JÖNKÖPING UNIVERSITY
School of Education and Communication

"Every Body Has A Story"

A Multimodal Analysis on the Discursive Construction of the Athletic Form

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ABSTRACT

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This study sought to examine how the prototypical male athletic form and the prototypical female athletic form are discursively constructed when a sports magazine has full control of what material to produce and publish. What makes up the 'athletic form' involves all the various traits and characteristics that are attached to the notion of what it means to be an athlete and what it means to have an athletic figure. The theoretical foundation was built on theories about gender in the media with a strong focus on objectification and (hyper)sexualisation, and previous research on gender in sports reporting has shown evidence of a strong gender bias where women athletes are both objectified and sexualised while women's sports in general is portrayed as significantly less interesting and valuable compared to men's sports. In order to study the discursive construction of the athletic form, the material – the 2017 edition of *ESPN Magazine*'s *The Body Issue* – was analysed through the method of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis. While there were several features and traits that were universal to both genders, such as toughness and strength, there were also differences of significant importance. There was a distinct clash between the notion of being athletic and being feminine as athleticism was not deemed a feminine trait, and efforts were even made to show how the women athletes are still "normal women" despite being athletes. Plus, a male athlete's body was depicted as being purely about function with its appearance not a matter of concern. A female athlete's body, on the other hand, was likewise about function but large emphasis was also focused on the notion of attractiveness and beauty, and that women athletes are not only tough and strong but also beautiful. Overall, the construction of the female athletic form contained a sexual aura that was forever present.

Keywords: Athletic form, gender, sports media, objectification, (hyper)sexualisation, discourse

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1. Introduction

"The media is a powerful purveyor of messages about culture and gender ideology" (Weber and Carini 2013, 196), not least since it is from the media "the majority of people gain the majority of their information and knowledge about the world" (Long and Wall 2012, 102). Simultaneously, all the various media forms "are not divorced from the social, cultural, political and historical contexts of their making" (ibid.). In summary, media representations have the ability to be exceptionally influential in purposely forming particular worldviews in its consumers. One area where this is prevalent is in the discursive construction of the prototypical athletic form. This involves all the various traits and characteristics that are attached to the notion of what it means to be an athlete and what it means to have an athletic figure.

The way the sports media talk about and treat sports directly "shape how society views and perceives sports" (Lumpkin 2009, 39) and previous critique towards how archetypical athletes are portrayed include discussions about objectification and sexualisation, particularly surrounding women athletes. Brian McNair has aptly referred to the modern times as a "striptease culture" (*see* McNair 2002), and while the risks are many to both men and women, women are predominantly at risk as they are more often on the receiving end. To objectify is to turn something that is not an object into an object and treat it accordingly, "which can be used, manipulated, controlled, and known through its physical properties" (Calogero 2012, 574) and as Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr (2011, 8) state, the widespread sexual objectification of women "is likely to contribute to mental health problems that disproportionately affect women".

When reviewing sports coverage, it can be determined that it is still a man's world as men's sports dominate (Lumpkin 2009, 38), and in older estimates, 95% of all sports media coverage in the United States was said to focus on men's sports (Kinnick 1998, 214). This brings forth the argument that with the relative rarity of women's sports being featured, *how* women's sports and female athletes are then actually portrayed is of added importance. Many studies show that there is a noticeable difference between how male and female athletes are represented, not least from a sexualisation viewpoint (e.g. Weber and Carini 2013; Martin and McDonald 2012), and Kinnick (1998, 215) speaks of an "implicit message" that accompanies the

underrepresentation of women in sports, which is that "female athletes either do not exist, or have no achievements that are newsworthy". As Kinnick (1998, 215) continues, when women do are featured, the emphasis is often on sports that are seen as "sex appropriate" and less masculine where they can emphasise typical female ideals such as elegance and beauty, and where the athletes' bodies are not covered by any visually intruding equipment such as in figure skating or gymnastics where their bodies are instead on display. The particular language used is of importance as it constructs how the genders are perceived (Taylor and Hardman 2004, 3), and in sports, the words used "provide a conceptual frame for the sports experience, and that mental frame has particular importance because fans often apply it to nonathletic situations" (Eastman and Billings 2001, 183).

Unsurprisingly, sports magazines have capitalised on the notion of 'sex sells'. Since the mid-1960s, *Sports Illustrated* [*SI*] have annually released a special version of their magazine called the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue*, and despite what the title could perhaps suggest on a first glance, the content is not particularly related to the sport of swimming. Lumpkin (2009, 39) goes as far as to call it "soft porn", and the special issue is still alive and strong today as a commercial success for *Sports Illustrated* with over $1 billion in revenue since its inception (Fox Business 2016).

As a response, *ESPN* launched their annual special edition called *The Body Issue* in October of 2009. It aims to differentiate itself from its *SI* counterpart by only featuring actual athletes, as well as also including men. However, another difference is that the athletes are always either entirely naked or wearing absolute minimum clothing that is typically related to their sport. *The Body Issue* is described by *ESPN* as a "celebration of the athletic form" (ESPN 2009), and its launch was a financial success (Rovell 2009) and beat any other October issue previously released by the magazine (Clifford 2009). But, with such a statement comes great responsibility and the question of gender representation in the creation of the athletic form in *The Body Issue* is still at large, especially since their conveyed intention is to celebrate the many different shapes and forms that the athletic form can be made up of.

Here, *ESPN* is in a rather distinct position of power. They have famous and popular athletes at their disposal as well as complete control over what material to produce and present to their worldwide public. As such, they have the power to guide their

readers towards certain ideologies concerning what constitutes the prototypical athletic form, and more importantly what differences there are between the male athletic form and the female athletic form. This power is not to be understated, and the importance to study the discursive construction of the athletic form is bound to the theories mentioned above and the potential subsequent social consequences if certain attributes and characteristics are attached to what is presented as the prototypical athletic form.

This study's purpose is the empirically add valuable knowledge to a field that is already rich in research, but as time progresses and technologies evolve, so do the discursive potentials. *ESPN* produces texts, photo galleries, and videos of the athletes who accept their invitation to be featured in *The Body Issue*. Thus, they are not limited to material captured in the heat of the moment or captured by persistent paparazzi. They are in full control to deliver whatever message they desire, which is guaranteed to reach a wide audience. And this message is not just a piece of text or a polished image; this message is dependent on the collaboration of all the material and how the different modes of interaction interrelate to construct the definitive prototype of the athletic form. It is this message that this study desires to elucidate.

2. Aim and research questions

This study aims to empirically add knowledge to the vast research field that is the representation of gender in media, with a focus on athletes and sports media. Previous research has repeatedly found evidence of dissimilar representation of the genders in sports reporting including the sexualisation of female athletes and women's sports in general, and, with an overall increase in the sexualisation of athletes in both genders, a case has been made about women now being hypersexualised while men are not.

The purpose of this study is to qualitatively analyse the discursive construction of the athletic form, both male and female, in sports magazines from a multimodal perspective in order to capture all important valuables which together form the prototypical image of an athlete.

2.1 Research questions

1. With full control of what material to produce and its contents, which features and characteristics are promoted in the discursive construction of the athletic form?

2. What discursive differences can be identified between the prototypical male athletic form and the prototypical female athletic form?

3. Previous research

The topic of media representations of female athletes and women's sports has received substantial attention in modern times, and scholars have even referred to mass media as a "powerful hegemonic institution, used mostly to preserve the status of (White) men at the top" (Hardin, Lynn, and Walsdorf 2005, 107) and that "the mass media are delivering a hegemonic message to their consumers that certain sports are more important than others" (Engleman, Pedersen, and Wharton 2009, 227). A lot of focus has been dedicated to the differences in how male and female athletes are portrayed, both as it relates to the imagery, the language used, the points of emphasis in the reporting, and more.

In a content analysis of 245 cover pages from *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN Magazine*, Frisby (2017a) found evidence of a division in the representation "in ways which support hegemonic ideas of masculinity" (120). Not only were women only featured in just 10% of the covers, they were also often depicted in sexually objectifying poses while being scantily clad and making seductive eye contact with the viewer, whereas the men athletes were typically in their team uniforms. Frisby (2017b) followed up with another content analysis of women on the covers of *SI* and *ESPN* in which she found statistically significant data that showed that the main aspects promoted in female athletes were their physical and bodily features, which led to the realisation "that in the world of sports, a female athlete's role, as of 2017, is continually constrained to her sexuality" (28).

Hardin et al. (2002) studied the media coverage of the 1996 Olympic Games, which had been dubbed "the gender equity Olympics" (341). The analysis spanned three years' worth of editorial photos published by *Sports Illustrated* in their magazine *SI for Kids (SIK)* after the conclusion of the Olympics. Despite the aforementioned label given to the '96 Olympics, the authors found that the post-Olympic media coverage in *SIK* had actually widened rather than reduced the gender inequity gap, with the editorial photos continuing "to perpetuate gender stereotypes and sexual difference" (341). Staying with *Sports Illustrated*, Weber and Carini (2013) found more issues relating to their representation of women in sports. Over an 11-year period, female athletes were only featured on the cover of *SI* 4.9% of the time, which was a number that correlated with similar research findings from the 1980s. Moreover, that low figure included covers where the female athletes shared the cover with male athletes,

or where the women on the cover were in fact not even directly related to sports. Similar to Hardin et al. (2002), Weber and Carini (2013) also found other contributors to the gender inequality gap, such as the sexual objectification of female athletes and mainly only promoting them in sports that are considered to be gender-neutral or feminine. Furthermore, *SI* used to release a magazine with a primary focus on female readership called *Sports Illustrated for Women*, and a study by Fink and Kensicki (2002) found some discouraging results. The articles in *SI for* Women were found to be depicting female athletes as being different from male athletes by highlighting the feminine and sexual aspects of the women instead of their athleticism. Furthermore, there were more personal stories and articles about athletic struggles and fewer sport-related articles in *SI for Women* compared to the standard *SI*, which was said to be sending the message that "Female athletes and their on-court activities are not interesting in their own right" (334), with an example being a story about a professional female basketball player focusing on her modelling career, and how "a man will take notice" (334) if female athletes work hard enough.

These findings are of interest to this study, as the topic of sexualisation and objectification of athletes is at the forefront. The 'athletic form' can come in many various shapes depending on the sport, with the more so-called 'feminine sports' typically featuring athletes that are of a slimmer build. As such, not only is the construction of men and women in the same sport of interest, but so is the choice of sports for each gender as it can arguably heavily impact the overall image construction of male and female athletes.

Moving on, this is, of course, not solely a *Sports Illustrated* issue. Engleman, Pedersen, and Wharton (2009) analysed 1,522 feature articles and 1,191 cover and special photographs in *ESPN Magazine* over a nine-year period, and found that 96.6% of the articles and 94.7% of the photographs focused on men's sports. In addition, 90% of the feature articles that did focus on women's sports were located in the back half of the magazine, and altogether, "*ESPN The Magazine* is reinforcing gender hierarchy structures in the U.S." (237) and "continues to reinforce gender hegemony and sets an agenda in which female sports and accomplishments are undervalued" (239). In fact, when comparing the two juggernauts in U.S. sports media, Martin and McDonald (2012) found very similar figures between the two regarding their magazine covers with an overall decrease in women on the covers

from 1987 to 2009, and that "female sports figures were frequently sexualized and/or featured in ways which emphasized conventional feminine norms, thus serving to trivialize their athletic accomplishments" (81). Adding on, Schmidt (2016) found that over a 30-year period of sports reporting in *The New York Times*, only 5.2% of all articles focused on women. While overt sexism was uncommon, women were frequently portrayed in typical feminine domestic roles (such as wives and mothers) which the author states is not a problem in itself, but combined with the limited attention given to women's sports and the lack of a counter-narrative presenting women as skilled and capable athletes, "women often appear to be relegated to a second-class status" (291). Even on occasions where the coverage is close to being even, as Davis and Tuggle (2012) found in their analysis on NBC's reporting of the 2008 Olympics where the women's events received 46.3% of all coverage, there are still representational issues: "the Beijing Olympics upheld the long-observed maxim that for female athletes to garner media coverage, they must be involved in socially acceptable individual sports and/or sports that highlight body type" (61).

While this study will not look at the physical magazines (where image/article location is of importance), the ratio between men and women is still of high interest, especially concerning the range of sports featured which could contribute to the 'gender hegemony' and force typical feminine traits onto the general image of the female athlete.

ESPN's *The Body Issue*, which exclusively features athletes in little to no clothing as "a celebration and exploration of the athletic form" (ESPN 2009), has also been under previous scrutiny by researchers. Smith and Smith (2011) analysed the second annual issue and found a strong gender bias where the female athletes were still more sexualised than the male athletes with a lesser focus on their athleticism. Hull, Smith and Schmittel (2015) reinforced these findings to a degree when looking at the first five issues, stating that a "gender bias is still present in mainstream sports media" (106). However, research comparing audience perception of *SI*'s and *ESPN*'s special issues by Smallwood, Brown, and Billings (2014) has shown that the women in *The Body Issue* are seen as more athletic and more muscular than their *Swimsuit Issue* counterparts, who are instead seen as more sexualised, feminine, and model-like, which also clearly shows "a divide between athleticism and femininity" (13).

All of the above is but a snippet of the research available on how the genders are portrayed in the media, and more specifically athletes, but it is in the vicinity of the aforementioned that this study aims to place itself. This study will strive to empirically add valuable knowledge by qualitatively analysing the construction of the athletic form in sports magazines. Unlike previous research where the focus is on various selections made by the media, this study's interest will lie in how sports magazines decide to fashion the prototypical athletic form – both male and female – when they have willing athletes at their disposal and are in complete control of how they are to be construed.

4. Theoretical frame and concepts

4.1 Gender and the media

One of the overriding theoretical perspectives in this study has to do with the representation of gender in the media. The reason for this is that when it comes to influencing the general views on men and women in society, the media is one of the most pervasive and powerful actors as any and all forms of media communicate ideas about the sexes (Wood 1994, 31). Furthermore, the media is a major player in establishing what is considered to be proper masculinity and proper femininity, especially since all images in the media are re-presentations that have been constructed in accordance with and in support of the distinctive ideologies that exist in contemporary society (Richardson and Wearing 2014, 5-7).

Another reason for its importance is that there is documented evidence that shows how the representation of men and women in the media is not even close to being equal (Bunker and Bryson 2016, 356). As such, not only are the narratives around the ideas of the prototypical man and the prototypical woman constantly being emphasised by the media, but so are the narratives that revolve around gender imbalance and the specific different roles that are assigned to the genders, and these "are especially apparent in the world of sports" (Trolan 2013, 215). And as people are continually exposed to a specific set of beliefs and values in the media they consume, those beliefs and values will gradually be adopted and accepted (Lopez, Corona, and Halfond 2013, 728).

4.1.1 Objectification

A major aspect of how the genders and athletes are portrayed in the media revolves around objectification. Objectification theory, in the words of Fredrickson and Roberts (1997, 173), "posits that girls and women are typically acculturated to internalize an observer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves" and deals with "the experiential consequences of being female in a culture that sexually objectifies the female body". To objectify is to turn something that is not an object into an object, and subsequently treat it as such. This behaviour of associating a person solely with its body, to strip the individual of its personality and quirks which actually makes them who they are, can have dire consequences for women in society, and one arena where this sexual objectification is prevalent is in the media and its

sports coverage (Calogero 2012, 574). Calogero (2013, 312) states that "Sexual objectification may be the most pernicious manifestation of gender inequality", as "women's bodies become … the property of the observer".

Some of the main potential consequences of sexual objectification include three mental conditions: eating disorders, depression, and sexual dysfunction. A vital point here is that young people who consume media are at risk since these consequences are not limited to people who experience objectification first-hand, but it can also happen indirectly through the internalisation of sexual objectification, which is known as 'self-objectification' (Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr 2011, 8). Self-objectification is described as the result of long-term sexual objectification that leads to the internalisation of these views in women, who then start to partially see themselves as being objects for others to behold (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997, 179-80). Additionally, while overt sexual objectification experiences are directly linked to the three mental health risks mentioned above, Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr (2011, 9) present five psychological consequences of self-objectification which run the risk of ultimately leading to an eating disorder, depression, and/or sexual dysfunction: appearance anxiety, reduced flow, diminished internal awareness, body shame, and anxiety about physical safety.

Moreover, because sexual objectification is mainly targeted towards women, occurrences of sexual objectification "can be viewed as gender-specific stressors because they are negative life events (stressors) that happen to women *because* they are women" (emphasis in original) (Landrine and Klonoff 1997, 25). As such, objectification can be compared to other oppressive experiences which are more demanding and possibly detrimental to people's mental health compared to the everyday generic stressors we all experience (Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr 2011, 17). This association of objectification to other oppressive events is not to be belittled because as Fredrickson and Roberts (1997, 182-183) explain, in cultures where sexual objectification is widespread, the everyday life of a man and a woman can vastly differ with regards to living with anxiety relating to one's gender. One major issue is the link between sexual objectification and sexual violence which forces women to stay attentive of potential bodily harm that is sexually driven, and this forced attentiveness has been shown to be a chronic source of anxiety for women in their everyday life, in which they may feel the need to take far more precautions

throughout each ordinary day compared to men. “In short”, as Frederickson and Roberts (1997, 183) round off, “a culture that objectifies the female body presents women with a continues stream of anxiety-provoking experiences, requiring them to maintain an almost chronic vigilance both to their physical appearance and to their physical safety”.

Furthermore, sexual objectification can be linked to what has been referred to as a ‘commercialisation’ of the female form where the female body is put on display in association with a product in order to increase sales, which is a trend that can be traced all the way back to the 1920s (Freedman 2003, 209). This, as Freedman (2003, 209) explains, “has exerted an increasingly powerful influence on the cultural meanings of the female body” and its explosion throughout the 20th century has made tight pants, bare bellies, and cleavage “international marketing tools that highlight the female body as a commodity”.

4.1.2 Sexualisation and Hypersexualisation

Another aspect which is tightly linked to objectification is the topic of sexualisation. Contemporary society has been said to be sexualised (Gill 2009, 138), especially the western cultures (Attwood 2009, xiii) as portraying sex in various ways in the media has become a standard – a constant underlying narrative (Attenborough 2013, 223). The prototypical image of a woman has been transformed, from the traditional ‘wife-mother-housewife’ of old to “sexually assertive, confident and ambitious women who express their ‘freedom’ through consumption” (Gill 2007, 81). Moreover, as Gill (2007, 81) continues, “increasingly *all* representations of women . . . are being refracted through sexually objectifying imagery” (emphasis in original) and that no matter the context, including the age of the person in question, “women are being presented as alluring sexual beings” (ibid.)

Much like objectification is viewed as hazardous, so is the vast sexualisation of people, particularly women, in the media. The abovementioned development of the female image has been met with its fair share of apprehension, with sexualisation being seen as “pandemic in its reach and impact” and “as omnipresent as oxygen and as toxic as poison, it seems impossible to escape this phenomenon” (Egan 2013, 20). Gill (2007, 258) also speaks of a shift in the nature of the sexualisation of women, from being presented as “passive, mute objects of an assumed male gaze” to now

often being presented as "active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner". This shift, Gill (2007, 258) argues, is crucial and is also representative of a power shift "from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze". Gill (2007, 258) calls this power shift "profoundly serious and problematic" and describes it as "a higher and deeper form of exploitation than objectification" as the objectifying male gaze is internalised, which ties back to the scholarly discussion about self-objectification. What was first a deliberate representational strategy to be used on women has instead, over time, been adopted by women "as a way of constructing the self" (ibid., 259)

As Egan (2013, 21) continues, some of the specific worries about the general sexualisation of culture that have been aired are self-doubt, trouble forming intimate relationships, and self-destructive impulses including prostitution and suicide. Here, the role of the media is very apparent, particularly regarding advertisements that are "pornographic-like", with the sexual nature being used to create the desire of purchasing a product and for the consumers "to emulate the [people] in the pornographically inspired images that seduced them in the first place" (Egan 2013, 22). Here, an argument could be made that magazines apply the same strategy – using overt sexual appeal – in order to sell their product, which in this case would be more magazines. Furthermore, the overly sexualised images used by the media have been said to "reinforce narrowly defined ideas of sexiness and heteronormativity" (Fitzgerald and Grossman 2017, 115).

Beyond the definition of sexualisation lies hypersexualisation. As Fitzgerald and Grossman (2017, 115) articulate it, "When images excessively represent narrow ideas of sexual appeal above all other qualities, sociologists refer to them as ***hypersexualized***" (emphasis in original). Adding on, the authors go as far as to claim that the media's hypersexualisation of women "amounts to the ***symbolic annihilation*** of women and girls by systematically ignoring, trivializing, or distorting them" (emphasis in original) (ibid.). To be more precise about what constitutes hypersexuality, one can use Hatton and Trautner's (2011, 257) set of criteria for measuring hypersexuality in media texts: the "body position, extent of nudity, textual cues, and more – the cumulative effect of which is to narrow the possible interpretations of the image" to be about nothing more than just sex. It is not only about the pose of the model, but about everything around it having a sexual

nature which together creates a piece for which sex trumps all other potential messages it could bring.

While sexualisation is not strictly a phenomenon concerning women as both women and men are becoming increasingly sexualised in the media, hypersexualisation is still more likely to involve women (Hatton and Trautner 2011, 256). Furthermore, beyond the worries mentioned previously, Hatton and Trautner (2011, 257-8) speak of other serious issues that the increasing sexualisation can bring, such as the legitimisation of violence towards women, sexual harassment, anti-women attitudes, and body image issues and eating disorders in both women and men.

5. Methodology

5.1 Material

In order to analyse the *construction* of the athletic form, the desired material needs to have a fabricating element to it and not merely be representation in the form of sports events coverage, for instance. Thus, *ESPN Magazine*'s *The Body Issue* was deemed appropriate as it is original content that is produced in collaboration with various willing athletes, and where the magazine is in full control of what content to produce and how it is to be presented. With the tagline "a celebration and exploration of the athletic form" (ESPN 2009), *The Body Issue* has been released on a yearly basis starting with the first issue in 2009. Today, *ESPN* has a section on their website dedicated to a particular section of the magazine called 'Bodies We Want'. Here, the user can view all the images from the 'Bodies We Want' sections in the magazines from 2009 through 2016, with the number of images ranging from 19 (in 2010) to 68 (in 2016). Due to the limitations of this study, doing an all-encompassing analysis of all the material was not a possibility. As such, through a strategic choice in order to get the most contemporary and rich material possible, only the 2017 edition of *The Body Issue* (the digital version) was analysed. The 2017 edition is freely available on the web courtesy of *ESPN* (2017).

The 2017 edition contains 16 entries and features a total of 23 athletes from 13 different sports. The solo entries consist of Kirstie Ennis (adaptive sports), Ezekiel Elliott (American football), Julian Edelman (American football), Javier Baez (baseball), Nneka Ogwumike (basketball), Isiah Thomas (basketball), Ashley Wagner (figure skating), Michelle Waterson (mixed martial arts [MMA]), Malakai Fekitoa (rugby), Gus Kenworthy (skiing), A.J. Andrews (softball), Caroline Wozniacki (tennis), and Novlene Williams-Mills (track and field). There are two duo entries with the first being the married couple of Zach and Julie Ertz (American football and association football, respectively) and the second being teammates Joe Thornton and Brent Burns (ice hockey). The last entry consists of six members from the U.S. women's national hockey team. Unlike the previous editions that are available on the web, the material not only consists of photographs but also videos as well as accompanying articles (billed as 'online exclusives') containing interviews with the athletes. Furthermore, *ESPN* has picked out an extract from each article which is highlighted next to the photographs and acts as a hyperlink to said article. Thus, the

digital version of the 2017 edition was deemed the most suitable in order to answer the research questions put forward in this study.

This particular material was not selected to allow broad generalisations about the sports media in general. Instead, the chosen material is a rather extreme example considering the opportunity given to the magazine as they have willing athletes at their disposal to, in their own terms, 'celebrate the athletic form' through texts and visuals. As such, the material should be very welcoming in allowing analyses of various semiotic modes that can emphasise the potential objectification and (hyper)sexualisation of athletes – both male and female – in the construction of the athletic form.

5.2 Qualitative research

> *Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.* (Denzin and Lincoln 2017, 10)

The quote above is Denzin and Lincoln's (2017, 10) attempt at "an initial, generic definition" of a research method that is not as easy to define as it may first appear, as it "crosscuts disciplines, fields, and subject matter" (ibid., 9). Nonetheless, what separates qualitative research from the older quantitative method is that the focus lies on the *meaning* of the particular subject in question, and to extract meaning from a research subject requires interpretation from the researcher (Jensen 2012, 266). As stated by Jensen (1991, 4), qualitative research is about "the *occurrence* of its analytical objects in a particular context, as opposed to the *recurrence* of formally similar elements in different contexts" (emphasis in original).

The method arose as an alternative to quantitative research following critique towards both the method itself as well as its development throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Flick 2007, 1). As Flick (2007, 2) continues, instead of focusing on numbers and figures, qualitative research uses texts as its empirical material and "starts from the notion of the social constructions of realities under study" and the tools used in

qualitative research need to "be appropriate to that issue and should be open enough to allow an understanding of a process or relation". Thus, considering this study's aim, the choice was made to go with a qualitative approach over a quantitative approach in order to attempt to answer the particular research questions put forward with a stronger focus on the *how*'s rather than through measurements.

5.3 Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

To analyse the construction of the athletic form is to analyse the messages that are communicated around the notion of an 'athletic body' and what it means to be an athlete. This discussion can be linked to what is referred to as 'discourses'. Discourses can be explained as attempts to establish specific designations of meaning and particular orders of interpretation, and through that process deliberately institutionalise certain viewpoints in a society (Keller 2013, 2). On the back of this, as Keller (2013, 2) continues, discourse theories and analyses are about establishing the relationship between about what is being said or written (which is viewed as a social practice) and the subsequent (re)production of meaning systems, and all the various social actors, rules, and resources that allow this process to occur as well as the ensuing social and cultural consequences. As such, the deliberate construction of a perceived typical athletic form can be seen as a discursive event which needs to be critically analysed to reveal its communicative implications.

What is important in analysing discourse, as van Dijk (1997, 5) explains through a comparison to the function of grammar and its structures which create meaning, is that discourse is not simply 'language use'; rather, it is about the specific *components* used in the language and the deliberate *order* in which they appear as well as how they relate to each other within a social context, which ultimately creates a communicative message. The discourses of media texts are the broader ideas that the texts are communicating, which can be seen as "models of the world" (Machin and Mayr 2012, 20). By analysing the particular words chosen and the structure of the sentences, the underlying ideologies can shine through (ibid.).

In all studies that apply critical discourse analysis [CDA], Keller (2013, 3) identifies four common denominators: the focus is on "the actual use of . . . language and other symbolic forms of social practices"; the practical use of signs as well as their meanings are socially constructed and exist within their own social reality; that the

deviating individual interpretations that may exist are still a part of a more comprehensive discourse structure within an institutional-organisational context; and "that the use of symbolic orders is subject to rules of interpretation and action that may be reconstructed".

Furthermore, van Dijk (1997, 2-3) has noted the importance of not limiting the analysis of discourse to a single mode – the spoken word – but to also include written communication as there are enough similarities between these two modes to make them both highly important in a discussion about discourse. In short, a mode "is a socially shaped and culturally given resource for making meaning" (Kress 2009, 54), and while van Dijk emphasises the importance of analysing various modes, he limits himself to just two: the spoken and the written. However, as the material chosen for this study contains not only written and spoken language but also has a large emphasis on visuals, there are additional modes that need to be examined if the full discursive message is to be analysed which leads us to *multimodal* critical discourse analysis [MCDA]. MCDA takes van Dijk's emphasis on different modes to a higher degree, as, for a long time, the visual aspects were ignored in discourse studies which therefore meant that a lot of meaningful communication was neglected (Machin and Mayr 2012, 1). If one decides to analyse only a limited amount of modes, Norris (2004, 102) explains, valuable communicative information is likely to be overlooked, as it only allows analysis of *some* aspects of a communicative interaction. The multimodal approach, then, assumes that meaning-making is not only about language, but rather about "the full range of communicational forms people use – image, gesture, gaze, posture, and so on – and the relationships between them" (Jewitt 2009, 14). In other words, MCDA is interested in a much wider range of modes than that of traditional CDA.

To maximise the potential of the analysis, the analytical tools need to be carefully selected in order to extract as much valuable information as possible from the research subjects, which in this case will be texts, images, and videos. As such, a toolkit was crafted to fit all of these modes and to steer the analysis to find the answers to the research questions.

5.3.1 Toolkit for texts

The textual analysis will resemble that of a traditional CDA, and several analytical tools were selected as they fit the purpose of the study. To begin with, the first goal was to identify what type of article it is, i.e. what the main story and focus of the article is. The purpose of this is to look at whether *ESPN* are interested in a story about the *athlete* or the *person* (*man*/*woman*), and subsequently if the individual is primarily represented as an athlete or as something else. This will be an indicator of what was deemed to be the most intriguing and important aspect to highlight about the individual in question.

Secondly, a selection of tools were used to analyse the particular language used more deeply, with a strong emphasis on the specific words and phrasings that were chosen. This analysis will be limited to the sections of the articles that are directly concerned with the body. Examples here include formulations about how the body has been built and shaped in relation to their sport, what is said concerning size, muscle, and general attractiveness, amongst other details.

When looking at what words that are used, it is referred to as a *lexical* analysis. A lexical analysis can be very effective in recognising discourses and thus reveal what is considered valued even if it is not explicitly stated (Machin and Mayr 2012, 30). What is indirectly or implicitly implied is a tell-tale sign of underlying beliefs when, for various reasons, those beliefs are not openly communicated (van Dijk 2001, 104). This, in particular, could be of interest if the topic of the article is about one area, but the language used hints of another main interest from the magazine.

Here, the focus is on *word connotations*, i.e. what specific words that are used and what associations those words have. Although different words can explain the same story, using certain words instead of others can give different meanings to the story (Machin and Mayr 2012, 32). Another interesting aspect in language use is *overlexicalisation*. In short, overlexicalisation is the repetition of or the abundance in use of a certain word or synonyms, and also excessive descriptions which aim to guide the interpretation in a certain direction (ibid., 37). On the other end, another important feature is *lexical absence* which is when particular words that would be expected are instead absent from the text, which can have ideological explanations (ibid., 38-39). Finally, the last main analytical tool that was used for the articles was

attention to *structural oppositions*. Structural oppositions in language are opposing or differing concepts which, when one is used in favour of the other, highlights certain attributes or qualities (ibid. 39). In this study, one example could be if an athlete is mainly referred to as a mother or father rather than an athlete.

Through this analysis, the purpose will be to clarify precisely how *ESPN*, in textual form, construct the athletic form as well as what is communicated to be the most important features. These results will then be analysed in connection to the findings in the analyses of the other modes.

5.3.2 Toolkit for images

In MCDA, the desire to mould tools for analysing imagery arose from the belief was that the typical visual analysis methodology lacked the required tools to provide a "more precise, systematic and careful description that would in turn allow more accurate analysis" (Machin and Mayr 2012, 7). Therefore, there was a need to develop a set of analytical tools which could assist in analysing visual features to the same degree as the tools of CDA allow deep analysis of the lexical and grammatical features of language, some of which are included above in this study's toolkit for texts.

Regarding MCDA and images, Machin (2009) rationalises why the multimodal approach is beneficial for analysing visuals. Like a single word in a sentence, Machin (2009, 182) explains, an individual visual sign should be analysed as part of a composition of signs that make up a 'visual syntax', which has the ability to shape the meaning of each individual sign. This is where the multimodal approach shines as other, traditional semiotic methods lack the tools to speak of the cumulative effect of multiple visual elements. Furthermore, as Machin (2009, 182) elaborates, multimodality allow us to more precisely reflect on all the various "communicative functions images are able to fulfil". In total, the tools of multimodality can create "a more systematic way to analyse visual communication which has been largely dominated by more general open interpretation" (ibid., 183). Thus, in this study, everything in each image will be under scrutiny and attention will be given to how they interconnect. Moreover, as with the articles, a toolkit has been created to have a structure in the visual analysis.

One of the first things that were noticed was the *setting*. The setting alone can be a communicative message where discourse and values shine through (Machin and

Mayr 2012, 52), and in this study, the setting in relation to the athlete's sporting background was of high interest as it can be used as a way to direct attention either towards the athletic aspect or away from it. Another point of interest was *attributes*. In short, this is about what objects were featured and how they were represented, which had the ability to communicate various ideas and values (ibid., 51). A prime example in this study was sporting equipment, but any other object was also of importance. Next was the topic of *salience*. To give salience to a certain feature is to highlight it and make it stand out, which draws the attention of the viewer (ibid., 54).

Furthermore, other characteristics of importance included the active or passive nature of the *pose*. A pose that was a direct reference either to the individual's sport or athletics in general was considered an active pose as it displayed the athletic body while in appropriate athletic motion, while all other non-sports related poses were considered passive. Additionally, the direction of the *gaze* was an important aspect as it can be a way of "guiding the viewer as to how they should evaluate the participant, even if this is not explicitly stated" (ibid., 70). When the gaze is into the lens and thereby directly at the viewer, it creates a 'demand image'. In demand images, the viewer is acknowledged and prompted to react. Here, all the various details in the image, such as poses and facial expressions, will factor in when it comes to interpreting what kind of demand and question that is being asked. In the other scenario, when the gaze is not towards the camera, it is referred to as an 'offer image' where no demand is made and no response is expected from the observer. Instead, the image is offered as information to be interpreted with all the details considered. Plus, the specific direction of the gaze is still of importance. If the gaze is not towards a specific object visible in the image but instead off-screen, this can carry meaning as it encourages the viewer to imagine where the gaze is focused on and what they are thinking (ibid., 71-72).

5.3.3 Toolkit for videos

To begin with, just as with the articles, the first aim was to recognize what the most important messages were in each video and if the clips mainly displayed the athletes while in action or if there was a stronger focus elsewhere. The toolkit for videos was fundamentally the same as the toolkit for images, but slightly adjusted when necessary to fit the medium. The questions of *setting*, *attributes*, and *salience* was equally as important when analysing the videos as the images. The goal was to realise

the main communicative message(s) in the videos, and further interpret them in relation to all the other information gathered from the other modes.

5.3.4 Summary of toolkit

Just as the theory of hypersexualisation focuses on the cumulative effect of all factors, so did this study when considering the findings from each mode. As is a defining characteristic of the MCDA approach, these modes were not to be analysed solely in isolation, but the main point was how they interconnect and together create the all-encompassing context in which the discursive construction of the athletic form can be interpreted and analysed for its complete communicative message.

5.5 Reliability and Validity

As per the course of any qualitative study, a general issue is subjectivity (Drapeau 2002, 1) as different people can interpret the same material in various ways. Likewise, the requirement of interpretation is a limitation of the multimodal approach (Jewitt 2009, 26). In order to combat this, I aimed to be completely transparent regarding which analytical tools were used and how they were used to reach each conclusion, as well as simultaneously explore different or opposing interpretations that may also be viable. Concrete examples from the material were always provided to further display and explain my thought process. Moreover, considering the material's vast use of naked bodies in the visuals, one of the more apparent subjectivity issues could be the declaration of what is and what is not sexual. Considering the context, the fact that the athletes were naked (or close to) was not considered a sexual aspect *in itself*. How their bodies were used and portrayed, however, was of significance, along with what messages the complementary modes communicated. This aspect of the analysis attempted to retain high reliability by following the principles presented by Ekström and Larsson (2010, 17) such as always being consistent, comprehensive, considerate of context, and being open to differing interpretations.

Additionally, determining one's sample size is another common issue with qualitative analyses (Blaikie 2018, 1). However, as the entire 2017 edition is freely available on the web and its content is already (comparatively) limited, no further limitation was required and the material could therefore be analysed in full.

Furthermore, the study's validity is likewise deemed high as the study was successful in its attempt to answer the research questions put forward. The particular material and method chosen along with the toolkits allowed for the study's purpose and aim to be achieved in a highly satisfactory fashion.

With all of the abovementioned considered, I am undoubtedly confident in the study's reliability and validity and will unquestionably ensure that the same high level of caution and care for quality is existent from the first word to the very last.

6. Analysis

The results will be presented in a thematical structure based on the findings during the analysis. The themes in question are (1) a mixed bag of athletic focus and personal focus (2) toughness, injuries, and broken bodies, (3) athleticism clashes with femininity, and (4) function versus beauty.

6.1 A mixed bag of athletic focus and personal focus

One aspect that became more and more noticeable throughout the analysis is that there is no real consistency when it comes to the articles and videos focusing on either athletic or personal stories. Overall, it shifts back and forth from individual to individual with some being heavily focused on athletics, some heavily focused on personal experiences, and some where it is mixed.

To begin with, the entire article about A.J. Andrews (Ain 2017a) is related to her current softball career as well as her athletic background. The lexical analysis reveals that she is wholeheartedly referred to as an athlete, and her specific 'gritty' playstyle and her extreme work rate are two of the more featured aspects. In addition, this is represented in her photo gallery as she can be seen diving completely outstretched to make a play with a presumed hard landing in store. Another point of emphasis in the article is the desire for gender equality in sports:

> *Before, my goal was winning a Gold Glove award; now I want to see women being paid equal to men. I think right now that's deemed impossible, and that's something I've really had my eyes on achieving. [...]*
>
> *I really want women to be looked at as equal to men and to have equal pay. It's just unfair that we're working just as hard as them -- if not twice as hard -- and don't get the same level of respect. Then again, you see Serena Williams, who is a trailblazer for women in sports, and she's still not getting paid like a man might get paid. That's one of those things that I think is looked at as impossible, and I would love more than anything to make it possible.* (Ain 2017a)

This is further expanded upon in her video. With footage rolling of her receiving an award called a "Gold Glove", and being the first woman to do so as it was previously only awarded to male baseball players, her message is that anything is possible and her winning the award is a reflection of the "strides women's sports are making" (ESPN 2017) and that she is a 'pioneer' not only for softball but for women's sports in general.

This particular message is of added interest since it is an issue that is brought up by the U.S. women's national hockey team as well. Every section of their article (Ain 2017b) is related to their sport, with their boycott in the lead up to the 2017 world championships taking the centre of attention. Referred to as "an iconic moment in women's sport" (Ain 2017b), the particular words used truly highlight the magnitude of their efforts to achieve equal treatment. Their boycott was a success as demands for equal treatment to their male counterparts were met by the U.S. hockey governing body before the start of the tournament, and they subsequently went on to win gold. Their video shows highlights from their performance as they speak at length about how important their fight was for the future of women's hockey in the U.S., and how their biggest strength was unity – including not only every player on the team and all the people who supported them, but also every other player who received an invite to play for the U.S. in place for the ones boycotting but stood behind them and refused, which played a vital role in their success. Plus, there are more words and terms used that refer to the wider scope of their movement and they emphasise how proud they are of what they accomplished, and the article rounds off with one of the players stating the following:

> ***LAMOUREUX-MORANDO:*** *Every once in a while, we need to take a step back and have perspective on what we just accomplished and the ripple effects it'll hopefully have on other women's sports.*
>
> ***DUGGAN:*** *It's an incredible time to be a female athlete. It's a powerful movement. I'm proud to be a part of it.* (Ain 2017b)

In both these entries, their athletic personas are front and centre with no personal stories being used in an effort to create interest. Instead, there is larger scope in the discussions which is also entirely about sports, which is the empowerment of female athletes across the board.

Other examples where the sporting career is in prime focus are Ashley Wagner and Caroline Wozniacki. The first half of Ashley Wagner's article (Ain 2017c) is exclusively about her figure skating career where she talks about getting into the sport as a kid and who her idols in the sport were growing up, and what it takes to stay on top while being relatively 'old'. The second half of the article deals with Wagner's issues with concussions (of which she has had five) that she suffered while figure skating, and what she has had to deal with to not only return to form from her

injuries but to try to minimise the risk for more concussions as she continues to compete. Overall, the article is still about Ashley Wagner the athlete and figure skater, especially since the talk about concussions are always in direct relation to her career. Wozniacki's article (Ain 2017d) puts the focus on her tennis career and athletic background, with very little personal information being shared. Amongst many other things that will be touched on later, she speaks of defying naysayers who laughed at the idea of her becoming a tennis star and about her other athletic accomplishments such as completing the New York City Marathon in under three and a half hours. However, Wozniacki's photo gallery is lacking this athletic focus as she is primarily shown in passive poses.

Then, there is also an example where the focus is more evenly split. In the case of Nneka Ogwumike, focus shifts several times throughout the article (Ain 2017e) making it hard to put a distinct label on it. The reader learns (albeit rather briefly) about her dietary focus, her immediate family and upbringing, how she started playing basketball because she was told gymnastics would be too dangerous because she was too tall, and how she is not particularly interested in sports beyond being on the court herself, amongst other details. All in all, it is a rather even split between the person and the athlete, with both sides of her life being used to generate interest. While the video practically echoes the article, her photo gallery is distinctly non-athletic with passive poses being preferred.

Moving on, there are also entries where the athletic persona is positioned in the background to a more personal story or experience. The main story about Kirstie Ennis (Roenigk 2017a) is her recovery after a helicopter crash while on duty as a U.S. marine which, among many other serious injuries including facial damage and a broken neck, led to an above-the-knee left leg amputation. It was not until after the crash and subsequent end of her military career that she pursued sports professionally (specifically adaptive sports due to her injuries). The main talking point of the article is Ennis's battle to accept and live with her new form, with the missing leg being the by far largest struggle. Her goals of becoming a Paralympian and achieve other athletic feats (such as reaching the top of all the 'Seven Summits' mountaintops) are used as motivation, but the athletic aspect does take somewhat of a backstage role to the story of her recovery in general. As such, it is primarily a

personal story before an athletic one, with her career not being described in any great detail.

Similarly, the entire article about Jamaican track and field athlete Novlene Williams-Mills (Ain 2017f), which is the longest of all articles in the 2017 edition, is a very emotional story of her battle with cancer. After receiving the diagnosis just before the 2012 Olympic Games, she still went on to compete while keeping the illness private. The article revolves around the struggles with cancer both from a personal perspective as well as an athletic one. However, the strong personal story does take precedence over an athletic focus, and it mainly concerns the woman who strives to be "a survivor of cancer" (Ain 2017f) in all respects instead of the athlete.

Even in these two cases where two very emotional and personal stories are the main attractions and their athletic sides are more in the background, they are still distinctly prevalent. The same can be said about the mixed martial artist Michelle Waterson (Ain 2017g), who is the only example where the individual is primarily given a title other than athlete. Although the majority of the article does focus on instances throughout Waterson's life that are about her fighting career, a strong emphasis is put on what that means for her as a mother of a young daughter. Her purpose to continue to fight is credited to her child, because through fighting she is able to provide for her, and before fights she has started to visualise herself as being a "Mama Bear" (Ain 2017g) protecting her cub to get motivated. As such, the article portrays her as primarily a mother and an athlete second, but her fighting career is still presented as vastly important.

However, in all the photo galleries of Ennis, Williams-Mills, and Waterson, more salience is given to their athletic sides through the means of athletic poses and appropriate objects used to enhance the athletic feel, as well as the lack of any objects that are related to or hints at the personal stories. Overall, the more athletically-focused articles are accompanied by photo galleries that ease that focus to a degree by including more passive and non-athletic photos, while the more emotionally-focused articles are instead balanced by photoshoots that enhance their athletic personas. This is also true for Williams-Mills's video as although it also deals with her cancer diagnosis and subsequent treatment, the visuals are mainly footage from her career

both before and after her illness. Likewise, there is plenty of footage of Waterson fighting in her video along with footage of her family.

Next, as the sole mixed gender entry is the married couple of Julie and Zach Ertz, who are both professionals in their respective sports (association football and American football), it is the only example where the primary focus is on romantic relationships. The article (Ain 2017h), which is in an interview format, very rarely talks about their sporting achievements and instead focuses more on their relationship and how they make it work. A thing of note found in the lexical analysis is that the words "husband" or "wife" are never used, though. Plus, while it is a personal focus, it is not merely about how a man and a woman achieve a healthy relationship but it is rather about how two athletes who compete for teams located in different parts of the country can still have a life together.

When we get to the men, it is also a mixed bag. Julian Edelman's article (Ain 2017i) is structured as an interview, and *ESPN*'s questions are worded to extract information from Edelman about his athletic background and his preparations which allow him to succeed as a football player, as well as the physical toll and injuries that follow. The article is heavily focused on his football career and the effect it has had on his body, with nothing being said about Edelman's current life outside of football. The only non-athletic section is about Edelman as a young child being frustrated to tears about being small compared to his pears. Likewise, the story of Ezekiel Elliott's article (Ain 2017j) is about his sporting background and current football career and does not speak of any other anecdotes, neither personal nor family related, unless they have a direct connection to his athletic persona. Isiah Thomas's article (Ain 2017k) is entirely about his basketball career, with an added emphasis on his relatively short height (175cm which is considered exceptionally short in the basketball world) and how he has been forced to overcome that physical disadvantage and instead turn it into an advantage. By all means, this article is purely about the basketball player Isiah Thomas, with everything in the article from his younger days to present day being related to the sport.

Then there are, again, articles that revolve around both athletics as well as personal accounts. Since 2015, top U.S. skier Gus Kenworthy has been competing while openly being gay, and this is one of the main talking points of his article (Roenigk 2017b). It

is about going from a fear of the truth being revealed to the world, to a strong feeling of freedom and acceptance once he decided to open up. Altogether, his experiences have made him mentally strong which, in turn, helps him to perform at the top of his profession. Moreover, the second half of the article is instead focused on his sporting career and his work to become and remain a top skier. As such, there is almost an even split between his personal life (mainly his sexuality and the consequences of both living 'in the closet' and being an openly gay athlete) and his athletic career. A note here is that when the focus strongly shifts to him as a skier halfway through the article, no more notions of his sexuality are made and he is instead only referred to as an athlete. In the case of Joe Thornton and Brent Burns, the topics are bit more light-hearted as the article (Fleming 2017) starts with a discussion on their decision to be featured in *The Body Issue* and ends with a rather lengthy discussion about their large beards, with the middle course being about hockey.

Finally, the men's side also contains entries that are more heavily towards emotional and personal experiences. Javier Baez's article (Rivera 2017) is about his baseball career and how he ended up where he is now, but it is a very personal story of early life struggles. One of his assets is said to be his mental strength, and he accredits it to being forced to be strong after losing both his father and his great-grandmother while also being mugged at gunpoint at just eleven years old, all in the span of a fortnight. In his video, he shows off tattoos that he got of his father's two nicknames. Moreover, his sister was born with a spinal birth defect and died young, and her condition forced their mother to stop living for herself to instead take full care of her daughter. His bond to his sister is further emphasised by Baez in his video while footage is shown of the two of them with very slow and emotional music. His background is said to have made him a bit apathetic and he rarely shows emotion, even in great athletic success. There are sport-related sections in the article as well, as there is a section where Baez describes what makes him an effective defensive player (such as the physical gift of being ambidextrous) and the article finishes with him describing how he ended up in the position he now plays, but overall, the article is very personal.

The final athlete is Malakai Fekitoa whose article (Ain 2017l) is primarily about his background and upbringing with the language stressing hardships – from being born and raised on a small island in Tonga where life was "very simple" and they were "quite poor" to moving to New Zealand on a school rugby scholarship at the age of 16

while barely speaking English. It is a story of hard work and rough living conditions from a young age, to dealing with moving to a much larger place with a vastly different lifestyle but trying to make it work and not let his family down (and to this day his family is said to be his driving force). In addition, at the age of six he was in an accident which led to a smashed left hip, and he was told he could never again play sports. Ultimately, his sporting success, which has made him a star with the All Blacks (the New Zealand rugby national team and arguably the most famous and popular team in the world of rugby), fills him with great pride.

6.2 Toughness, injuries, and broken bodies

The topics of toughness, injuries, and other bodily consequences are mainstays throughout the entire material. To put it mildly, a lexical analysis shows that being an athlete is not portrayed as a simple task and the specific words chosen connote that the toll it takes on the body is massive.

A.J. Andrews is described as being utterly fearless and tough, especially since she played an entire season with a broken hand:

> *This past season, I dove for a ball and I actually broke my hand. My glove got caught in the grass and I ended up landing on top of my hand and busted two or three bones. It was my left hand, my catching hand. It was kind of a psychological thing for me. I didn't tell anybody about it and I still played the whole season -- I was trying to catch balls, and it was literally painful every time the ball landed in my glove. Sometimes I had to turn around and wipe the tears away because it hurt so bad. I'd wipe them really quick and turn around so no one could see me and keep going*. (Ain 2017a)

In addition, her playstyle is defined as exceedingly rough (and her video shows footage of her crashing through walls and diving to make plays) but she has no intention of altering it:

> *I think there are some plays I've done where it looked like I probably broke my neck. I'll get up, put my bow back on, fix my hair and I'm ready to go again.* (Ain 2017a)

A note here in the language is that there is no attempt to hide her actual feelings and how hard it truly was for her. Here, toughness is not about being able to disregard pain and discomfort, it is about overcoming it and fighting through it. This distinction is important because the variants tell different tales. Ezekiel Elliott references his toughness as one of his main strengths, and one that he developed in college because

it was what he needed to stand out and excel at his position despite being undersized compared to his peers.

A similar sentiment that is repeated throughout is about the athletic lifestyle constantly 'breaking you down'. For instance, Kirstie Ennis, with experience from the military, makes a direct comparison between her former profession and her current:

> *In the military and in sports, you put your body through hell. You push the limits and you break any expectation you had of yourself. They break you down and reshape you. I don't think someone who's not an athlete, active duty or a veteran would ever understand. It's not just a physical process; it's mental and emotional.* (Roenigk 2017a)

Another example is Ezekiel Elliott who echoes the idea of 'going through hell' in his description of everyday life during football season:

> *You're going into football games and you're just beating your body up. And the next day or the day after, or two days later, you find yourself back in the weight room, and you feel beat up and sore. And it seems like every step you take is just hell.*
>
> ***If you do something for so long, it just seems like second nature.*** *It's just part of my life. I want to be the best to carry a football, and that's what it's going to take: getting those heavy lifts in when your legs are all beat up and tired out from getting 30 carries.* (Ain 2017j, emphasis in original)

The athletic lifestyle and accompanying sporting schedules are described as exceptionally cruel on your body, and this is true for both men and women. As are the injuries that follow, which are sometimes described in quite clear detail. A.J. Andrews's broken hand has already been mentioned, but there are far more sports-related injuries to cover. Take, for instance, Julian Edelman. His feet are in his own words "very ugly" from playing the sport as he now has "jacked up" toes and a bunion on his right foot; they are covered in scars, look like "grim reaper feet", are "tales of the crypt" (Ain 2017i), and they are an embarrassment. Likewise, every finger has been broken, and like his toes his pinkie is "jacked up" and cannot be straightened. This is also displayed in his photo gallery as there is a photo where all of his fingers on his right hand are spread out and straight, barring his pinkie. Dislocated fingers are said to be a common issue. More past injuries include both feet being broken, a broken forearm which has led to scarring, labrum damage, a broken jaw, a messed-up knee, a torn posterior cruciate ligament, hernia surgeries, to not even name them all.

Moreover, playing hurt is said to be unavoidable, and the repetitive use of words such as “broken” paint a very rough picture. Ezekiel Elliott references playing through a broken wrist which “really sucked”, but he had “to suck it up” (Ain 2017j). At the start of Malakai Fekitoa’s video, he can be seen having stitches removed from his eyebrow, and he explains how it is the fourth time that his right brow has been busted open while his left has been busted open three times, plus his forehead once, and he proceeds to point at his many visible scars.

Speaking of scars, Brent Burns is blatantly proud of his battle marks:

> *But the dentistry, the beards and the butts: Those are the defining parts of a hockey player. Scars on faces and lost teeth are badges of honor for us.* (Fleming 2017)

The dentistry, in this case, means lost teeth which is a common trait among hockey players after being struck in the mouth by pucks, sticks, and what have you. But, it is not even referenced as something to avoid but rather something that is simply bound to happen and should be embraced because it embodies the typical appearance of a hockey player. Likewise, Michelle Waterson also speaks of embracing the changes that their bodies go through as they are “battle wounds” (Ain 2017g) with her cauliflower ears and nose breaks being examples, and Gus Kenworthy states how he loves his body because it has healed from a lot of injuries caused by his sport, and that he admires his body’s “willpower” (Roenigk 2017b). All these various terms of endearment really hammer in the point of how injuries and bodily marks are not anomalies.

The dangers of the sports are also further emphasised by speaking of the consequences in the context of everyday life. For instance, this extract from Ashley Wagner’s article paints a very scary picture:

> *I have suffered about five concussions. Back in 2009 I received a concussion from a really bad fall in which I fell onto my back and my neck snapped and my head hit the ice. My body started to shut down on me entirely. It was bad enough that I would suffer from full-on body tremors, I could barely walk, I couldn't even speak through them. I would have heart palpitations. That was the most traumatizing thing that my body has ever had to go through. […] My body was literally doing everything it could to work against me. I just felt trapped in my body. I was experiencing these symptoms for probably 3 months, and for 3 months no one could tell me what was wrong and I was getting no relief. I was worried that this was a lifestyle that I was just going to have to adjust to.*

> *The concussions definitely rewired my brain in the way that I process information. My short-term memory is not that incredible; talking to me is a little bit like talking to Dory from "Finding Nemo" [laughing].* (Ain 2017c)

While she feels comfortable enough to joke about it, the real-life repercussions are not presented as a joking matter. The visuals alone in Michelle Waterson's video showcase the facial rearrangements that can take place in combat sports, and she speaks of how important it is to always stay completely focused on your task because if your mind slips up for just a moment, that is when it gets dangerous and that is when you can get hurt.

6.3 Athleticism clashes with femininity

As mentioned, there is no hiding of the fact per *ESPN* that every individual is an athlete and that their sporting career is a massive part of their lives, even if it is not always *the* defining characteristic. Now, while that has been identified, there is however a clear divide between the genders when it comes to being an athlete and still possessing 'ordinary' gender characteristics.

When looking at structural oppositions, there is no rift between notions of athleticism and being a man. For the men, there are plenty of references to shaping their body to be prolific in their sports, as well as general fitness. For example, Zach Ertz speaks of envying teammates as a youth as he carried some body fat while his teammates were "carved out of friggin' granite". In the interview with Ezekiel Elliott, there is a strong emphasis on words that connote to being physically big and muscular and a notion is made of him having "a lot of body", and all of these attributes are always brought up in a positive context. Very similar ideas are portrayed in the article for Malakai Fekitoa, as his primary skill is said to be his very strong physique despite being a bit on the short side compared to other players at his position, and he speaks of loving gym work which keeps his physique on top and keeps him in 'rugby shape'. An almost identical story is told about Isiah Thomas who is also short for his position, but one of his greatest attributes is his compact figure (i.e. muscular) which is a result of all the time he has put into weight training, ever since his younger days.

Moreover, an issue that is brought up about body composition is insecurity and being self-conscious. Zach Ertz's comment above is part of his answer to a question about body insecurities:

> ***Have you ever felt insecure about your body?***
> *ZACH: When I got to Stanford, it looked like all the other guys were carved out of friggin' granite. I was coming in, still had a little bit of baby fat. And the first time being on my own, I gained some weight that I probably shouldn't have. Back then, I didn't really understand how to make your body eat for substance instead of satisfaction.* (Ain 2017h)

Another example is from the article with Gus Kenworthy:

> *I have felt so insecure about my body at times. I've been on every end of the spectrum. I felt like I was too skinny and wished I could be muscular. I've felt like I was chubby and wanted to be skinny. I think everybody suffers from body image issues. I might exude confidence sometimes, but I'm pretty insecure. I have started to feel better knowing that my body isn't perfect, but it is the best that my body can be, and every day I try and better it.* (Roenigk 2017b)

By looking at how these comments are structured, it is quite clear that the cause for body insecurity and self-consciousness in both of these athletes has to do with *lacking* typical athletic features. In other words, the insecurities are because of a lack of a typical athletic build. The fact that the men strive to be strong, big, muscular, and so on is never discussed in a negative fashion when it comes to their masculinity. As a man, being an athlete is appropriate. To attempt to achieve such a body is an understandable desire, and can be the solution to get rid of body insecurity and self-consciousness.

The visuals can be said to reiterate this idea of an athletic appearance being a general positive trait for a man when looking at what is given salience in the photoshoots. While all photos are definitely not action shots, which will be further discussed later, the athletic aspect is very much put into focus. In Edelman's gallery, *ESPN* make use of objects to further highlight the idea of a strong, big, and muscular athlete. In the setting of a rather dirty and empty factory, Edelman stands perpendicular to the camera with two very large dumbbells in his hands. He is posing as if he is working out with them, and his body is flexing as a result. Through the use of the objects and the particular pose, as well as a light source which almost makes Edelman shine in the otherwise dirty setting, a great deal of salience is given to his athletic physique. Likewise, Zach Ertz is captured while working out with ropes which has a similar effect. Furthermore, there are more examples of objects not directly related to the athlete's sport being used to great effect. Ezekiel Elliott's physical prowess is showcased by having him posing on top of a small box which makes him resemble a

statue, which could bring thoughts towards what was said in the articles about their bodies being sculptured.

However, when the genders are flipped, so is the discourse. Yes, the basic idea of being an athlete is still a positive trait. For instance, A.J. Andrews is described as a 'gritty player' who is not afraid to dive into mud to make plays, and she has no issues with getting dirty (literally) to help her team win. "But", she states, "I also really like looking fabulous" (Ain 2017a) while playing. This choice of conjunction ("but") may not look awfully important at a first glance, but it echoes a sentiment that can be found throughout the material and it actually becomes rather significant. Yes, they are athletic and have athletic features, *but* they are still feminine. Overall, there is an clash between the notion of athleticism and femininity, which Andrew's emphasises even more in her video (ESPN 2017) by talking about how "young women athletes" are being "scrutinized" (a term also used by Wozniacki about the appearance of female tennis players) and "criticised" for having muscle definition, which leaves them ashamed of their muscles because they do not want to look too "manly" (with text on the screen emphasising the word "ashamed"). She is, however, critical towards this assessment, and it can be compared to this statement by the U.S. women's hockey team:

> ***Q: What's the biggest misconception you think people have about female hockey players?***
>
> ***LAMOUREUX-MORANDO:*** *You run into people at the airport who ask what sport you play, and they're like, "Oh, I thought you'd be bigger." Or "You look really petite, and you have all your teeth." We're normal women. We like to be feminine. We love to get dressed up and be pretty. But we love to train and be strong and be aggressive. There's this misconception that, if we play ice hockey, we're a certain way off the ice. We're normal.* (Ain 2017b)

The message here is that there is nothing wrong with being an athlete, a hockey player in this particular case, and a woman. But when one study the words that are used, it is clear that being a woman and a hockey player is *not* considered a normal combination. Because what makes them normal is not traits that are related to their sport or their athletic careers, it is instead traits that are typically feminine. As Lamoureux-Morando reiterates, they are "normal women" (Ain 2017b) *despite* being athletes.

Like with the men, there is also a discussion about insecurities relating to the body.

> *I've always had really cut arms, but I would wear long sleeves because I was self-conscious. At a young age, someone said something like, "Oh, your arms are so big." And I never really knew what was wrong with that, but that stuck with me. So I would lift, but I wouldn't lift too much.* (Ain 2017a)

Again, it is related to athletic features but the situation is reversed. It is the visible presence of athleticism or the aesthetical results of athletic training that is the issue rather than the lack of it, and this idea is repeated in the material.

> ***I'm not sure if this is OK to talk about, but I'm going to anyway: Growing up, I didn't think having a big butt was good.*** *I was very self-conscious when I was playing volleyball because we had to wear the Spanx […].* (Ain 2017e, emphasis in original)

Her 'big butt' is the result of her specific training regimen and is described as a previous cause for self-consciousness in combination with athletic wear she had to use (although she goes on to state that she grew to love her look). Furthermore, she speaks of currently training in a fashion to avoid putting on muscle and her attitude towards weight training is explained through words that connote disgust.

> *I was so self-conscious about my weight and my shape and the fact that you could look at me and see that my arms had muscle, my legs had a lot of muscle. At the time, I would just obsess over working out. […] I would go on the bike and bike bike bike bike bike.* (Ain 2017c)

While Wagner's situation is a bit different as there is a competitive advantage in being small in her sport and thus a constant pressure to be tiny (which is brought up in the prefix to the above quote), it is again the athletic features that are the culprit. Moreover, just like Ogwumike, Wagner states how she nowadays loves her body. Caroline Wozniacki follows up with another statement of now loving her body although she did not in the past:

> *I think when I was younger, I used to maybe feel a little insecure because I had more muscles than the models or the skinny girls you see on the street. But at the same time I think I grew up to really love my body […].* (ESPN 2017)

While these statements of overcoming their insecurities should definitely not be devalued, they are built on the idea that an athletic body is not compatible with a 'normal' woman.

This notion is arguably further strengthened in the accompanying visuals. While Julie Ertz is also featured working out with ropes in the same photo as Zach mentioned before, this is the only time other objects are used to clearly highlight athletic traits. Instead, there is seemingly a lot of effort given to show off the *other* side of the individuals. For example, in the photo gallery of the U.S. women's national hockey team, only one lone photo has them in a pose that resembles skating, and even then it is not a very natural-looking hockey pose by any means. Despite the setting being a hockey rink and with all the women wearing skates, there is not much that promotes hockey players as athletes. Instead, they are very much posing like regular models, only on skates. For instance, one zoomed-in shot has them closely grouped together forming a circle with their bodies facing inwards in a relaxed state, and with everyone's head tilted to allow the gaze to be into the camera. Another has them standing on side-by-side and aligned in such a fashion that some are standing back-to-back while others are chest-to-chest, with everyone either smiling or laughing towards the lens. Some are holding hockey sticks, but they are merely props. With the strong emphasis in their article about them not only being hockey players but also 'normal' women, these images seem to want to further accentuate just that and give light to their femininity.

Moreover, this is a trend seen throughout the imagery. While there are no galleries that are completely lacking any action photos, there is a strong glamour feel that is particularly noticeable because of what is communicated in the articles and because the galleries are less action-oriented compared to the men's. Plus, while some of the non-action shots of the men (as the ones mentioned above) still have an athletic feel and showcase their athletic features, the non-action shots of the woman are orchestrated by soft and glamorous poses that do not emphasise their athletic (i.e. muscular) traits but instead highlight curves and other typical feminine qualities. Additionally, in the only mixed-gender photoshoot, there is a photo where Zach Ertz is in an athletic and tense pose resembling a sprinter who is about to take off. Julie, on the other hand, is laying on top of his back facing up. Her front leg is outstretched in an upwards angle, her eyes are closed, and she covers her chest with her left hand. In this photo, Zach is clearly portrayed as an athlete while Julie is far more sexualised by her pose, and the behind the scenes footage in the video also shows an outtake where her breasts were far more in focus by the way they were covered up than what

ended up being the final shot, but as it is displayed in the video it is still part of the overall content of these two athletes. The only female athlete whose gallery is exclusively action-focused is Ashley Wagner's, but that could be seen as a result of her sport which is deemed to be inherently feminine and many of the poses are still soft and glamorous, even if they are in line with her sport (a regular figure skating routine involves these sorts of moves and poses).

In short, masculinity and athleticism go hand in hand, and this combination is never questioned in any fashion and any body insecurities that is brought up has to do with a lack of athletic features. Athleticism and femininity, however, are basically treated as opposites, and strong points are made of how the women are still feminine *despite* being athletes and the imagery largely emphasises their feminine features. To quote the ending sentiment from Michelle Waterson in her video, she is "a mother, a fighter, a woman" who is "strong but feminine" (ESPN 2017).

6.4 Function versus beauty

As the athletes' bodies are described in terms of how they are built and how they look, another theme it typically boils down to is either function or beauty, and occasionally both. However, what makes this particularly interesting is that there exists a clear division between the genders which results in different constructions of the athletic forms. A lexical analysis of the articles and the videos show that, in short, a male athlete's body is perpetually shaped by his sport and its purpose is to be as functional as possible to maximise the chance of athletic success. On the other side, a female athlete's body, while also shaped by her sport, is not only functional but also beautiful, which is not only a side note but a vastly important quality, and this can be seen as an extension of the athleticism versus femininity discussion the previous section as they are arguably, at least in some ways, connected.

To begin with, though, a common characteristic given to athletes regardless of gender is strength. Through the use of various terms that connote the sentiment, the remarkable strength of the athletes is brought up over and over again throughout the material and is treated as a universal quality in top athletes that is to be celebrated no matter if it is a man or a woman.

> *I feel proud of the strength I have. My leg strength has been a huge asset to playing rugby and the skills I need in the midfield -- speed, agility to get past my opposition.*

My arm and upper body strength is also something I've worked hard at [...] (Ain 2017l)

DUGGAN: *From a muscular standpoint, we're strong women. [...]*
BELLAMY: *We all have different body types. I have a pretty big butt, but then my legs are like bird legs. But I still can lift just as much as these girls can lift. [...]*
LAMOUREUX-MORANDO: *We're strong women, not just physically but mentally. You don't have to be shy about being strong [...].* (Ain 2017b)

This overlexicalisation really drives home the point of strength being vital and a positive trait in both men and women.

What does it mean to be in "hockey shape"?
JT: Being in hockey shape is totally different than any other kind of fitness. You can run and bike and work out all summer and then go on the ice for one shift and you're dead.

BB: There's just so many physical things going on on the ice at the same time. Playing hockey is like juggling while riding a bike underwater while guys are trying to hit you. So you could be in good enough shape to run a marathon, but you go skate for two shifts and you feel like total dog crap. You always think, "I should have just stayed on the couch all summer eating potato chips." You come back in great gym shape and you're like, "Man, I look so good, but I can't f---ing skate at all." It's why hockey players can have bad bodies and it doesn't matter. They can skate for days. If I can bench press with two 110-pound dumbbells while training in the summer, I couldn't do that with 70 pounds come March, but I can play. For me, whatever my body does, whatever it looks like, that's how we do our jobs and it's all there for a reason, good or bad. (Fleming 2017)

This extract from the interview with Thornton and Burns does a fine job to summarise the overall approach towards what a male athlete's body's purpose is. Even more so since the notion of beauty is overtly cited but distinctly disregarded. Further, this notion is expanded upon in the video: Further, this notion is expanded upon in the video:

Thornton – Legs and abs are definitely the most important for us. Just, you know, we skate so long and-
Burns – Yeah, I think I have good abs underneath.
Thornton – Yeah.
Burns – You just can't see them.
Thornton – Yeah, some you can see [points at himself], some you can't [points at Burns]. (ESPN 2017)

While said in a joking tone, it carries significant meaning. A male athlete's body is purely built for function. It is shaped to excel at their particular sport and its appearance, from a beauty standpoint, is not of any significance. This idea is further developed through the imagery where there is a distinct focus on athletics and portraying the bodies in athletic motion. The by far most common attribute in the images is sports-related equipment, but it is the way that the equipment is used that really brings the point home.

Figure 1. A typical action pose. Source: ESPN 2017.

Beginning with Javier Baez, while the setting is not related to his sport, various baseball equipment is used in every single image. There are two clear-cut action photos of Baez taking a swing, with his gaze off and beyond the camera towards the direction of the implied ball (see figure 1). Another has him ready to take a swing with his gaze instead towards the camera, as if he was waiting for the viewer to toss the ball. Similarly, every photo of Ezekiel Elliott contains a football which is used to enhance the athletic feeling of the images. Every image of Gus Kenworthy take place on a ski slope with Kenworthy wearing ski boots, and the action photos have him in various skiing positions (including mid-air flips and other tricks). Isiah Thomas is always in possession of a basketball.

Now, there are also examples where sporting equipment is featured although the image is more sexually focused. For instance, in one photo Julian Edelman uses a football to cover up his genitals and another very zoomed-in photo has him biting into a glove while staring into the camera. Edelman's gallery also contains a picture which is arguably one of the most sexually loaded images across all the men's galleries (figure 2). Here, while wearing a hat, Edelman faces the camera while jumping with his legs spread wide and covering his genital area with a miniature drum. The athletic focus is entirely gone, and the miniature drum draws attention to the area it is covering.

Figure 2. Edelman with a drum. Source: ESPN 2017.

Moving on, Malakai Fekitoa's photo gallery is very glamour-driven, and while a ball is featured, it is never used in an explicitly sexual nature which is also the case for the remainder of the footage of all male athletes where sporting equipment is used in non-action shots. Furthermore, these photos are also taken at angles where no unnatural covering up of the genital area is required, which means that no extra attention is given to that part of the body.

So, even though sporting equipment is used in a sexual nature, the non-sexual photos and specifically the vast gallery of action poses with compatible equipment take precedence. Thus, the sexual innuendos become more of an outlier, although its existence should definitely be noted. As should the significant catalogue of more glamour-like images, particularly Fekitoa's. In the setting of an island – likely a reference to his background – there is a lot of colourful imagery with grass, trees, water, and other things seen in a nature setting. Moreover, the gallery only contains two action shots (where he is running), while the rest are extremely glamour-like. In one, Fekitoa sitting on a log in front of a cliff with water and cliffs behind him. In a sitting position towards the right side of the image, his upper body is slightly twisted towards the camera with his right hand behind him on the log, and with his gaze seemingly just past the left side of the camera. Next, he is waist-deep in water with his hands on two separate rocks, looking off to the right side of the lens. The camera angle here is slightly from above. Following, Fekitoa is now leaning back on a rock with only his feet hidden in water (figure 3). With his body facing to the left, his right hand reaches over and rests on his left thigh, with his gaze once more to the right of the camera and slightly behind him. Then, he his laying on his side right where the water meets the sand, staring out into the water. His body is again twisted (in what could be seen as a pronated running pose), allowing his muscles to be flexed while holding a ball behind his buttocks. The beauty aspect of these images is arguably unquestionable, although they are not overtly sexual due to the camera angles where he is always naturally covered up and since there are no seductive gazes towards the camera.

Figure 3. Fekitoa the model. Source: ESPN 2017.

While these images do exist on the men's side, and are even quite prevalent, it is still the athletic facet that takes priority with all things considered. With all the imagery in mind and by looking at the style of photos and attributes used, salience is primarily given to how to body looks and acts in athletic action, which can be connected to how the talk in the articles and the videos is about how the body is built for function.

When it comes to the women, the situation is quite different.

> *I've always had really cut arms, but I would wear long sleeves because I was self-conscious. At a young age, someone said something like, "Oh, your arms are so big." And I never really knew what was wrong with that, but that stuck with me. So I would lift, but I wouldn't lift too much. And then as I got older I knew that I needed to get bigger and faster and stronger in order for me to be successful and excel in my sport. I really began to embrace the fact that my muscles are beautiful and they make me who I am and they make me the athlete I am.* (Ain 2017a)

The women's bodies are also stated to be shaped by their sport in order to excel. However, it is constantly structured in opposition to attractiveness as if those two ideas do not naturally intermix.

> *It's so in to have curves now. It's in to be looking healthy. If I don't look like a supermodel on the runway, that's OK because I look good in my own way.* (Ain 2017d)

This quote from Wozniacki's article touches on the sentiment from Thornton and Burns, as although her body is shaped in a certain way that is not 'supermodel-like', that is still all right. However, the distinct difference here is that it is not about function, but about still being beautiful but just in 'one's own way'. Muscles, while also talked about how they are necessary and beneficial in their sports, are also 'beautiful' as seen in the Andrews extract and in this comment from Julie Ertz:

> *I feel very comfortable in who I am now, and he's definitely a part of it -- continuing to say how beautiful my muscles are, or he loves when I'm running or working out.* (Ain 2017h)

Muscles must not only be functional; they must also be beautiful. This particular word is also used by Nneka Ogwumike when she speaks of her tall stature:

> ***I'm not trying to knock any shorties, but I think being tall is such a blessing.*** *I'm very thankful for what my legs can do because I can jump super high. I*

> *don't know my exact vertical, but I can dunk. When you embrace your height, it's even more beautiful than just being tall.* (Ain 2017e, emphasis in original)

As it is a term that is not only repeated but also only used in reference to the women, it becomes one of their prime characteristics. Moreover, it is further underlined by discussions about general attractiveness. In her video, Ashley Wagner explains how a "great butt" is a common attribute for figure skaters and that she believes it should be a "world-wide known fact" (ESPN 2017). Additionally, as quoted before, one of the ways the U.S. women's hockey team establishes that they are "normal women" is that they like to "dress up and look pretty" (Ain 2017b).

Even in the case of Michelle Waterson where the brutality of her sport is not at all hidden, the beauty aspect is the first thing that is mentioned as the first two paragraph read as follows:

> ***MMA is not for someone who wants to keep cute.*** *Your body changes. You lose body fat, and that means you lose breast tissue. Your shoulders get broad, and you get scraped from the gloves. I do it because I love to do it. I could definitely be doing something else if I just wanted to look hot.*
>
> ***I like my Karate Hottie nickname.*** *I think it's catchy. I don't mind saying that I'm hot. If you want to underestimate your opponent [because of her nickname], for sure, go ahead.* (Ain 2017g, emphasis in original)

Even in an article which heavily emphasises her sport's punishment on the body, and where the footage in the video shows not only Waterson being successful but also shows some of her crushing defeats and how roughed up she can get from both training and competing, attractiveness is the first topic that is addressed. Waterson's photo gallery, though, strongly focuses on her athleticism as all but one pose is related to mixed martial arts, even though the setting is of stone-ridden cliffs at sunset. All of these has her facing either to the left or to the right in a fighting stance, with only one photo featuring an object in the form of a sword. Always with intense facial expressions, she alternates between looking and not looking into the camera. The lone non-action photo is in greyscale with Waterson sitting on a rock in a curled-up posture with her legs pressed against her chest and her left side facing the camera. Her face slightly tilted to make it more visible, while her gaze is looking out to the left. With dark clouds forming in the background, there seems to be a light hailstorm around her with pieces of hail also being visible in her hair and on her skin. However,

just like Fekitoa and Edelman can be considered outliers as their galleries have less of an athletic focus, Waterson's gallery is an outlier because of the strong athletic focus.

For the remaining women, the split is either more even or weighted towards glamour and beauty, and the use of equipment as attributes is significantly different. When it comes to Novlene Williams-Mills, whose article is very emotional, the photo gallery evens it up a bit by including five action photos where she is either posing as if she was at the starting line of a sprint (with appropriate equipment used in the form of starting blocks), as if she was running, and one where she is stretching. There are also two passive photos. The first is of Williams-Mills standing upright on a sprint track. The camera angle is from the back-right, and with a slight bend in her left leg, she looks out towards the right. She holds a relay baton across her right shoulder. The other photo is a much more classical glamour shot. Williams-Mills has her right side towards the camera, and with her head tilted to allow her face to be more visible, she looks up and above the right side of the camera. Her left hand rests on her left thigh, while her right is draped across her chest to cover herself up. Williams-Mills's gallery is the second-most athletically focused after Waterson, but then it starts to move further in the other direction.

A.J. Andrew's gallery, while containing appropriate action photos of her playing softball (albeit in the setting of a desert), also contain three passive photos which make use of softball-related objects. First, with her front-left side towards the camera, she looks into the lens in a pose which creates an arch in her back (figure 4). With a relaxed expression, she holds a softball in her right hand and a gold-coloured glove in her left. Her glove is used to cover up her chest, and although an argument can be made that the position of the glove and the ball hints at a typical softball stance, the remainder of the pose takes away from that focus. The back arch in particular, along with her left leg being in front of her right with a slight bend at the knee and the general relaxed appearance of her stance, makes her out to be more of a model than an athlete with the equipment being props used to cover herself up. Another photo has her with her legs pointing to the right while her torso is twisted in the direction of the camera with

Figure 4. A sexualised version of a standard softball pose. Source: ESPN 2017.

her face and gaze towards the left side, and with a bit of a pondering facial expression. In her hands is a white softball bat which is held across her chest to again cover her up. The final photo is of Andrews in a white towel which completely covers her entire body from her shoulders to her shins. She is looking straight down with a big smile on the face, while holding up a golden softball glove.

Thus far, the differences may seem negligible, but it is a trend that keeps up. In Nneka Ogwumike's gallery, even though the setting is of a rooftop basketball court, her sport becomes more of an accessory in a series of photos that do not emphasise athleticism. Furthermore, this is clearly intentional as she states in her video that she has dreamt of being featured in the issue and being in an "artistic collaboration" where she can show off a "different side" (ESPN 2017) of herself. The first photo has her facing and being very close to the camera while leaning forwards with a basketball in her hands that almost becomes invisible because of sunlight, and instead gives more salience to her body. Her long hair falls downwards in front of her, effectively covering her right breast while her left arm covers her left. Her facial expression is here rather intense. In the second (figure 5), she is leaning up against a surrounding chain fence with her left side towards the camera. Her head is slightly tilted forwards and angled towards the viewer. She holds a basketball in her left hand which is pressed towards the front of her left breast, not covering much more than her nipple. Her facial expression is now much more relaxed with a hint of a smile as she lightly glares into the lens. Next, she is squatting down while being on her toes, with her heals almost making contact with her bottom. With her body facing to the left, her arms are outstretched with her fingertips resting on a basketball which is on the ground. Her head is again tilted towards the camera with a very similar gaze and expression as in the previous photo. Finally, she stands tall with her body facing up and to the right, while her face and gaze are towards the back-right of the camera. Her right arm is outstretched as she holds a basketball in front of her pelvic area. Furthermore, this is the only shot during night time and her skin has a shining effect to it. There are two action photos as well, as one has her dribbling a basketball

Figure 5. A "different side" of Ogwumike. Source: ESPN 2017.

(again looking into the camera) while the other has her shooting it. In the photo of the shot, the angle is from her back-left side and from below, which does seem to highlight her buttocks which was one of her physical assets that she explicitly mentioned being pleased with from a beauty viewpoint.

When looking at Caroline Wozniacki's gallery, the situation is very similar. Plus, her video starts by Wozniacki referencing some of the comments she has received throughout her career in regards to her focus on her appearance: "Focus on your sport", "train harder", "you do too many shoots", "you think too much about your looks" (ESPN 2017). However, she states that people do not understand the amount of work she has put into achieving her body. Three of her photos involve passive poses with a very sexual feel. The first has her in front of a bright white background and on a bright blue floor. With her left side towards the camera, she is on her tippy toes and looks back and away over her left shoulder while holding a tennis racket across her neck and a tennis ball in her left hand. The next has her laying on her stomach in the direction of the camera on a surface which resembles a tennis court in clay (figure 6). With her body at a slight angle, she has her lower legs up in the air while crossed. Her hands are resting on the ground around a tennis ball while her head is tilted in opposite direction of her body with a seductive gaze into the camera. Lastly, she is in a pose which very much resembles the first one, but with a very dark background instead of the bright white and blue. With her body facing to the left and again with a tennis racket held behind her head, she has her left leg in front of her right with her back curved inwards and her head tilted backwards. She stares directly into the lens, and there is warm light source coming in from the left illuminating her stomach, left thigh, and the right side of her face. The sexual nature of these photos is exceedingly present, and the tennis objects used are merely there as props. Additionally, her video is filled with close-up shots from the photoshoot and these images in particular.

Figure 6. Wozniacki on her stomach with her sport being used as a prop. Source: ESPN 2017.

Moreover, the sexual nature is likewise strong in two of the action photos. In two photos of her being in mid-swing with a tennis racket, the angles of photos require her to use her free hand to very obviously cover up her breasts which she does with a

fully opened hand and separated fingers, which makes her right breast almost fully visible barring the nipple. The setting is that of a clay court with a dark background and light coming in from the left, again illuminating her skin. Her gaze is once into the camera and once past it. The last photo is also of her in mid-swing but with a very bright blue background. Looking downwards with a slight smile, her chest is this time naturally covered by her arms. All of these three photos have her hair flowing wildly behind her. In these six photos, only one does not have either an obvious sexual appeal or at least a sexual innuendo that could be avoided. Due to the direction of the poses together with the camera angles in two of the action shots, even these two that are directly related to her sport have a deliberate sexual quality to them.

To add to this, the videos typically communicate the same messages as the articles, adding yet another layer with the same ideas. In isolation, neither of these examples may seem all that extreme, but when they all combine the messages become that much stronger. A man's athletic body is purely functional, and it looks the way it does because it is in its current appearance that it performs best, and nothing else matters. For the women, there is still the constant pressure to be beautiful as well, with that specific adjective being on repeat and its importance is undeniable.

6.5 Discussion

To arise interest in the athletes, *ESPN* do not seem to have one particular strategy for the men and another for the women, nor do they only focus on either athletic or personal stories. There are certainly a couple of very personal stories about athletes of both genders that take precedence over their athletic accomplishments, but they are evened out by other instances where the focus is instead wholly on athletics. Often, the different modes revolving around the same athlete work together to balance the scales, with salience given to one area in one mode and then to another area in any of the other modes. For example, the articles that are heavily focused on personal experiences are accompanied by visuals that instead have a stronger athletic focus, even if it is just in the background footage. As such, their athletic persona is always pushed a great deal and it serves as a reminder that even though these people have experiences outside of the world of sports that may be more important to them, being a top athlete is still a major part of their life and still plays a vital role even if it is not *the* current top priority.

Another theme where no real differences can be found between the genders is the topic of toughness and injuries. The particular language used, as showed in section 6.2, paints a very grim picture of all the damage one will take as a top athlete. And not only can it affect their sporting careers, it can and will affect their everyday life going forward. The stories and the visuals combine to express how incredibly difficult and challenging it is to become a top athlete as well as achieving and sustaining an athletic form which is a necessity. What makes this particularly noteworthy is that the language does not in any way attempt to hide this fact; instead, the language highlights it and stresses it time and time again which truly makes it a part of the athletic form which reflects back on the individuals who have achieved it.

When it comes to what it means to be an athlete as a man and as a woman, differences start to emerge. For one, athleticism is considered a masculine trait and it is structured opposite of femininity. Even though a common message is that it is all right to be a woman and an athlete, they also make sure to highlight the ways in which they are feminine, not least in the visuals. The repetitive references to femininity, which can be seen as a case of overlexicalisation, act as a constant reminder that, yes, these women are athletes, but that does not mean they are not feminine. They are still 'normal women', as it was stated, which does suggest that being a female athlete is, in fact, not already normal.

Lastly, another main difference between the genders has to do with the language around the aesthetics when it comes to beauty and attractiveness. Visually, the focus on sex and beauty is difficult to ignore. Just as there are no galleries that lack action poses, there are no galleries that lack glamour and beauty shots, and in several they are even in the majority. But this is not only an issue regarding the women by any means – the men are sexualised as well, with Edelman and Fekitoa being rather extreme examples of this where it was overwhelming (see figures 2 and 3 for examples of the more sexual nature). Still, there is a distinct difference between the genders when it comes to the how being an athlete changes one's body composition. Visible muscularity is always a clear positive trait for all the men, and something they strive for and even felt insecure about if they were lacking. Strong and visible muscles are signs of a body that was sculptured for success. For women, on the other hand, the topic of muscles is far more complicated because of what it physically means for the body. Insecurities were again mentioned several times, but for the complete

opposite reason. Visible muscles are, in short, not lady-like or feminine, and sometimes even purposely avoided.

However, a constant message is that muscles too are beautiful, and women athletes are beautiful with their muscularity and despite all the various marks on their bodies which are a result of training and competing. Now, this can of course be seen as a noble message with nothing but good intentions, as being strong and fit should certainly not be cause for insecurities. But, this is also the largest difference in how the athletic figures are constructed: function versus attractiveness. Men's bodies are functional and it does not matter how they look. Beauty is not a concern. Or, that is what *ESPN* are saying in the articles but the inclusion of sexualised and glamour-like images of the men does send the message that beauty is still an aspect of consideration. But, when the men themselves speak of how they think of beauty, it is not expressed as a stressor.

When it comes to the women, the messages *ESPN* deliver are quite contradictory. On the one hand, they speak of how looks are not the most important attribute. For instance, Andrews comments how she will not refrain from getting dirty and messing up her hair if that means making a play. But, just a few paragraphs later, emphasis is put on how 'beautiful' her muscles are. As this is a pattern that is repeated for other women as well, the argument that looks are not important for women athletes drowns in the company of references to how important it is to be beautiful, sexy, and feminine. This is arguably a case of hypersexualisation as everything revolving the women does, in the end, circle back to being about attractiveness, and the photo galleries are heavily weighted towards beauty and sex (see figures 4,5, and 6 for examples where their sports take a back seat to beauty). While the men are also sexualised in the photography, the discussions about their bodies are mainly about function. For the women, function is also brought up as an important quality, but both the photography and the discussions highly stress the importance of being beautiful. Furthermore, this also highlights the objectifying aspect in the material as the athletes are portrayed as bodies to behold and scrutinise, and although it involves both genders there is no doubt about the objectifying nature being stronger and more prevalent revolving women athletes.

7. Conclusion

This study sought to examine how the athletic form is discursively constructed when sports magazines have full control of what material to produce and publish. By looking at several modes of communication and how they relate to each other, there are quite a few things that can be said about the construction of the athletic form in *ESPN*'s most recent widely popular *The Body Issue*.

To begin with, in relation to previous research (Fink and Kensicki 2002) suggesting that women's sports are not deemed interesting enough and therefore focus is instead on the athletes' personal lives, this study advocates that this is not the case. Considering the findings in this study, the notions that "Female athletes and their on-court activities are not interesting in their own right" (Fink and Kensicki 2002, 334) and that there is an attempt by *ESPN* to set an agenda "in which female sports and accomplishments are undervalued (Engleman, Pedersen and Wharton 2009, 239) are not applicable to *ESPN*'s construction of female athletes in *The Body Issue*, as their athletic accomplishments are constantly brought forward and discussed with terms that put them in clearly positive contexts. They are also not portrayed in typical feminine domestic roles, which research has previously found (Schmidt 2016), as they are always athletes. The only time a typical feminine role was brought up – Michelle Waterson's motherhood – her athletic persona was still treated as vital. Except for Waterson, there was a total lexical absence of these terms. Plus, the repeated proposition that women athletes should be on equal footing to men athletes further suggests that women's sport is not to be looked at as inferior or as if it is not worthy of one's time.

Another typical critique towards the sports coverage of women's sports is that female athletes are mainly only promoted in gender-neutral or feminine sports (*e.g.* Weber and Carini 2013), and despite femininity being a point of emphasis, the range in the type of sports represented was practically as wide as it can get. Even though a typically feminine sport was picked (figure skating), a large part of the discussion around it focused on the dangers involved and that the competitors are athletic and strong. Furthermore, the inclusion of Michelle Waterson's sport of mixed martial arts takes away any idea of there being a preference towards 'feminine sports'. Likewise, the constant discussion about injuries and bodies being 'beat up' and worn down,

which was discussed in equal terms for both genders, makes out a rather grim narrative of the athletic life in which the women are equally involved.

Related to this is the findings by Smallwood, Brown, and Billings (2014) who noted that, when comparing the portrayal of women in *The Body Issue* with *SI*'s *Swimsuit Edition*, there is some evidence of "a divide between athleticism and femininity" (13) because of the more athletic portrayal in *The Body Issue*. However, the results in this study suggest that the same division can arguably be seen solely in the contents of *The Body Issue*. Large emphasis was put on the notion that the women were still feminine, they still enjoyed looking pretty and dressing up, and they were still "normal women" and not just athletes. This results in the creation of, as Krane et al. (2004, 315) describe it, "an intriguing paradox" for women athletes as they are forced to live in two different cultures simultaneously: the inherently masculine sports culture as well as "their larger social culture where femininity is celebrated for women".

Lastly, we arrive at the aspect which has a significant impact on the entire construction of the athletic form – the notion of beauty and attractiveness. Frisby (2017b, 28) made the claim "that in the world of sports, a female athlete's role … is continually constrained to her sexuality" (Frisby 2017b, 28) because the main aspects promoted when the subjects were women athletes were their physical and bodily features. Now, since this particular material is overtly focused on the body, there were, of course, many references to physical features. And, as the analysis showed, physical qualities in the context of attractiveness were also by and large a female issue. However, in the discursive creation of the athletic form, there are far more traits that are given prevalence to say that their sexuality is the only aspect that matters. Still, though, it is certainly present and a vastly important aspect, which is clearly communicated in the articles and videos. But there are also cases of sexualisation of the male athletes as well which agrees with the view that not only women but also men are increasingly sexualised in the media (Hatton and Trautner 2011, 256).

However, as the authors also stated, hypersexuality is still a phenomenon primarily affecting women, and the analysis did support this claim. The discussion about beauty was solely concerning women, and considering how often it was brought up

and the vast importance that was given to the idea of being beautiful, especially *despite* being athletes, the beauty aspect does penetrate the entire discursive construction of the female athletic form and thus becomes a crucial attribute that is exclusively attached to only the female athletic form. Even if *ESPN*'s intentions are good-hearted with the messages of female athletes also being beautiful, the construction of the female athletic form contains a sexual aura that is forever present, even in some of the action photos. Now, an argument could perhaps be made that this is partly because the social standard that says the female chest is sexual while the male is not combined with the fact that all athletes were posing naked, but this could have been combatted by using other camera angles like was the case with all the men.

Furthermore, while *ESPN* did not refrain from constructing the female athletic form by using 'non-feminine' sports as reference points, it did not stop them from still making sure that femininity was not lost and nor was their beauty. To simply be a world-class athlete, which is of course not a simple task by any stretch of the imagination, is not enough. To be beautiful and sexy, either 'conventionally' or in 'one's own way', *while* being a world-class athlete – that is the prototypical illustration of the female athletic form. While *ESPN* repeatedly communicates that women athletes should be equal to men, they are in the end partly reduced to their sexuality and Frisby's statement is not all that far off. What may be seen as even more concerning is the fact that this beauty aspect was not only pushed by *ESPN* but by the women as well, which could be connected to the theory of self-objectification as these beauty demands have been internalised and they feel the pressure to always be beautiful in the eyes of their observers (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997, 179-80). Some of the potential social consequences were even directly mentioned by the athletes who spoke of body insecurities and self-consciousness because of how they looked (and especially looking too 'manly'), and yet this beauty narrative was so strongly advocated.

And moreover, this entire situation could be linked to one of the central themes of CDA – the relationship between discourse and power (Machin and Mayr 2012, 4; van Dijk 1996, 84-5). There is an indirect power hierarchy that is created through the discursive depictions of the athletic forms, even though the pursuit for equality is a topic of discussion. The women athletes are not on equal footing to their men counterparts even with all the positive aspects that have been brought forward as they

are ultimately still reduced to satisfying observers and uphold feminine characteristics that are bluntly considered to clash with athleticism. Their sexuality is still used to sell the product that is women's sports. With that said, I do believe it would be unfair to say that *ESPN* are using *The Body Issue* to purposely reinforce these ideas as they do encourage a discussion that would attempt to rectify this current longstanding social situation, but it is an unfortunate consequence of the attributes and characteristics that are bestowed upon the female athlete.

The sports media has received a ton of criticism in the past because of unequal gender representation and upholding a gender hegemony that vastly favours men (Engleman, Pedersen, and Wharton 2009, 227; Frisby 2017a, 120), and rightfully so. However, I would like to say that this study shows that it may not always be entirely intentional, and perhaps even the opposite of what was originally intended. *ESPN* overtly stress the importance of gender equality and that you should be comfortable in your body. However, they also revert back to stress the importance of being beautiful if you are a woman athlete, which leads to *ESPN* delivering two inherently contradictory messages about what it means to be an athlete and a woman. And since *ESPN* were in full control of the material and the manner in which all the athletes were represented, blame cannot be placed anywhere else than with *ESPN* themselves. They are, in a way, intentionally contradictory. Perhaps they want to move away from the objectifying and sexualising nature of women's portrayal in sports, but at the same time not lose the interest and revenue it brings. Or, maybe, if given the benefit of the doubt, the overall message that *ESPN* constructed is not what they had planned but rather a result of carelessness.

In an arena where opportunity is given to push away from the sexual nature of women's representation in sports media, it is instead embraced and pushed ever closer – even if it is, to some degree, inadvertent, and instead a sign of an entrenched mentality.

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