Why Play Sport in Your Underwear? Children's Perceptions of Athlete Photos

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The voice of children and youth is missing in many academic studies of youth sport. Yet many decisions are made on their behalf, because academics and practitioners think they know what impact the sport media has on children (Gatz, Messner, & Ball-Rokeach, 2002). There is no denying that the media has a powerful influence on children, and that the media matters, particularly in terms of how it is consumed by children (Gatz, et al., 2002; Rowe, 1999). Similarly, there is ample evidence indicating that female athletes are underrepresented in the sport media, particularly the print media and photos, reinforcing white male hegemony in sport (e.g. Fullerton, 2006). Photos of male athletes not only dominate, but male athletes are also portrayed in more active poses and in sports focusing on strength and sports such as basketball, volleyball and tennis (Markula, 2009). In contrast, female athletes are mainly portrayed in sexualized ways, which send messages that appearance is more important than sporting achievement (Duncan, 2006). According to Garrett (2004) the stereotypical portrayal of athletes in the media then leads adolescents to perceive certain sports as only appropriate for girls or boys. Research (e.g. Vescio, Wilde, & Crosswhite, 2005) has suggested that the absence of female role models, affects children’s expectations of the role of women both in sport and other contexts. It is therefore important to hear children’s voices to identify whether they see photos in the way adults see them. Early media literacy training can go some way to addressing the gendered nature of the media and in this case female athletes in particular. Research on bodybuilders suggest that both girls and boys find muscular women unappealing because muscles are associated with men (Gorely, Holroyd, & Kirk, 2003).

Most research, however, has focused on academic interpretations of photos, little if any has considered the perspectives of children. Photos are ambiguous and it is words which assist in their interpretation (Barthes, 1982). With photographs, children tend to focus on what “a picture depicts rather than to its structural qualities” (Liben & Szechter, 2002, p.393). As Fullerton (2006) argues media professionals, in general, do not consider the impact their writing or photos may have on children, so it is timely to explore children’s perceptions of photos. Children construct meanings differently from adults and are active creators in how we all make sense of what we see, hear and read. The majority of existing research with children has been focused on the negative consequences of the media such as violence on television. What the media does is provide mental impressions which when mixed with individual norms, values and feelings can influence the way we respond and subsequently choose to act (von Feilitzen & Bucht, 2001).

This presentation will focus on the findings from six focus groups held with 24 children aged 9-11 in a New Zealand elementary school, at the conclusion of the Beijing Olympics in 2008. Each focus group was made up of four children, a mix of girls and boys. Each focus group was shown the same eight photos but in different order. The photos were purposively selected to elicit discussion amongst the children. They included a female and male photo in the following sports: weightlifting, beach volleyball, swimming (Libby Trickett and Michael Phelps) and two posed photos of New Zealand athletes; the flag bearer Mahe Drysdale, a rower and the BMX rider Sarah Walker. The children were asked what they thought each photo was about and why? How the photo made them feel and any messages it sent to them. The focus groups were audio recorded and then transcribed. The analysis focused on identifying themes which arose across the focus groups with respect to each of the photos. These findings are part of a larger study on children’s perceptions of sport images. The children’s discussions focused on a number of themes. For the purposes of this presentation only the themes relating to gender, ethnicity, masculinity and clothing will be highlighted. For three of the photos, the Chinese female weightlifter, Libby Trickett and Michael Phelps there was considerable debate as to whether the photo was of a man or a woman. The photo of Libby Trickett, in particular, has five of the six groups questioned her gender. This was because of her hair, her masculinity and ‘because girls are not good at swimming’. Even the photo of Michael Phelps generated discussion in three of the groups about whether he was a man or a woman. The main feature of this photo concerned his muscles. Every group commented on these and how it was disgusting and ‘that he shouldn’t be showing off his muscles’. The gender and masculinity issues were also mentioned in the photo of the Chinese female weightlifter, but issues of ethnicity were also raised here. In particular stereotypes of Chinese men and women ‘looking the same’ and that ‘Chinese cheat because they take steroids’. The photo of New Zealand weightlifter Mark Spooner also elicited much discussion around muscles and strength and their appropriateness or not for men and women. The muscles were once again seen as ‘disgusting’, even though because ‘men have more muscles they are better at sport’. Issues around what sport were appropriate for men and women came through in the female beach volleyball photo discussion, in that this was a sport that ‘most women play and not many men’. The overwhelming comments however, were about how ‘disgusting’ and ‘gross’ it was to be playing a sport in ‘their bras and undies’, particularly since ‘boys were watching’ and that they needed proper clothes to play ‘they could at least have shorts’. Also how it was not good that such photos went on the internet. In contrast the men’s beach volleyball photo again elicited discussion around gender because of their long hair and therefore ‘looked like a woman’. But that it was ‘sensible that they play in their top and shorts’ and that ‘men don’t want to show their tummies’. The two posed photos
revealed that the children associated how they had performed in the Olympics with the photos, rather than necessarily what the photo showed. For Mahe Drysdale there were many comments about how he still ‘got bronze, even though he was sick’ and that he ‘must be proud representing New Zealand’. Sarah Walker’s photo was seen slightly differently, as here there were gendered comments centered around how ‘girls get in accidents more often’, but also ‘how she gets more credit because she does it and it’s a boys sport’. Many were also concerned that she was not wearing a helmet in the photo, and that ‘it must be cold’ because she was wearing a jacket.

The findings indicate that children see very different things in photographs to adult academics, that photos are ambiguous in their own right and that from an early age children have strong views about what constitutes being male and female and issues of ethnicity. As was suggested by Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf and Hardin (2002) to further our understanding of what impact photographic media has on children, we need to examine their attitudes in more depth. Media literacy programs need to be well designed and evidence based, as the research has mixed findings related to their efficacy in promoting, for example, a positive body image amongst young women (Irving, DuPen, & Berel, 2001; McVey & Davis, 2002). Given that boys and girls social construction of gender is influenced by their beliefs and expectations, it is important that notions of femininity, masculinity and race are explored at an early age (Garrett, 2004). So whilst the media does not tell children what to think, they do tell them what to think about – so how children construct meanings associated with athlete photos is likely to have an impact on how they choose to behave subsequently.