Contextualizing Erotic Capital for Sexualized and Commercialized Women’s Sports

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Erotic capital becomes more important and more valorized in the sexualized and individualized modern societies. According to Hakim (2010), erotic capital was proposed as a new personal asset of human capital, an important new addition to economic, cultural and social capital that was initiated by Pierre Bourdieu in 1980’s. The concepts proved valuable and they were subsequently developed by other scholars in consumer research, advertising, and human resource industry (e.g. Beard, 2011; Frew, & McGillivray, 2005; Hooley, & Yates, 2014, Mears, 2014). Erotic capital comprises six distinct elements such as beauty, sexual attractiveness, liveliness, social skills, social presentation and sexuality (Hakim, 2010). Erotic capital might lead to gaining similar social status and prestige as well as economic, cultural and social capital. Athletes who possess greater erotic capital gain more public attention and higher degree of popularity, attract sponsors and advertisers which can be converted into earnings (Mutz, & Meier, 2014). Thus, the sexualization of athletes may be regarded as a by-product of the ongoing trends of commercialization and mediatisation of sports (Mutz, & Meier, 2014).

As conceptualization of erotic capital permeates in sport management, this study will introduce readers to works on erotica capital and explain the key concepts through a relevant context, the Legends Football League (LFL) as a case of extensively focusing on erotic capital of players. The LFL targets marketing and promotion toward physically attractive images of bodies, with players wearing lingerie while playing masculine sport of football. This once halftime show for the National Football League’s Super Bowl was turned into a 10-team league that debuted in the fall of 2009. The LFL has far been considered a strictly entertainment broadcast of pay-per-view events appearing on Fuse and focusing on commercially sexualized images. It seems clear that the LFL players are interested in performing and developing erotic capital, but this is not just a phenomena for them, it is more about women’s sport overall. Thus, this study has three purposes. First, this study examines which elements of erotic capital commonly or uniquely fit into the sexualized women in sport context. Second, based on the antecedences’ frameworks, as the first lens, this study investigates how women’s sport framed sexually with variety of camera angles by conducting a semantic shot classification. As a second lens, gender display used to capture how female athletes performed gender to examine erotic capital in the LFL. Third, this study examines how erotic capital newly constructed in the sexualized women’s sport.

By including erotic capital of female athletes throughout the league, the researchers collected symbolic commercial videos from the YouTube official channel of LFL. The national commercials of each season might be the best choice to represent the images of the league. After collecting the data with rebranding as Legends football league, three videos were selected for this study, this selection included the 2013 LFL national commercial, the LFL rebranding video: The beginning, and the 2015 LFL US national commercial. These videos were selected and watched from the YouTube LFL official channel in promotional content list. To analyze the contextual meaning of the LFL, content analysis was conducted with the critical reading of the LFL promotional videos’ commercial narratives. To carefully analyze multi-layered frameworks in this study, the researchers thoroughly analyzed the first level framework alone by repeatedly watching videos, then move to the second and the third level framework. For improving the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study adopted the use of member check method.

This study offer several findings. First, the LFL was framed to a greater degree in terms of ‘player-focus views’ and ‘event-focus views’ than ‘court-/field-focus views’ in the semantic shot classification of the promotional videos. That is, the LFL semantic shot lead to investigate gender display such as focusing on facial expressions of players and it helps to audiences to capture vivid moments of a sport event. Thus, gender display and semantic shot classification methods explain that how media outlets routinely sexually objectify the female body. Secondly, the LFL took a full
advantage with female athletes’ erotic capital that included white beauty and sexualized images of bodies in the western society for their league success. That is, this is not only about how the LFL took an advantage with their erotic capital, but also how their erotic capital transformed into their economic capital with successful women’s sports league that known as a fast growing women’s professional league globally. Lastly, this study also found that erotic capital elements might not be parallel construction of erotic capital. Few elements may support other elements and inter-related each element depend on the situation. Thus, the major finding of theoretical analysis is that beauty, sexual attractiveness, and sexuality are possibly core elements of erotic capital for the LFL players. Another major finding of new construction of erotic capital is that social skills, social presentation and liveliness are overarching supporting elements of erotic capital for the LFL players.

This study offers three important contributions to the field of sport management: First, for the theoretical development, theoretical frameworks of this study gives a deeper understanding of how female athletes utilize erotic capital and why erotic capital is essential concept to better understand women’s sport in the sexualized sport at the contextual level. Second, for the methodological point of view, this study provides further understanding of how the multi-layered analyses are effective to see framed social views toward women’s sport league. Third, for practical benefit, new construction of erotic capital offers a potential outline for those sport organization, professional athletes and sport fans pursuing to make better images for women’s sport with balanced portrayals. Erotic capital can be a new tool to understand commercially sexualized images of women in sport in addition to the prevalent critical feminist perspectives (e.g. Kane & Maxwell, 2011; Fink et al, 2013). This study also is an initial effort to apply this theory in sport management field. Thus, it is worthwhile to look into how this theory fit into the current trend of the sexualized women’s sport. Thus, this theoretical analysis gives some cultural background to deeply explain why the female athletes performed gender properly in sexual ways while performing masculine sports.