poulton 1999; Maguire and Tuck 2005; Poulton 2004; Vincent, Kian, Pedersen, Kuntz and Hill 2010) – that the relationship between sport and national identity is investigated.

The main objective here is to probe the framing, construction and representation of members of 'Team GB', at both manifest and latent levels, in the English media-sport discourse surrounding

London 2012. Using a variety of techniques and production codes – notably through the use of personal pronouns and reference to national traits and symbols – media-sport personnel contribute to the (re)production of established-outsider relations (Elias 1991, Elias and Scotson 1994) through the construction and representation of a series of ‘I/we’ and ‘us/them’ identities at a national level (Whannel 1992; Blain, Boyle and O’Donnell 1993; Rowe, McKay and Miller 1998; Crolley and Hand 2002; Hills and Kennedy 2009; Maguire and Poulton 1999; Tuck 2003; Poulton 2004). Examining the use of such journalistic practices will allow for an exploration into precisely *who* the English press chose to include/embrace as members of ‘Team GB’, and who they opted to exclude/reject, as ‘plastic Brits’.

Martin Samuel, sports columnist for the *Daily Mail*, first coined the phrase ‘plastic Brit’ in June 2011 in relation to American-born sprint hurdler Tiffany Ofili-Porter. Reacting to Ofili-Porter breaking Angie Thorp’s fifteen year old British 100m hurdles record, he claimed: ‘We have allowed it to be stolen by a plastic Brit who is using Team GB to fulfil her own Olympic ambitions’ through a ‘self-serving adoption’ of ‘the GB flag of

convenience’. Samuel’s grievance was with the head coach of UK Athletics, (Dutch-born) Charles van Commenee’s selection policy and methods to build a stronger team in preparation for London 2012:

Fortunately, he has a plan. We’re going to cheat. Not literally, obviously. That would be wrong. Team GB’s cheating is more a convenient manipulation of the rules, coming together with our colonial past, to create the option of securing the best of America’s cast-offs, plus the odd Caribbean ringer... [to carry] the GB flag of convenience (Samuel 2011).<sup>2</sup>

This signalled the start of a sustained year-long campaign by the *Daily Mail* against ‘plastic Brits’ – loosely defined as athletes, born overseas, ‘who swapped their flags’ to compete for ‘Team GB’ (but with some caveats, as we will

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel specifically identified Shara Proctor (from Anguilla) and American-born Shana Cox and Tiffany Ofili-Porter as those ‘carrying the GB flag of convenience’. The latter athlete is referred to variously in the media as Tiffany Ofili (her maiden name), Tiffany Porter (her married name since May 2011) and sometimes with a double-barrel surname. This is reflected throughout this article.

demonstrate) – ahead of London 2012, which will be outlined below.

## Methods

Whannel (1992:121) notes that ‘star performers are characters within a set of narratives’, which are (re)constructed and (re)produced by media personnel. Their narrative bank is rich, albeit formulaic, since ‘sport offers everything a good story should have: heroes and villains, triumph and disaster, achievement and despair, tension and drama’ (Poulton and Roderick (2008: xviii). Whannel (2002) also identifies sets of narrative functions in the narrativisation of sport stars’ careers that help to make sense of moments in their lives. These pre-existing narrative structures include: the ‘golden success story’, the ‘ups and downs story’ or the ‘rise and fall narrative’. As Hills and Kennedy (2009:113) advocate, an understanding of ‘the existing narrative scripts used to frame the events of a sport star’s career’ is helpful since ‘analysis of narratives in cultural texts can illuminate values and discourses within specific cultures’.

We used a qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000) to explore the ways in which the narrative of ‘plastic Brits’ was

(re)constructed and represented through texts and images within the English press both before and during the London 2012 Olympic Games. Prior to London 2012, we adopted a directed approach using the online search engine Google to generate pertinent newspaper articles relating to the construction and reproduction of the *Daily Mail’s* campaign against ‘plastic Brits’, using combinations of key words as a guide for the initial codes and units of analysis. This deductive application of categories helped us to explore the discursive use of pertinent themes and patterns to better understand the (re)construction of the narrative. Key words in the coding frame included: ‘plastic Brits’; ‘Team GB’; ‘flag of convenience’; and ‘dual nationals/nationality’, together with the names of athletes identified by the *Daily Mail* as ‘plastic Brits’.

The online search also helped us to identify ‘key moments’ in the newspaper’s campaign. As noted above, this began in June 2011 (when American-born Tiffany Porter first competed for ‘Team GB’ and broke a long-standing British hurdles record) and developed in advance of the Games, ‘peaking’ in March 2012 when Porter was appointed captain of Great Britain’s athletics team for the World Indoor

Athletic Championships. The narrative became newsworthy again when the BOA confirmed who had been selected for 'Team GB' in July 2012. 156 online newspaper articles were subject to analysis pre-London 2012.

During the Games themselves, a cross section of 6 daily English newspapers were subject to this interpretive analytical approach from 3 August 2012 (the day of the opening ceremony) through to 19 August 2012 (one week after the closing ceremony). These were: the 'middle market' *Daily Mail*, two tabloids: *The Sun* and *Daily Mirror*, and three broadsheets: *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *Daily Telegraph* (together with their Sunday equivalents). Online versions of the newspapers were accessed when hard copies were unavailable. The same key words and athletes names that were used in the qualitative content analysis of the pre-London 2012 press coverage were applied to the analysis of the newspapers during the Games. Overall, 573 newspaper articles were subject to analysis.

Given time-spatial constraints, here we present some of our initial readings and findings: first, from the construction of the 'plastic Brit' narrative; second, from

the reproduction of the narrative in press coverage of the announcement of 'Team GB' for the Olympics; and third, from the representation of some of the so-called 'plastic' members of 'Team GB' during the London 2012 Games, namely: Philip Hindes, Yamilé Aldama, and Tiffany Porter, for reasons explained below.

### **Constructing the 'Plastic Brit' Narrative**

From June 2011 onwards, *Daily Mail* sportswriters steadily built their narrative about 'plastic Brits', framing them as 'outsiders' to the collective notion of 'Team GB'. Typical headlines included: 'Plastic Brits are Cashing in (but there's no Lottery money for the likes of Kelly [Sotherton])', with Neil Wilson (2011) complaining that "plastic Brits'... will have their Olympic campaigns funded by the National Lottery while British-born contenders have been dropped 10 months from the Games' (*Daily Mail*, 17 October 2011).

A catalyst for the *Daily Mail's* campaign against the 'overseas imports' came with the appointment of 'mercenary' Tiffany Porter as captain of the GB athletics team for the World Indoor Championships in March 2012: 'Now the Plastic Brits are Taking Over! Porter is



Controversial Choice as Team GB Captain' (Anon. 2012a). Wilson (2012) remonstrated: 'There's No Way I'll be Standing for National Anthem when 'Plastic Brit' Porter Wins Gold' (*Daily Mail*, 9 March 2012). Claiming that she was 'as American as apple pie', he lamented: 'Porter is one of many athletes flying under the flags of convenience of countries not their own'.

Jonathan McEvoy (*Daily Mail*, 8 March 2012) – also reinforcing Porter's 'real' nationality – asked: '... on Independence Day last year... Who tweeted this? 'It's July 4. Wishing I was in the States to celebrate this special day. I'm definitely there in spirit''. McEvoy gave readers the answer: 'Of course, it was Porter, the self-serving arriviste who, with the help of a Dutch head coach who would enter a Martian if the paperwork worked out, uses Britain like a doormat'. Playing the patriot trump card, McEvoy explained: 'British athletics played fast and loose with our national identity on Thursday by appointing as captain a 'Plastic Brit' who would not – or cannot – recite the words of God Save The Queen'. Challenging her 'British' credentials at a press conference, McEvoy reported how he had enquired if she knew the words to the National Anthem: 'The point is not so much whether she knows the anthem by

heart... but that the question has any relevance at all'. As his headline indicated, it was McEvoy's belief that: 'It Could Have Been Farah or Ennis but Our Athletes Will Be Led By a Plastic Brit' (*Daily Mail*, 8 March 2012). His preference was for one of whom he described as 'the two modern greats of British track and field, Jessica Ennis and Mo Farah'.

The latter suggestion was an interesting one given the *Daily Mail's* 'plastic Brit' narrative. Mohamed Farah, a Muslim, moved to Britain as a young boy having been born in war-torn Somalia, so under the *Daily Mail's* criteria, technically qualified as 'plastic'. Indeed, there was disagreement between *Daily Mail* colleagues over whether Farah was to be accepted as a 'true Brit' or excluded as 'plastic'. Established-outsider relations were to the fore in the media discourse. Kelly (2012) commented on the 'controversy' the *Daily Mail's* label had caused:

When the American-born Tiffany Porter took her first, awkward bow as captain of the British athletics team, everyone was told she did not deserve the label 'Plastic Brit'. Who said so? Britain's head coach, Charles van Commenee, while alongside him world 5,000m



champion Mo Farah complained he felt 'disgusted' by the line of questioning Porter had to face. And so a Dutchman brought up in Amsterdam and the Somalian-born runner who lives in Portland, Oregon were on hand to refute the accusations that Porter was not 'British enough' (*Daily Mail*, 9 March 2012).

Despite Kelly's dismissal of Farah's British authenticity, his colleague Wilson (2012) embraced Farah, distinguishing him from Porter and fellow 'American' Shana Cox, who qualified 'because of a parental affiliation to Britain which they had not chosen to use until it became financially and competitively attractive'. For Wilson, Farah's case was 'very different':

Because his change of nationality had nothing to do with athletics, or with seeking a lift in cash or status. Farah came when still of primary school age when he was summoned by his father who was a resident already of Britain. His entire athletics career has been spent in Britain under its system of coaching and support. His successes are Britain's successes (*Daily Mail*, 8 March 2012).

Here Wilson, unlike Kelly, claimed Farah as 'one of us', an established 'true Brit', because he had been immersed in British culture, education and coaching structure since his youth, rather than recently for perceived mercenary gains. The disagreement between *Daily Mail* personnel was observed elsewhere. For example, a headline in the *New Statesman* magazine (13 March 2012) mocked: "Plastic Brits' — and the *Mail's* Struggle to Decide Who Isn't British'. Columnist Sunder Katwala noted: 'The fierce polemics of the *Mail's* sportswriters against some of the foreign-born athletes who have qualified to compete for Britain have demonstrated a comical inability to agree among themselves over whose British identity to challenge as fake' (*New Statesman*, 13 March 2012). Elsewhere, other media outlets helped to maintain the position of the 'plastic Brit' story on the (sports) news agenda in the guise of 'reporting on' the issue. For example, the *Daily Telegraph's Sport* supplement (9 March, pp. 2-3) headlined with: 'Farah's Fury Over 'plastic Brits' Storm'. The majority of newspapers, amidst the circulation battle, sought to distance themselves from the *Daily Mail's* position. In the left-leaning tabloid *Daily Mirror*, Mike Walters, announced: 'The time has come to stop labelling our dual-

nationality athletes as ‘Plastic Brits’’. Denouncing the ideology propagated by sections of the right-leaning media and in a clear side-swipe at the *Daily Mail* in particular, he noted:

Of all the spiteful, pejorative labels pinned to athletes with dual nationality, ‘Plastic Brits’ is by far the nastiest. By its very nature, the phrase is divisive and demeaning. Why not go the whole hog and just call them bogus asylum seekers? Well, that’s what right-wing foot soldiers would like us to believe, isn’t it? (*Daily Mirror*, 15 March 2012).

Amidst this criticism, the *Daily Mail’s* Samuel (2012a) – instigator of the original charge against ‘plastic Brits’ the previous year – responded to reactions to ‘The Plastic Brit debate, started on these pages and pounced on by every other newspaper and, Saturday night, BBC news’ and argued:

Hypocrites, xenophobes, plastic patriots, we’ve been called a few names this week for daring to question Great Britain’s competitors of convenience. UK Athletics says we’re banned... We’re ranting and raving, according to one newspaper. We have a right-

wing agenda. And all for saying it would be better if international sport had meaning, and the Great Britain team reflected the true standards of British athletes and coaches, shorn of false achievement... It really isn’t about patriotism, purity or fear of a foreign invasion as these artificial intellects would have you believe, either... it cuts directly to the spirit and meaning of competitive sport at national level and addresses its decreasing worth in an age of naked opportunism (*Daily Mail*, 12 March 2012).

Samuel (2012a) thus challenged British sport and foreign policy head on: ‘If even international sporting bodies refuse to embrace the principle that nationality matters, that events should compose the best of yours against the best of theirs, then what is the purpose?’

Samuel’s observations highlight the complex and contested nature of international sport (Maguire 2012). However, at a more latent level of meaning – and despite his claims to the contrary – his comments (and those of some of his *Daily Mail* colleagues) could be decoded as a thinly-veiled ‘immigration policy’ for who should be

granted British citizenship (and therefore be permitted to represents us) and who were 'outsiders'. The 'plastic Brit' narrative can thus be read as an insight into right-wing perceptions about Britain and 'Britishness' and underscored by an anti-multiculturalism that struggles to celebrate dual-nationals as truly one of us. Let us unpack this debate.

### **Conceptualising the 'plastic Brit' narrative: media-sport, citizenship and national identity politics**

The controversial nature of the narrative of 'plastic Brits' raises complex issues of citizenship, national identity and identity politics, as well as the interconnections between sport achievement, foreign policy and elite athletic migration. For as Maguire (2008:451) notes: 'Issues of attachment to place, notions of self-identity and allegiance to a specific country are significant in this regard'. To help make sense of these issues, we first consider the inter-relationship between media-sport and national identity politics, before discussing the British identity politics against which London 2012 took place.

Sport is widely recognised as an important source of collective

identification and is arguably the most potent and visible symbol of national identity. International sporting contests act as a form of ritualised war, serving as symbolic representations of inter-state competition (Elias 1996). Yet, it is the media's framing of such competition that vividly brings into being the cultural and ideological significance of sport. Using a variety of production codes and techniques, media-sport contributes to the construction and representation of 'established-outsider relations' through a series of 'I/we' (Elias 1991, 1994) and 'us/them' identities at a national level (Blain et al. 1993; Crolley and Hand 2002; Hills and Kennedy 2009; Maguire and Poulton 1999; Tuck 2003; Poulton 2004; Whannel 1992).

It is in this context that media personnel play a pivotal role by drawing upon the myths of collectivity and unity, emphasising the nation as embodied in its athletic representatives (Rowe et al. 1998). In this way, media-sport has the ideological power to both represent and *re-present* the 'imagined community' of the nation (Anderson 1983), at both the manifest and latent levels of meaning. 'We' learn about 'our' national character, 'our' history and 'our' society via national habitus codes (Lee and Maguire 2011; Maguire and Burrows 2005; Maguire et

al. 1999a, 1999b; Maguire and Poulton 1999; Maguire and Tuck, 2005; Poulton 2004; Vincent, et al. 2010).

Sporting mega-events, such as the Olympic Games, have a transnational dimension. Equally, however, they also serve as vehicles for the expression of national identities (Hilvoorde, Elling, and Stokvis 2010). The host nation, in particular, is at the core of the Olympic spectacle. Through the media coverage of the opening and closing ceremonies and by the way the performances of the 'home' athletes are mediated, national unity, self-image and external perceptions are constructed and represented. These occasions allow for the people of the host nation to express both their self and group image (i.e. their 'I/we' identity). In this way, media personnel help people to invent, imagine and interpret past (and present) glories and construct an image of what the nation is and what its people should think and feel they are in the contemporary world. From a process sociological perspective, these long-term developments and changes in people's social behaviour, their habitus, are intertwined. As Elias observes (1996:151):

The love for one's nation is never only a love for persons or groups

of whom one says 'you'; it is always the love of a collectivity to which one can refer as 'we'... The image of a nation experienced by an individual who forms part of that nation, therefore, is also a constituent of that person's self-image.

People then experience a sense of collective national characteristics as embodied representations of themselves. These embodied characteristics form sleeping memories and conscious thoughts that find expression in and are reinforced by national institutions, symbols and collective occasions of perceived national importance, such as sporting events. Dormant national memories are vividly awakened through the media coverage of international sport events: in this context a narrative of who 'we' and 'they' are is on display. By studying such media discourse, aspects of the processes through which national habitus is framed, constructed and represented can be explored. In this context it is possible to examine how national identity is formed and transformed within and in relation to representations that generate contested notions of identity, loyalty, allegiance and belonging. The study of mediated

accounts of 'plastic Brits' highlights these dynamics in quite a vivid manner.

That is, these 'codes of being' are built around a core of significations, which help us to know who we are, how to think, how to feel and how to behave as a citizen of the nation (Maguire 2011; Maguire and Poulton 1999). As such, habitus codes often find expression in 'mediated patriot games' (Maguire and Poulton 1999; Tuck 2003; Poulton 2004), which are frequently framed by media personnel as vivid contests between 'us' and 'them'. By studying media-sport discourse, aspects of the processes through which 'our' national habitus/character is framed, constructed and represented by and through discursive practices can become more evident. These discursive practices of media-sport, for example, present us with a set of consciously created images, histories and symbols that confer meaning on what it is to be part of the nation, or in this case, 'Team GB'. For further discussion of this in relation to complex nature of Great Britain, see: Burdsey 2007; Falcous 2007; Hills and Kennedy 2009; and Reid 2010. Knowing the words to and (actively) singing the National Anthem is a case in point, as illustrated by the *Daily Mail's* indignation

when Tiffany Porter declined their invitation to sing it.

### ***Ruling Cool Britannia?* The Monarchy and British identity politics in modern Britain**

The 'plastic Brit' narrative should also be understood in the broader context of a year that saw the UK 'celebrate' two occasions of perceived national importance: Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee and London host the Olympic Games. Indeed, the construction and reproduction of a patriotic 'feel-good factor' had been high on the mainstream British media agenda since the Royal Wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton (the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge) in April 2011, with few dissenting voices. This was reinforced during the Olympic Games themselves, for example, when the faces of the Royal Family (especially younger members) were prevalent across both the print and broadcast media. First, The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh took part in the opening ceremony, with the Queen herself 'starring' in a memorable 'television moment' as she appeared in a comedic sketch with 'James Bond' during Danny Boyle's epic production. Other members of the Royal Family were

also in attendance and continued to be a presence across the Olympic venues (and consequently in the media) as 'cheer leaders' for 'Team GB' throughout the Games, led by BOA ambassadors and 'media favourites': the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry. Princes William and Harry were also television studio guests, interviewed by Sue Barker, during the BBC's coverage (3 August 2012). Their cousin, Zara Phillips, competed for 'Team GB' in the team equestrian event, winning the silver medal which was presented by her mother, The Princess Royal (President of the BOA and an Olympian herself), who was also a spectator at many other events. Finally, Prince Harry was The Queen's official representative at the closing ceremony.

The English media were complicit in this 'PR exercise' for the Royal Family. For example, in a full-page feature, the *Daily Mirror* (9 August 2012:3) headlined with a word-play on the National Anthem: 'God Save the Team'. The article quoted from a royal press release: 'The Duke and Duchess and Prince Harry are thrilled with the success of the British athletes'. With reference to some of the defining principles of British national identity and habitus, the press release continued: 'They believe the athletes and their

support team represent the very best of British: dedication, fair play, sense of humour and friendship'. The article concluded with a 'tribute to the royals for 'raising the profile' of the nation at home and abroad' from the UK Minister for Sport and the Olympics, Hugh Robertson MP. He was quoted as saying of the young royals: 'Their support has made a difference'. The weaving together of the Jubilee celebrations, the Olympics and the role of the Royal Family in English media-sport discourse arguably reinforced traditional notions of 'Britishness' and a Kingdom that was united (despite Scottish Nationalist calls for independence).

### **How many 'plastic Brits' in 'Team GB'? English press representations of pre-London 2012**

Following the intensification of the *Daily Mail's* campaign against 'plastic Brits' as 'outsiders' ahead of the World Indoor Athletics Championships in March 2012, the story resurfaced again as London 2012 approached. This was not led by the *Daily Mail* in the first instance. Instead, other newspapers brought the 'plastic Brit' narrative to the forefront of the (sport) news agenda by 'reporting on' the story. For example, the online edition

of the *Daily Telegraph* (10 July 2012) featured an info-graphic detailing where the 11% of 'Team GB' who were born outside of the UK originated. The online article was headlined: 'Team GB: 'Plastic Brits' – Where do They Come From?' and led with the fact that '60 of 542 'home' Team GB members were born abroad'. Simon Hart (2012) explained:

It is the topic that has divided opinion in the run-up to London 2012: whether it is right that overseas-born athletes – or 'Plastic Brits' as they have been labelled – should be allowed to take the place of home-grown competitors at the Olympic Games. Now the issue will come under fresh scrutiny after research carried out by the *Daily Telegraph* revealed that of the 542 Team GB members who were announced on Monday, 60 – 11 per cent – of them were born abroad. The figure has been inflated by some athletes who were simply born away from home to British parents, though the vast majority are dual nationals who joined the GB ranks only after London was chosen as the 2012 host city seven years ago...

With the reproduction of the 'plastic Brit' narrative here, the *Daily Telegraph* – another Conservative leaning newspaper – appeared to echo the *Daily Mail's* campaign and ideological position. As if to re-emphasise the 'controversy', Hart (2012) continued:

The issue has provoked a heated debate in Britain, with some critics condemning the new arrivals as little more than sporting mercenaries, while others have argued that if an athlete has a UK passport, then he or she is perfectly entitled to compete under the Union Flag.

The article went on to quote Andy Hunt, the Chief Executive of the BOA and *chef de mission* of 'Team GB', who defended Britain's selection rules as 'clear and fair':

'There are no Plastic Brits', he said. 'As far as I'm concerned, if you're a British citizen with a British passport and you are eligible to compete for this country, then fantastic. If you win a place on merit, you should be in the team... If you actually look at our eligibility rules in this country, it's very, very hard to get citizenship compared to other countries. We don't do





passport trading as many nations do. Yes, we've got a number of individuals in the team who are dual passport-holders or who have gained nationality over the last few years, but I'm comfortable with where we've got to, and there are no Plastic Brits'.

The *Daily Telegraph's* 'research' helped to fuel the *Daily Mail's* simmering campaign. A day before the *Daily Telegraph* published its own findings, the *Daily Mail* (9 July 2012) presented readers with 'Your Guide to Team GB'. Without any explicit reference to 'plastic Brits', the newspaper listed the 'date of birth, place of birth and where the athletes live'. The covert meaning here was to implicitly underline who was a 'true' Brit, through their birth right and choice of where to live. Two days later, the sports pages of the *Daily Mail* (11 July 2012) were more explicit, headlining with: 'Team GB have 61 'Plastic Brits' Taking Part in London Olympics' (Anon. 2012b). The article declared: 'The controversy over 'plastic Brits' has been reignited by the revelation that Team GB will have 61 overseas-born athletes competing at this summer's London Olympics', explaining how 'a *Daily Telegraph* survey has revealed that 11 per cent of the 542-strong were born abroad'. That this

statistically reflected contemporary multicultural Britain – 'Twelve per cent of people in Britain today are foreign-born' (Katwala 2012) – was overlooked.

Indeed, the *Telegraph Online* 'interactive map' highlighted how 8 'foreign born athletes have represented other countries' prior to selection for 'Team GB'. These included the track and field athletes Yamilé Aldama, Shara Proctor and Tiffany Porter, who had originally ignited the *Daily Mail's* 'plastic Brit' debate. While athletics received the most media attention pre-London 2012 regarding new arrivals from overseas, in fact Britain's 78-strong athletics squad included relatively few overseas-born team members (8) compared to some other Olympic sports. In handball, 9 out of the total 28 players in men and women's squads were foreign-born competitors, including Yvonne Leuthold (Switzerland) and Seb Prieto (Monaco), cited as having previously competed for their 'home' nations. Across the men's and women's basketball squads, 8 of the 24 players were born overseas, including one from Australia, Bermuda and Sudan, two from Canada, and three from the USA (see Falcous and Maguire 2005 for a discussion of the 'Americanization' of British basketball). The Ukrainian-born Olga Butkevych was the sole member of



the British wrestling team. She was recruited by British Wrestling's head coach, Nicolai Koryeyev (also from the Ukraine) in 2007 as a sparring partner to the British team and received her British passport just months before the start of London 2012.

While these features are worthy of further attention, our focus here is upon 3 of the 8 members of 'Team GB' identified by the *Daily Telegraph* as having 'switched allegiance' and thereby allows us to examine how these most 'plastic' of Brits were represented. These Olympians are: Philip Hindes, Yamilé Aldama, and Tiffany Porter. Their representation in the English press enables us to illustrate wider questions of British identity politics.

### **Representations of 'Team GB' during London 2012: 'plastic' or 'fantastic'?**

Success by 'plastic Brits' presented some of the press corps – notably those from the *Daily Mail* given the newspaper's sustained campaign against them – with a challenge to conventional understandings of sporting heroism and traditional narrative formations (Hills and Kennedy 2009). *Daily Mail* sports reporters were seemingly faced with the

dilemma of how to frame and 'celebrate' the heroics and victories of athletes their newspaper opposed to being (established) members of 'Team GB': were they to be heralded as 'fantastic' or remain as 'plastic'?

Relatively unknown to the mainstream English sports media prior to the Olympics, cyclist, *Philip Hindes*, was part of the three-man gold-winning sprint team at London 2012. Following their success, co-rider Sir Chris Hoy<sup>3</sup> dominated all of the front pages (with the exception of *The Times*, which led with Great Britain's gold-winning men's canoe slalom pair), as the English press celebrated the (Scottish) rider's fifth Olympic gold, which confirmed him as one of Britain's most successful Olympians (along with 2012 Tour de France winner, Bradley Wiggins – born in Belgium, albeit to British parents, a fact largely overlooked by the English media – and Sir Steve Redgrave, whose record Hoy surpassed later in the Games by winning a sixth gold medal). In fact, there was little mention of team-mates Hindes

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<sup>3</sup> While outside the scope of this article, the issue of the identity of Scottish Olympians, such as Hoy and Andy Murray, vis-à-vis their British identity was linked in some press discourse to the debate regarding SNP plans for an independence referendum.

and Jason Kenny as Hoy's heroics stole the headlines. While there was no explicit mention of 'plastic Brits', identity politics were still seemingly on the *Daily Mails* (3 August 2012:2) agenda as their reporters pointed to the fact that Hindses was 'German-born' and emphasised his (dual) nationality through a narrative suggesting that Hindses was responsible for nearly denying his team (and especially Hoy) Olympic gold.

The story was developed on the back-page as Ivan Speck (2012) wrote: 'Great Britain's gold medal-winning cyclists were mired in controversy last night after Sir Chris Hoy's young team-mate claimed he intentionally crashed following a poor start in their heat. German-born Philip Hindses, 19, said it was a ploy to force a restart' (*Daily Mail*, 3 August 2012: 88). This narrative did not feature prominently in other newspapers. However, Hindses' dual nationality was highlighted, sometimes covertly, sometimes more overtly. Marsden and Rayner (2012) in the *Daily Telegraph* (3 August 2012:2) profiled 'The Young Heir to the Cycling Crown' in a feature that explained how:

Hindses, 19, who was born in Germany and competed for their national team until 2010, led Team

GB's world record breaking team sprint with Hoy and Jason Kenny... Hindses' mother is German, and it was only in October 2010 that he joined British Cycling's academy programme, qualifying through his father, an RAF airman who served in Germany.

His parentage was also identified by other newspapers, though it is noteworthy which parent (and therefore nationality) was listed first and the emphasis placed on his father serving in the British Armed Forces. For example, *The Sun* (*The Games* supplement, 3 August 2012: 4) refrained from the 'German' prefix, describing the 'young Hindses, son of a British soldier based overseas and brought up in Germany' (i.e. British first, German second). Similarly, Richard Williams, writing in *The Guardian* (3 August 2012:3) told how: 'Hindses has a British father and a German mother and was representing his mother's country at junior level until the coaches of British Cycling snatched him away last year to fulfil a role as the trio's powerhouse lead-off man. Last night Germany took bronze'. Owen Slot in *The Times* (*The Games* supplement, 3 August 2012:4) also sought to emphasise that Hindses was a 'coup' for 'Team GB', outlining how just two years ago he was a 'young

German boy... born to a British father... [who] was itching to switch sides'. Meanwhile, the *Daily Mirror* (3 August 2012:2) appeared to make light of the situation by describing Hines as 'a German with a Brit dad who learnt English by watching *Inbetweeners* DVDs'.

The representation of Hines indicates there were some complex mediated patriot games at play as his contribution to gold medal success challenged conventional understandings of British sporting heroism. As we have observed elsewhere, anti-German sentiments are characteristic of English media-sport discourse (Maguire et al. 1999a, 1999b; Maguire and Poulton 1999; Poulton 2004; Maguire and Burrows 2005). So while the *Daily Mail* refrained from labelling Hines as a 'plastic Brit' in light of his success, the newspaper was reluctant to embrace him as a 'true Brit' or 'established' member of 'Team GB'. Instead the *Daily Mail*, and other newspapers to a lesser extent, reinforced the fact that he was 'German-born' and that his error of judgement almost cost Britain and 'national treasure', Hoy, victory.

Triple-jumper *Yamilé Aldama* attracted her fair share of media attention prior to the Olympic Games, pilloried by some as

one of the most egregious of the so-called 'plastic Brits' because she had previously represented two other countries before obtaining British citizenship and competing for 'Team GB'. She had also been arguably the most vociferous in defending her British citizenship by telling her complex and compelling biographical narrative in several newspaper articles. For example, her story was profiled by Mark Bailey in a cover-story interview in the *Telegraph Magazine* (16 June 2012:1), entitled: 'Three Steps to Heaven: The incredible journey of Britain's globe-trotting triple jumper' – a play on words reflecting both her event, but also perhaps the fact that Aldama had previously represented her native Cuba, as well as Sudan, prior to gaining British citizenship in 2010 (almost a decade after her initial application for British citizenship when she married a Scot and relocated to the UK). Aldama (2012) also told her own story in *The Observer* and *guardian.co.uk* (14 July 2012), directly challenging the label she had been given:

Plastic Brits. I have been hearing that term over and over again in the weeks and months building up to the Games. At first it did not bother me. I have lived in this country for 11 years, I am married



to a British man, I have British children, I train under a British coach, at a British club. This is my home. What are they talking about? But in the past week it has really begun to upset me. It is so offensive.

In the article she highlighted how she is 'not the only athlete ever to have changed nationality'. By means of illustration, Aldama (2012) listed: British tennis legend, Fred Perry; South African-born Zola Budd<sup>4</sup>; British athlete Fiona May, who competes for Italy; South African-born England cricketer Kevin Pietersen; and Somalian-born member

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<sup>4</sup> As a South African, Zola Budd was banned from international competition due to South Africa's apartheid policy. Ironically, given the *Daily Mail's* current position, the newspaper helped her to compete for Great Britain at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics under a 'flag of convenience' with their campaign – led by then Chief Sports Writer, Ian Wooldridge, and endorsed by editor, Sir David English – to get the British Government to fast-track her passport application (her grandfather was British). *Daily Mail* executives lodged Budd's passport application. When challenged on this apparent inconsistency, Samuel, rebutted: 'Times change. People change. Views change... Heaven forbid that, 28 years on from the Budd controversy, a writer has a different view to a predecessor. It's hard to be inconsistent with opinions that were never mine in the first place' (*Daily Mail*, 12 March 2012).

of 'Team GB', Mo Farah, as examples. She also mentioned Harold Abrahams (depicted in the quintessentially British film *Chariots of Fire*, which won five Oscars in 1981 and, significantly, was re-released prior to London 2012), who 'suffered a lot because his father was a Jewish immigrant'.<sup>5</sup> Remarking how she 'thought we had moved on from those days', Aldama (2012) lamented: 'But sometimes I wonder if we have not moved on enough. There are so many examples... this campaign against me is hypocrisy'. Taking the opportunity to set the record straight for her critics, Aldama (2012) also explained the complicated reasons behind her changes of allegiance:

These newspapers make the point that I should never have competed for Sudan, that I should have waited for the Home Office to give me my passport. I did wait, I waited over two years. But when my application was turned down – because of my husband's situation after he was sent to prison [for heroin trafficking] – I could not

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<sup>5</sup> Aldama did not cite the similarly complex biography of the other main character in *Chariots of Fire*, British runner Eric Liddell, who was born in China to Scottish parents (see Cashmore 2008).





afford to wait any longer... at a time when I was ranked No.1 in the world (*guardian.co.uk*, 14 July 2012).

Given their interest in Aldama's life-story, it is unsurprising that *The Guardian* and *Daily Telegraph* were the only newspapers to cover her performance in the Olympic triple jump final in any detail. Elsewhere her fifth-place finish was largely overlooked. On a day when gold medal winning (Scottish) 'Team GB' tennis player Andy Murray competed with Jamaica's 100m champion, Usain Bolt, for pole position on the English (sports) media agenda, Aldama received negligible coverage in *The Sun* and only a short paragraph (lost in reports on British 400m runner Christine Ohuruogu's silver medal, which itself was relegated to the inside pages) in *The Times*, *Daily Mirror* and her *bête noir*, *Daily Mail*. All of these highlighted the fact that Aldama had previously represented Cuba and Sudan, rather than commenting on her actual sporting performance. The *Daily Mail's* (6 August 2012:76) Wilson dismissively wrote: 'Triple jumper Yamilé Aldama is out. She finished fourth for Cuba in 2000, fifth for Sudan in 2004 and now fifth again for Britain'.

In contrast, *The Guardian* ran a half-page report in its Olympic supplement. Directly challenging the 'mean-spirited accusations' that Aldama was a 'plastic Brit', Esther Addley wrote: 'The remarkable twists of Aldama's story have led to criticisms that she was a 'plastic Brit' and did not deserve to wear [fashion designer] Stella McCartney's ['Team GB'] strip. But as she clapped slowly above her head to rouse support before her final jump, the Olympic Stadium crowd gave that suggestion their own riposte'. Addley added: '...there is certainly no suggestion of inauthenticity among her colleagues in Team GB' and concluded: 'Her nationality last night was not in question'. Similarly supportive was Oliver Brown in the *Daily Telegraph* (6 August 2102: S7), whose report headlined: 'Outstanding Aldama Has Cause to Celebrate Personal Success' in which he observed: 'in light of the personal turmoil she has endured in her life this final was still a cause of celebration'. These journalists appeared to accept Aldama as a legitimate, if not established, member of 'Team GB'.

Similar issues of identity politics surfaced in the English press representation of *Tiffany Porter*. Having been born and brought up in the USA (who she competed for at youth level) by a



Nigerian father and English mother, Porter was the first member of 'Team GB' to be labelled a 'plastic Brit' by Martin Samuel of the *Daily Mail* in June 2011, despite having held a British passport since birth. She had attracted further censure when she was appointed captain of the British indoor athletics team in March 2012. A year in advance of London 2012, Turnbull (2011) profiled the 'rising star of women's hurdling' in *The Independent* (4 August 2011), suggesting that Porter was 'Set to Silence Critics by Being Plastic Fantastic'. However, while Porter reached the semi-finals of the Olympic 100m hurdles, she did not qualify for the final. Consequently she was given similar treatment to that which befell Aldama: relegated to short paragraphs at the end of other reports, with an emphasis on her place of birth.

For example, the *Daily Mail's* (8 August 2012:79) Laura Williamson wrote: 'There was more misfortune for Tiffany Porter, the 24 year old running for Great Britain despite being born and raised in Michigan, America'. Underlining her 'nationality' further, Williamson concluded: 'Porter, whose husband Jeff reached the semi-finals of the men's 110m hurdles in American colours earlier yesterday, was knocked out in the semi-finals of the 100m hurdles'. *The*

*Guardian* (8 August 2012: 7, Olympics supplement) did not mention Porter's birthplace in their brief paragraph, noting instead how: 'She surely would have made it had an old back injury not flared up'. The *Daily Mirror* gave Porter a solitary sentence, while there was barely any mention of her at all in *The Sun*, *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph*. It would seem that Porter was not recognised by these newspaper's sports editors as a worthy or 'established' member of 'Team GB'.

It should be acknowledged that 'Team GB' successes elsewhere may have accounted for this apparent lack of interest in Porter. The newspapers the day after her failure to qualify for her final positioned Hoy's record-breaking sixth gold medal atop of the English media agenda, along with 'Team GB' equalling their best medal tally since 1908 as they secured four more gold medals (including historic victories in the men's triathlon and team dressage competition). However, as Falcous and Maguire (2005) note with regard to 'local' British identities, while sport fans are content for 'foreigners' to play for their clubs (and indeed sometimes the nation) provided they are successful, their preference is for a local who looks, or at least sounds, like them.

## Preliminary conclusions

This study has examined the framing, construction and representation of members of 'Team GB' in the English media-sport discourse surrounding London 2012. Specifically, the study – underpinned by the process sociological concepts of identity politics, globalising processes and established-outsider relations – explored precisely *who* the English press chose to include/embrace as (authentic) members of 'Team GB', and who they opted to exclude/reject, in the context of the *Daily Mail's* pre-Games campaign against 'plastic Brits'. Our preliminary analysis indicates that the media-sport discourse found in the press coverage of London 2012 performed a similar function that has been highlighted elsewhere about national identity politics during sports mega-events as collective occasions of perceived national importance (Maguire and Poulton 1999; Maguire et al. 1999a, 1999b; Poulton 2004). That is, such discourse reinforced an intense sense of British national identity – while also giving cause to re-assess what this actually meant – as mediated patriot games were played out during the

Olympic Games, against a backdrop of wider geo-political and social currents.

We offer three main emergent findings from our qualitative content analysis of the English press coverage: (1) while present in advance of the Olympic Games, the 'plastic Brit' narrative was largely absent during the Games themselves; (2) performances by 'plastic' members of 'Team GB' were de-amplified in covert discourses pertaining to established-outsider relations: 'plastic Brit' successes (such as Hinder's gold medal) were celebrated, though not as much as those by 'true Brits', whereas 'plastic Brit' 'failures' (for example, Porter and Aldama) were generally disregarded and relegated to the sidelines; (3) hosting the Olympic Games and show-casing the country to the watching world encouraged journalists and politicians alike to (re)interpret and attempt to make sense of contemporary Britain, with the pre-Games cynicism about the cost of hosting and securing the Games apparently (temporarily) forgotten. As such, our analysis contributes to wider socio-cultural and geo-political debates, as well as scholarship, on the concept of national identity, foreign policy and, in particular, the notion of 'Britishness'. Let us expand on these early observations.



While the 'plastic Brit' narrative was present throughout a year-long build-up to the Games, the 'plastic Brit' label was conspicuous by its absence during the coverage of the Games themselves. The story was occasionally reproduced, but only in riposte to those who had used the epithet. However, the day after the closing ceremony, the instigator of the *Daily Mail's* campaign against 'plastic Brits', Martin Samuel, offered: 'My Final Word on the Plastic Brits (For Now)' (*Daily Mail*, 13 August 2012:61). He wrote:

The debate around national qualification in sport will fade from sight now, without a home Games putting it on the agenda, but do not imagine it no longer matters. Half the people who pontificated on the issues around Plastic Brits – I should invoice – did not understand the parameters anyway. It was always about sport, never about society (Samuel 2012b).

Samuel (2012b) was critical of 'Yasmin Alibhai-Brown in *The Independent* dim-wittedly linking it to attacks on multiculturalism and immigration'. Samuel argued:

I think the fact that Tiffany Porter did not even make the 100 metres hurdles final and three American women finished in the top four of it, suggests suspicions of her motives for abandoning the United States for Great Britain were justified, and not an attack on multiculturalism or immigration.

This denial was repeated in the *Daily Mail's* (13 August 2012:14) main editorial:

Inevitably, everybody wants to claim the overwhelming success of the Games for themselves, with the Left presenting them as a victory for multiculturalism. In fact, they are a victory for British pride and patriotism, supportive families, shared loyalties and common values – whatever our ethnic backgrounds (Dacre 2012).

This unusually inclusivist rhetoric from the *Daily's Mail* editor, Paul Dacre, helps explain how Mo Farah (despite his potentially 'plastic' credentials) came to be so fully embraced across the English media, including the *Daily Mail*. Samuel (2012b) described him as thus: 'Mo Farah represents the best of modern Britain and his story could not be further removed from the opportunism that is

becoming increasingly prevalent in modern international sport' (*Daily Mail*, 13 August 2012:61).

Similar discourse was evident throughout the newspapers, as 'Team GB's' third place in the Olympic medal table (with a record haul of 65 medals) provided the press corps with the fuel to construct and reproduce a patriotic 'feel-good factor', as an extension of the Queen's Jubilee celebrations (see Hilvoorde et al. 2010 for a discussion of how the Olympic medal index is used by nations as a unifying narrative). This was evident in both the tabloid and broadsheet newspapers half-way through the Games after the media-labelled 'Super Saturday', when 'Team GB' won an historic three track and field gold medals within an hour courtesy of: 'A ginger bloke from Milton Keynes [Greg Rutherford], a mixed race beauty from Sheffield [Jessica Ennis], an ethnic Somali [Mo Farah] given shelter on these shores from his war-ravaged homeland' (*The Sun*, 6 August 2012:6-7). Celebrating this achievement under the headline: 'Marvellous Modern Britain Unleashed Upon the World', *The Sun's* Oliver Harvey declared: 'This is what Britain looks like today'. In *The Sun's* editorial (6 August 2012:10), Dominic Mohan proudly observed:

Danny Boyle got it right on opening night. We've become a human kaleidoscope of a country where those of every race, faith and background are part of a huge and mostly happy family united by being proudly British... Like those representing Team GB on the track in the Olympic Stadium on Super Saturday, the 80,000 in the stands presented the genuine, multi-cultural face of these lands: Decent, sporting, tolerant, fair-minded and free of bigotry or racism. That is why the far Right are wasting their time. They have lost.

Similar sentiments were echoed in the *Daily Telegraph* (6 August 2012:2), with Michael Deacon (2012) also pointing to the diversity of British society and what this might mean for British national identity:

Look at it this way, Mo Farah is an immigrant. Jessica Ennis is mixed race. Most of our gold-winning rowers are women. Clare Balding, the BBC's best and most popular Olympics presenter, is gay. In other words: these Games are a triumph not only for Britain; they're a triumph for modern Britain.

Despite their protestations that the success of the London 2012 Olympic Games was testimony to British multiculturalism, this line of thinking may have underscored the advertisement on the front-page of the *Daily Mail* the day after the closing ceremony for a 'Giant Free Mo Poster' (instead of perhaps Jessica Ennis or Sir Chris Hoy). The poster depicted Farah in his celebratory 'Mobot' pose, with the caption: 'Two

Weeks That Made Britain Great Again'. It would seem that the selection policy allowing for the inclusion of some 'plastic Brits' at least helped to make Britain feel great again, if only for a memorably 'fantastic' fortnight during London 2012. It is unclear, however, how long such euphoria – 'imagined' or 'real', 'invented' or part of the national habitus of some Britons – will last.

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**This article was first published in *JOMEC Journal***

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ISSN: ISSN 2049-2340

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