

**Sexy Sports: A reception study of the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) Olympics website coverage of women's beach volleyball at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.**

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## **DEDICATION**

*I dedicate this thesis to my lovely, crazy and ever supportive family who provide me with unmitigated love and happiness.*

*First off I'd like to thank my parents Nargis and Mohamed Tajdin; thanks for being inspiring, loving and patient and for making many sacrifices for me. I will treasure that always and I don't have enough words to express my gratitude.*

*And to my lovely siblings Amirah, Nawal and Jamal thank you for being you and keeping me grounded with your wit, sarcasm and sense of humour. Amirah especially – thanks for putting up with my invasion and constant presence in your life for the past year and a half – I loved every minute and it was special sharing some of the best experiences of my life with you.*

*Your Daughter and Sister,*

*Wafa*

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## ***ABSTRACT***

*Sexy Sports: A reception study of the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) Olympics website coverage of women's beach volleyball at the 2008 Beijing Olympics* involves an examination of the sporting media and its reportage of the female athlete. The thesis will focus on the reception of the NBC Olympics website coverage of women's beach volleyball at the 2008 Beijing Olympics by viewing groups constituted by the researcher. The reason for this is that it would be difficult to find naturally constituted audiences for this website, but its reception is never-the-less of research interest. My hypothesis is that the nature of the images and text on the website is overdetermined by the construction of women on other popular texts such as men's magazines etc. In focusing on the meanings obtained from the content of the website (texts and images), the study will investigate how these meanings are naturalised in specific moments of production as well as through their intertextual relationships with similar texts involved in the glamorisation of female athletes. Specifically the study explores the meanings obtained from the content of the website (texts and images) and how in turn these meanings are naturalised by the consumers of the website. The study will utilise a qualitative research design to unpack the content of the website through the use of qualitative content analysis, focus group interviews and individual in-depth interviews. The research will be informed via a theoretical framework that draws from feminist theory, sport feminism, the concept of intertextuality between media texts, ideology and Stuart Hall's model of preferred reading.

Increasingly mainstream media uses the image of a woman's body to sell almost anything from men's razors to margarine and in so far as the reporting of women's sports is concerned this holds true. Through the research I intend to account for the connotative power of other texts i.e. the men's magazines and pornography, and how this is likely to be carried through into shaping the meanings that are read off the website. Arguably the production of the NBC texts and images are overdetermined by the existence of similar texts already in transmission in the circuit of culture.

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## ***CHAPTER ONE***

### ***INTRODUCTION***

In written texts, visual images, and spoken commentaries, female athletes are often portrayed as sexual objects available for male consumption rather than as athletes in their own right (Griffin, 1998: 70).

#### ***1. Introduction***

The focus of this study will be to investigate how the reading of one particular text is informed by the reading of other texts i.e. intertextuality. The study will examine how the sport media, through the use of both texts and images, plays a significant role in producing, reproducing and transforming sexualised discourses on gender relations. Numerous studies have argued that both the electronic and print media generally marginalise, trivialise and sexualise female athlete's achievements (for a useful summary of this position, see Stratton and Flintoff, 2002:96). In particular it is claimed that the media continues to depict female athletes according to cultural stereotypes that associate femininity with weakness, dependency, emotion and submissiveness. Furthermore the media tends to objectify these female athletes in ways that resemble soft-core pornography (Duncan, 1990). Another way the media sexualises women athletes is by focusing on their physical appearance rather than on their performance. Characteristics favoured in visual media are those commonly associated with feminine beauty such as unblemished skin, slender and toned physique and long wavy hair. Generally, the content of visual sport media suggests that only the most glamorous women athletes are worthy of being pictured (Duncan, 1990).

## ***2. Background to the Study***

I am a keen follower of sport and took an interest in the sporting sphere from a young age both in terms of playing (at a school level) and as an avid watcher and follower as I got older particularly of football (soccer) and the Olympics. I am a big fan of the English Premier League in particular, and began following it closely from the age of twelve.

Significantly, all the sport I have followed, and continue to follow is male sport – the only female sporting events I watch are Olympic swimming and gymnastics and maybe tennis during grand slam events. It was never overtly apparent why I preferred to watch male sport, but in most cases it was a lot more interesting especially with respect to the intensity and speed of the game.

In retrospect it has now become clear that my choices were shaped by what sports the television broadcasters deemed worthy of airing and my preferences stemmed from the relatively limited airing of female sports. Reflecting on this highlighted the fact that the media is a powerful institution that is rooted in patriarchy which is largely owned and controlled by men. Furthermore, as Gerbner (1994:10) points out, when it comes to television in particular, women, young people, old people, and minorities are represented less than white Western middle-class heterosexual males in the ‘prime of life’. In addition, these marginalised categories have a more restricted and stereotyped range of roles, activities and opportunities, and less than their share of success and power. For the Western media, white male viewers with ‘prime of life’ power as described by George Gerbner (1994:11) are those with the most disposable income and are therefore the prime target for advertisers – therefore the broadcast media make sure that their tastes are catered for. When it comes to sports broadcasting the result is that what is shown will be what the men prefer to watch i.e. masculine sports like rugby and football rather than fourteen year old female gymnasts from China twirling ribbons and perfecting floor routines.

In line with the understandings mentioned above it seemed to me that when female athletes were given prime time coverage what was highlighted was the gratification of the flesh rather than reportage of the efforts and talents of the athletes - these sporting events include swimming, tennis, golf and beach volleyball. Furthermore, when it comes to female

participation in sport, writers suggest that social sanctions powerfully shape female involvement (Metheny 1965; Cited in Scraton and Flintoff, 2002: 83).

In a way this reasoning made sense but it did not entirely elucidate why it is deemed necessary to sexualise female athletes within the mediascape. Therefore, in choosing this particular topic for my study, the theories I work with address the key issues and debates that have arisen out of sports reportage of female sporting events. It is against this background that this study investigates how female beach volleyball typifies the social arrangements discussed above; see Boutilier and SanGiovanni, 1983 cited in Scraton and Flintoff, 2002:83. The study is based on the hypothesis that the nature of the images and text on the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) Olympics website is overdetermined by the construction of women in other popular texts such as men's magazines etc. In particular it explores the NBC website's coverage of women's beach volleyball at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, looking at texts and photographs (image interpretation and analysis) of the athletes, where in most cases, the emphasis is on the women's bodies (dressed only in bikinis), rather than on their sporting competence as Olympic competitors.

### ***3. Objectives of the Study***

In focusing on the meanings obtained from the content of the website (texts and images), the study will investigate how these meanings are naturalised in specific moments of production as well as through their intertextual relationships with similar texts involved in the glamorisation of female athletes. Catelnuvo and Guthrie (1998: 13, cited in Roth and Barsow, 2004: 252) argue that because the sporting arena offers women the potential for reducing physical power imbalances on which patriarchy is founded and reified, one way to limit and deemphasise women's physical power and capabilities is to associate female athleticism with female 'sex appeal'.

Female beach volleyball was introduced as an official Olympic event in 1996. I have chosen to focus on it because it has generated controversy, with respect to the mandated uniforms for its female athletes, for almost a decade both in sporting circles and within the media - providing a suitable case study. In 1999 the regulating body of beach volleyball Fédération Internationale de Volleyball (FIVB) reduced uniform sizes for both male and female competitors, requiring female teams to wear skimpy two-piece uniforms, whereas the men could compete in shorts and T-shirts (Australian Broadcasting Corporation: Beach

Volleyball, 1999). According to the FIVB Olympic beach volleyball tournament specific competition regulations (2004) the uniforms are practical for a sport played on sandy beaches during the heat of summer. Generally, the content of visual sport media suggests, as argued by Duncan (1990), that only the most glamorous women athletes are worthy of being pictured, and their non active poses often resemble soft-core pornography.

The NBC Olympics website coverage of women's beach volleyball at the 2008 Beijing Olympics will be the focal point of the research because NBC (2009) holds the exclusive terrestrial rights to show Summer Olympics and Winter Olympics and has shown live coverage of every Summer Olympics since 1964 (The Museum of Broadcast Communication, 2009) in the U.S. It is thus the primary conveyor of visual images of female beach volleyball players to the public. In undertaking a reception analysis of the texts and images on the NBC Olympics website the study will explore and attempt to account for the 'naturalisation' of these texts and images, a naturalisation that arguably the image producers are also subject to. Through the research I intend to account for the connotative power of other texts i.e. the men's magazines and pornography, and how this is likely to be carried through into shaping the meanings that are read off the website. Arguably the production of the NBC texts and images are overdetermined by the existence of similar texts already in transmission in the circuit of culture.

#### ***4. Significance of the Study***

Focusing on textual and image reception will enable me to explore the intertextuality of the hegemonic field held in place not only by the NBC Olympics website but by various forms of popular culture such as men's magazines, music videos, advertisements and pornography. Therefore demonstrating the central role of intertextuality in the production of meaning i.e. when meaning is not transferred directly from writer to reader but instead is mediated through, or filtered by, codes imparted to the writer and reader by other texts (Kristeva, 1980: 69). The importance of intertextuality to textual meaning-production is critical in informing this particular study and forms the basis of the formulation of the interview questions which will seek to understand this process of naturalisation particularly with respect to the images on the website and also in the texts concerning beach volleyball.

The theoretical point of reference for this study is the claim that sexual stereotyping is intrinsic to the media coverage of women's sports and that being 'sexy' is often read as 'natural' because it is not dissimilar to sexualised representations of women across a range of media- from men's magazine to mainstream Hollywood movies. Ironically as many feminist theorists (for example, Borrie, 2000; Creedon, 1994; Hargreaves, 1994; Shugart, 2003) point out, the increasing presence of female athletes in mainstream media does reflect the growing social power of women, but their sexualised portrayal is a continuation of their historical oppression (Creedon, 1994: 19, 29; Hargreaves, 1982:44).

The study will be located within the critical histories and sociologies of sport which have been informed by those debates within Cultural Studies, concerned as they are with the relationship between culture and ideology (Hall, 1981). In particular, it will be located within the reception studies strand of Cultural Studies, with its focus on the meanings readers make of the texts they consume.

## ***5. Thesis Outline***

The thesis consists of seven chapters. Chapter One introduces the topic to the reader and discusses the background of the study, its objectives, its significance and also gives a detailed outline of the rest of the thesis chapters.

The second chapter discusses the context within which the NBC Olympics website is produced, transmitted and received. Sports journalism will be introduced first as the broader context within which the entire study is situated and this will include how it works into both cultural contexts and gender values. Additionally the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) will be contextualised in terms of its relevance to the study.

The third chapter, the literature review, discusses the theory that informs this study. The first part deals with feminist theory with respect to sport and the media. The second part of the chapter focuses on theory informed by the cultural studies paradigm with respect to the focal point of the entire study. It explores the concept of intertextuality, ideology, Stuart Hall's model of preferred reading, sports and eroticisation and Antonio Gramsci's concept of common sense and good sense.

The fourth chapter focuses on the methods, procedures and techniques employed in the study. It deals with the relevance as well as importance of qualitative research as it pertains to this

particular study. The data collection methods are discussed in-depth as well as the sampling procedures and methods of data analysis.

In the fifth and sixth chapters all the findings of the study are discussed in relation to the theories discussed in the second chapter.

The seventh and final chapter concludes and summarises the entire study and possibly answers why female athletes need to continue to be sexualised in order to be considered for mainstream media coverage. Additionally a better understanding of the media's potential in resisting stereotyped images of female athletes will be discussed.

**CHAPTER TWO**  
**SITUATING SPORTS JOURNALISM AND THE NBC OLYMPICS**  
**WEBSITE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

I suddenly had a passion to be that ordinary girl. To be that good little housewife, that glorified American mother, that mascot from *Mademoiselle*, that matron from *McCall's*, that cutie from *Cosmo*, that girl with the *Good Housekeeping* Seal tattooed on her ass and advertising jingles programmed in her brain. (Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying*, 1973: 277-278; Cited in Creedon, 1994: 108)

### **1. Introduction**

This chapter will discuss the broader socio-cultural context within which the NBC Olympics website is produced, transmitted and received. The media are the creation of a technological society in which availability of information is indispensable. Responsibility for content is inherent in the very nature of the media's job as is the selection process and the decisions made on what to broadcast and write; these decisions have a direct effect on predominant societal culture. As Boutilier and SanGiovanni (Cited in Cohen, 1993:171) note, regardless of what is actually happening, it is the media's interpretation of that event that shapes our attitudes, values and perceptions about the world and about our culture. It must also be noted that there is much debate within media studies regarding the ability of the media to shape these attitudes and perceptions.

The institution of sport has developed a unique relationship with the media industry. A symbiotic relationship has evolved, so that sport is used to sell newspapers and magazines, to boost television ratings, to attract corporate sponsorship and at the same time create interest and demand for sport (Hargreaves, 1994). In recent times, women have revolutionised their performances and developed their skill and expertise in various competitive sports. However, as I will argue in this chapter, the media is seen to actively sideline the proficiency and potency of female athletes when compared to the coverage and treatment given to their male counterparts. In the remainder of this chapter I will discuss sports journalism first in the context of debates examining the relationship between the media and society particularly in relation to gender values. Next I will provide a historical context of the NBC Sports division and its coverage of the Olympic Games and its dedicated Olympics website.

## ***2. Sports Journalism***

Sports journalism is anything but standardised. It is a conglomerate of multiple forms of expression, styles and methods and people, that, as in sports, for reasons of simplification, is given a common denominator. A certain uniformity has grown up in sports news and reports, but differences still remain. The alloys and combinations differ, with the result that personal accents are given prominence and different profiles are created. Sports journalism has many different faces, each of which satisfies the expectations of different tastes. (Claeys & Van Pelt, cited in Creedon, 1998:101)

Sports journalism covers many aspects of human athletic competition, and is an integral part of most media forms, including newspapers, magazines, radio and television news broadcasts. The prominence of sports in Western culture has justified the attention of journalists to not just cover the competitive events in sports, but also to report on the athletes and the business of sport (Creedon, 1994:111). Women's sports tend to get recurrently signified in ways that are associated with dominant ideas about gender. This process of signification and embodied ideologies are not fixed and unchanging, but rather sites of struggle and negotiation over gender values and understandings (Hargreaves, 1994:196). This can therefore justify the claim(s) that the sports media plays a significant role in shaping public consciousness about gender and can also offer a possible explanation as to why when compared to coverage of male sporting events female athletes are given an insignificant amount of any sort of coverage.

This is what John Bromley, Head of BBC Sport, had to say when he was questioned about the negligible coverage of women's sports:

We do cover women's sports. For example we give just as much time to the women's final at Wimbledon, to female athletics, and to gymnastics. There is no audience for women's field hockey – so we do not show it. (Channel 4's Open Air Programme, 14 April 1989; Cited in Hargreaves, 1994:197)

Arguably, it is precisely the lack of coverage that contributes to the lack of an audience. One could argue that male hockey is not aired either, however the fact still remains, as Cohen argues, that the poor coverage of female athletic events sends a compelling message about the sanctioning of sport as a male preserve (1993:174).

### ***2.1. Overt and Covert Perpetuation of Sexism***

As Cohen (1993:172) points out, until recently female sports were ignored by the mainstream sporting press. When female athletes were featured, traditional stereotypes were the focal

point. Elaborate descriptions were given to the women's physical appearance, dress, style and even sexual preference. Furthermore:

[...] ambivalence toward women athletes has taken the form of symbolic denial of power to women through exclusionary and denigrating tactics. The power, strength, and endurance factors related to drive, struggle and strategy in competition are rarely mentioned. In recent years positive images of sportswomen are combined with negative suggestions or innuendo that serves to trivialise or undercut their performance. Sexist images and references remain problematic but the new brand of sexism is more covert. (Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988; Cited in Cohen, 1993:172)

Moreover sports commentators are notorious for their overt observations, creating artificial, ambivalent, sexist and racist references i.e. the negative suggestions and innuendo as referred to above. For example female gymnasts are usually described as cute and 'pixie-like' athletes, in a similar context male athletes would not be described using the same loaded terms. Another example of these negative descriptions of female athletes occurred at the 1988 Winter Olympics when Al Trautwig of ABC (American Broadcasting Corporation) commented:

[...] once upon a time they were sweet little girls, then something went wrong. They grew up and became downhill skiers. And here they are at Calgary. (Cohen, 1993:173)

Not every sports commentator or pundit negotiates their opinion in this manner; intelligent, sophisticated commentary (whether spoken or in images portrayed) about female athletes is a reality of modern day reporting too but subtle references to sexuality and gender superiority can be found if close-attention is paid. Commentators are becoming increasingly covert in their analysis and discussions of athletic events due to the fear of public outcries that can undermine their positions and authority. A central theme in sport reportage is the concept of male superiority and female inferiority. As Creedon argues by utilising traditional definitions of 'female' and 'femininity' as the antithesis of 'athlete' and 'athletic' the *de facto* norm or standard against which performance is measured becomes maleness or 'masculinity' (1998: 90).

To give one a clearer picture with respect to the unbalanced coverage, the following facts and figures must be considered: men's sports enjoy massively more print coverage than women's (Chambers, 2004:112). In the US, print stories exclusively about men's sports outnumber those about women's sports 23:1, with 92 percent of photographs showing men (Duncan & Messner, cited in Chambers, 2004:112). In the UK between half a percent and 5 percent of the total sports space in national newspapers concerned women's sports in 1992 (Hargreaves,

1992; Cited in Chambers, 2004:112). In both the US and the UK the explanation for the concentration on a few men's professional sports is that these are the major, big money sports, as well as the fact that men are the chief consumers of sports news and they are not interested in serious sports news being produced by women.

## 2.2. *Women and Sports Journalism*

I will argue in this section that the secondary status of female journalists is linked to the representation of female athletes. Lisa Olson's 1990, assault by a group of New England Patriot players is considered a watershed moment for women in sports journalism. According to Ricchiardi (2005) the *Boston Herald Newspaper* reporter was accosted by naked football players who made vulgar comments and lewd gestures as she conducted a practice-day locker-room interview. The NFL's (National Football League) investigation noted that one player, Zeke Mowatt, was seen fondling himself at an arm's length from Olson and asking her: 'Is this what you want?' Others gyrated their hips behind the reporter, echoing Mowatt's comments. The reporter spoke of how the players positioned themselves inches away from her face and dared her to touch their private parts. According to sports sociologist Mary Jo Kane female sports journalists have been made to feel marginalised and worthless in their profession. Commenting on Kane's work, Ricchiardi writes:

[...] female sports journalists often have been targets because they have 'backstage access' to one of the most powerful and revered symbols of male superiority in American culture (and most others), coupled with a public voice, through the media, to criticise men. That, she concludes, places them in a unique position regarding the power relationship between the sexes. For men to regain control, women have to be reassigned to the role of sex object. The gender order is upset when women enter a locker room (2005).

According to Chambers et al., sports news is illustrative of deep and enduring gender divisions in journalism, in terms of who is permitted to cover which sports, how athletes are covered as well as in terms of which genders serve as audiences (Chambers, Steiner and Fleming, cited in Boyle, 2006:144). Additionally the lack of involvement in the production of sport media is, according to a number of writers (for example, Cohen, 1993; Creedon, 1994; Hargreaves, 1994) one of the reasons for their under-representation in sporting reportage. The enormous imbalance in the representation of sportsmen and women is not unconnected to sexual imbalances in the newsroom. Sports journalism remains one of the last journalistic arenas in which women have failed to make real progress, in terms of their ability to make an impact as sports broadcasters and writers and to move upwards within the institutional

organisations that shape journalism (Boyle, 2006: 145). This uneven balance between sexes occurs in all areas of the sports media where only a handful of female journalists work as sports presenters and commentators, the majority are men and those in high-powered positions are all men (Hargreaves, 1994:198).

It is unsurprising that female athletes are represented the way they are given the male dominance of sports newsrooms. Tracy Dodds, a groundbreaker in women's sports reporting who works as a sports enterprise writer for the *Indianapolis Star* and a former president of the Associated Press Sports Editors has noted that, early male stereotypes of female sportswriters were as: 'sluts and groupies'. It has changed today, but there still is a long way to go (Ricchiardi, 2005). The progress for women sportswriters has been monumental. Yet, many say they are still butting their heads against a glass ceiling, a hierarchical system that prefers men for the top jobs.

In this respect, Brian Oliver, sports editor of *The Observer*, observes:

Of course it's a man's world in sports journalism and having a female sports editor might make a difference, but I can't see that happening. There are women editors, business editors, magazine editors, travel editors, review editors, features editors - but no female sports editor on a national newspaper, and I don't think there ever has been one. There are plenty of female editors who could appoint one, but they choose not to. (Mackay, 2008)

It is therefore evident that, with few exceptions, sports media professionals reinforce rather than undermine gender inequalities. As Chambers (2004:112) points out, the process is self-reinforcing: the number of men who watch sport largely outnumbers women who watch and consume sport and its images, therefore advertisers are only willing to spend on this male target audience, meaning female sporting events are given severely negligible coverage. Moreover, the general notion that women reporters should be confined to writing about women for women has carried over into sports reportage.

### ***3. The National Broadcasting Company (NBC)***

Formed in 1926 by the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) NBC was the first major broadcast network in the United States. In 1986, control of NBC passed to General Electric (GE), with GE's \$6.4 billion purchase of RCA. After the acquisition, the chief executive of NBC was Bob Wright, until he retired and was replaced by Jeff Zucker. The network is currently part of the media company NBC Universal, a unit of General Electric (80%) and Vivendi (20%). NBC is available in an estimated 112 million households, or 98.6% of the country. NBC has 10 owned-and-operated stations and nearly 200 affiliates in the United States and its territories (NBC Universal, 2009). It is thus the primary conveyor of visual images of female beach volleyball players to the public.

#### *3.1. NBC Sports and Olympic Coverage*

NBC Sports is the brand used for sports programming on NBC, responsible for the televising of many sports events on the network. Formerly 'a service of NBC News' it broadcasts a diverse array of programs, including the Olympic Games (through 2012), the NFL, the NHL, Notre Dame Football, the PGA Tour, the first two events of American horse racing's Triple Crown, the USGA Championships, Wimbledon, the French Open and the Dew Action Sports Tour (NBC Universal, 2009).

Sports journalism in the United States has traditionally been written in a looser, more creative and more opinionated tone than traditional journalistic writing. An emphasis on the accurate description of the statistical performances of athletes is also an important part of sports journalism (Steen 2007:96). This holds true for NBC Sports coverage of various events.

NBC Sports coverage of the Olympic Games consists of broadcasts on the various networks of NBC Universal in the United States, including the NBC broadcast network, Spanish language network Telemundo, and many of the company's cable networks. The telecast runs for 17 days primarily in the evening and weekend afternoons on NBC, with varying times on the other networks. The Winter Olympic Games are normally televised in February in non-leap, even years, next in 2010. The Summer Olympic Games are normally televised in August in leap years, next in 2012 (NBC Universal, 2009).

#### *3.2. NBC Olympics Website and 2008 Summer Olympics*

In 2008, events were streamed live for the first time on the Internet through the website

NBCOlympics.com. NBC Sports coverage of the 2008 Summer Olympics was broadcast from August 6 to August 24, 2008 (including selecting football matches prior to the opening ceremonies) on the various television networks of NBC Universal in the United States. Coverage was broadcast on NBC, Telemundo, USA Network, CNBC, MSNBC, Oxygen, their associated HDTV simulcast channels where applicable, and Universal HD. NBC also set up two dedicated cable channels, the NBC Olympic Soccer Channel and the NBC Olympic Basketball Channel, for the express purpose of providing additional coverage of those two sports (NBC Universal, 2009).

The scale of the coverage grew to the same huge proportions as the Games themselves. In 2008, NBC was scheduled to air over 3,600 hours of live coverage (1,400 on the TV networks and 2,200 more online). According to NBC, that is 1,000 more hours than the combined coverage of all Summer Games since that first telecast in 1964. NBC also used 106 hosts, announcers, and commentators to cover the action (NBC's 'Complete' Olympics, 2009). On August 11 2008 NBCOlympics.com had 7.8 million unique page visits and 476,062 downloads from cellular telephones.

The NBC Olympics website coverage of women's beach volleyball at the 2008 Beijing Olympics will be the focal point of the research because NBC (2009) holds the exclusive terrestrial rights to show Summer Olympics and Winter Olympics and has shown live coverage of every Summer Olympics since 1964 in the U.S. (The Museum of Broadcast Communication, 2009).

#### ***4. Conclusion***

In summary, this chapter has attempted to put the study into perspective through discussing the broader context of sports journalism within which the NBC Olympics website emerges as a primary resource. The current very limited coverage of female athletes by the mass media can be described as demeaning and the entire social construction of female athleticism by the media warrants change. Within this context the role sports journalism plays in the perpetuation of sexism has been examined in addition to the role of women within the sports journalism sphere and we were introduced to the idea that this may play a part in the minimal coverage female athletes get in the sporting press. In its coverage of the female beach volleyball events at the Beijing Summer Olympics in 2008 the NBC sports website's reporters and writers who covered the events were all male adding credence to the point made

earlier in this chapter that sports journalism is fiercely guarded as a male domain and if women want to negotiate it and become a part of it they have a role to play as both journalists and the athletes being covered.

## ***CHAPTER THREE***

### ***LITERATURE REVIEW***

#### ***1. Introduction***

In this chapter I will discuss the theory that informs this study. The first section will cover feminist theory that is relevant to the study. It will begin with an outline of this theory and indicating how it can inform an analysis of the sporting sphere, in particular the representation of female athletes. Next I will discuss gendered stereotyping in the media, as well as the caricaturization of feminine images which, as I will argue, ensure that females remain secondary or even irrelevant in terms of their portrayals as athletes. Sports feminism theory will also be drawn upon in my examination of issues such as separatism in sport, relations of capitalism to gender as well as those of class. Next I will examine how sports promotional tools exploit the image of the female athlete.

Furthermore, in order to examine the above mentioned issues I will draw on cultural studies theory. Firstly I will engage in a discussion of intertextuality and how it informs society's reading of various texts and may contribute to the indifference and desensitisation to texts and images that exploit the depiction of females. The concept of intertextuality is especially important to the study because it highlights how readers derive meanings from the mediascape and how they in turn naturalise these meanings and interact with their everyday lived experiences. Drawing on the work of Louis Althusser and Pierre Bourdieu, I will also examine how ideology is conveyed through language and symbolism. Stuart Hall's theory on preferred reading that he developed to explain the different positions readers take when using and interpreting media messages will be drawn upon next. Additionally the discussion will include a look at sports and the eroticisation of female athletes and it will conclude with an in-depth discussion of Antonio Gramsci's thoughts and ideas on ideology, hegemony, common sense and good sense.

## ***2. Theoretical Frame – Feminist Theory***

Feminist media studies is concerned with the portrayal and position of women in the media and with a central premise being that the portrayal of women in the media is the result of male perceptions of women. One of the reasons for this treatment of women by the media is deeply entrenched male patriarchy (Creedon, 1994:18). In-depth study of patriarchy has become part of feminist studies arguing that western society, its history, politics, economics and knowledge production has been dominated by men and that the female perspective has been ignored (Hargreaves, 1994). Feminist media studies are important in that they can serve to make us aware of how almost all discourses in society are gender based or rather can be analysed from a gender perspective – in this case the subject of choice is sports journalism and the thesis works towards uncovering whether this holds true or not.

Analysing sports is an inherently controversial affair and the sociology of sports incorporates different and conflicting theories of society – those which in general support conventional ideas about sports, about the nature of society and about masculine and feminine identities and those which question them (Creedon, 1994:21).

### **2.1. Media Research, Feminist Theory and Sport – Creating and Reflecting Gender Values**

For the purposes of this thesis it is important to examine the values of our media systems and the values that are used to construct media representations of women. This can be achieved by looking at the role of the media in presenting stereotyped images of women in sport.

#### ***2.1.2. Stereotype Perpetuation in the Media: Sport, Physicality and Gender as Power***

Although the presence of women athletes in the media appears to represent fundamental social change – that sportswomen have gained widespread social acceptance – in reality, these ‘feminised’ images represent an attempt to reinforce traditional stereotypical images of femininity and female sexuality (Creedon, 1994: 28). Male and female can be said to be biological terms that represent physical differences in size, structure and reproductive capacity, feminine and masculine correspond to social, historical and cultural meanings that have been associated with these biological differences (Betterton, Birrell & Cole, Smith-Rosenberg & Rosenberg, Vertinsky, cited in Creedon, 1994: 29). However the relationship

between sexual difference and gender difference is more than a mere association – sexual (physical) becomes gender (social) difference.

Therefore the biological signifiers of being female (e.g., physical attributes, size, structure and reproductive capacity) require individuals to look, dress and act differently, in terms of gender roles and gender values, than those individuals who carry the biological signifiers of being male. Most authors (for example, Borrie, 2000; Cohen, 1993, Creedon, 1994; Hargreaves, 1994; Shugart, 2003) in the field of media research agree that sexism is continually perpetuated by sports journalists, commentators, pundits and sports fans. To date female athletes are featured in main stream sporting press predominantly in contexts whereby traditional stereotypes are on show, as exemplified by the NBC Olympics website's coverage of female beach volleyball at the Beijing Olympics in 2008 .

### *2.1.3. The Female Athlete as Caricaturised Femininity*

Specific findings from research literature suggest that visual production techniques, language, terminology and commentary applied to women's sport are selectively imposed by the media to provide a highly stereotypical feminised view – one that tends to sexualise, commodify, trivialise and devalue women's sporting accomplishments (Creedon, 1994: 36). For example Hinckley tells us:

[...] in America the second week of the NBC's Beijing 2008 Olympic coverage was dominated by women's beach volleyball. The coverage of the whole scantily-clad-women beach volleyball package was so thorough, that some viewers may be wondering if this was not just setting us up for the 2012 London Games to give gold medals in lap dancing. There was a lot of Bikini Babes on Parade, a fact of which NBC seemed acutely aware. Any time their antennae sensed that guys might be reaching for the remote, someone instinctively threw up a promo that said, 'Next: More Beach Volleyball!' (Hinckley, 2008)

In a study that looked at trivialisation through feminisation, Hillard (1984) found that media coverage given to professional female tennis players focused on their physical attractiveness rather than their sporting achievements. Creedon adds:

[...] the most recent research demonstrates no change in this type of coverage. For example, the Duncan et al. (1990) study found that television treated women differently, both as spectators and as participants. Women spectators were treated as comical targets of newscasters jokes and/or sexual objects, while at the same time, the technical framing (e.g. production techniques) of women's sporting events trivialised the seriousness of their athletic performance. A comparison of the coverage given to women's and men's basketball illustrates the unevenness in production techniques. Men's basketball contests were framed as dramatic spectacles of historic importance, while women's basketball contests were the feel of neighbourhood pickup games. (1990:35)

The media are active agents in the construction of meanings that come to be identified with specific images and themes (Creedon, 1990: 37). At the same time they also have the power to perpetuate and spread counter stereotypical images. Sport represents a potential site for empowering and liberating women much in the same way it has enabled minorities to challenge the ideology of subservience attached to them. At the very best, the mass media can play an active role in this ongoing liberation that is empowering countless young girls and women in sport.

## **2.2. Feminist Perspectives – Sports Feminism**

The chief concern for sports feminism can be said to be the desire for equality of opportunity for women in comparison with men. It represents a struggle by women to get more of what men have always had. This can be said to be a central feature of liberal democratic ideology, the intellectual and political framework of which is usually described as liberal-feminist (Hargreaves, 1994: 25). Liberal feminism is defined as an attempt to remove or compensate for the ascriptive and social impediments that prevent women from competing on equal terms with men, without otherwise challenging the hierarchal structures within which both sexes operate (Miles & Middleton, cited in Hargreaves, 1994:26). This then makes it imperative to look at gender with respect to issues of separatism in sport which are linked to dominant ideas about the biological and psychological predispositions of men and women, supposedly rendering men ‘naturally’ suited to sports, and women, by comparison, less suited. Separatism has also been a strategy for dealing with the cultural power that men wield in sports. Capitalist relations to gender must be considered as well i.e. whether patriarchy or capitalism is the primary reason for women’s oppression, additionally issues of gender and class must be looked at with respect to sports feminism.

### 2.2.1. Gender

Of all cultural practices sport is, arguably, the one that most prominently serves to demarcate the genders. Boys grow into a world in which sport is a significant component of masculinity. Furthermore:

[...] being sporting provides an ease of entry into masculinity, whilst to dislike sport prompts confines of conventional femininity. Sport and femininity are set up as conflicting systems so that reassurance has constantly to be offered that despite an involvement in sport a girl is also feminine. Such difference is not, of course, produced by representation alone, lived sporting practices themselves have always had masculinity structured in dominance. As such they are means by which patriarchy has been able to reproduce its power and authority in society (Horne *et al.*, 1999: 171).

Gender constructions particularly within sports media are structured by power relations.

Higgs and Weiler found that:

[...] although women were given greater coverage in individual sports, that coverage was divided into shorter and more heavily edited segments. In addition, commentators relied on gender marking, biased and ambivalent reporting, and a focus on personalities as opposed to athletic abilities when covering women's sports. (1994; Cited in Horne *et al.*, 1999: 172)

Williams, Lawrence and Rowe (cited in Horne *et al.*, 1999: 172) argued that despite any gains that women have made in the struggle to obtain equality in Olympic competition, their participation was limited to their image, as defined by the media, is structured according to prevailing gender stereotypes (Yeates, 1992: 17).

Within the sphere of feminist studies such image production is also challenged alongside the construction of gender differences and power relations. Halbert and Latimer (1994; Cited in Horne *et al.*, 1999: 172) have argued that although women have made great strides in sport their achievements will continue to be meaningless as long as sports broadcasters undermine, trivialise and minimise women's performances through biased commentaries and representations.

### 2.2.2. Separatism in Sport

Early forms of organised sport for women were established within mainstream society in the nineteenth century. According to Hargreaves (1994: 30) they were marked by their insular, separatist nature, developing mostly in the private spheres of schools, colleges and clubs. Because organised sports for women were almost always separated from men's sports, it was easy to define them as qualitatively different, in tune with conformist ideas about femininity and masculinity. At the start of the twentieth century, sports feminists particularly those in North America promoted separate sports for men and women for reasons they termed

'ethical'. They opposed men's sports because they believed they concentrated too much on competition and were overspecialised and corrupted by commercialisation (Theberge; cited in Hargreaves, 1994: 30). This provided the historical basis for the idea that there should be 'feminine appropriate' sports and 'masculine appropriate' sports, and a pattern of sex-role stereotyping was established – and therefore provided a practical and ideological foundation for separatism in sports. In recent times improved dialogue on issues related to separatism has developed mainly as a reaction to the powerlessness, frustration and anger experienced by sportswomen who have suffered serious sexual discrimination in sporting spheres.

Opposition to male control of most sports, rather than to their violent and aggressively competitive character is the resulting separatist position. It advocates the idea that women should be able to participate in sports that are associated with conventional images of masculinity and fiercely controlled by men's organisations for example boxing, motorsport and rugby. It is therefore argued that to be separate is the first step towards taking control from men and putting more women's sport on the map i.e. ensuring ideologies of equal opportunity (Hargreaves, 1994: 31).

However, the argument also prevails among some feminist sports groups that the characteristics of male sports are reactionary and undesirable and they argue that women should not emulate men's sports but should build alternative models which are intrinsically more humane and liberating (Hargreaves, 1994: 31).

### *2.2.3. Gender and Capitalist Relations*

In this instance the focus is on whether patriarchy or capitalism is the primary reason for women's oppression and hence objectification as highlighted throughout this study with respect to sporting reportage. This highlights characteristics that are similar to the debates and contentions between radical and Marxist feminism. Radical feminists argue that if it is ideologies of patriarchy that produces systems of cultural, social, economic and political control, then a transformation of capitalism would not necessarily do anything to change such structures of power (Eisenstein; cited in Hargreaves, 1994: 34). On the other hand Marxist feminism challenges essentialist notions of human nature, asserting that class is the root cause of women's oppression and issues to do with sexuality are secondary. According to the Marxist strand of feminism ideas about gender and sexual difference are socially constructed, that the causes and effects of oppression differ in different societies and that the character and

extent of female oppression have changed historically. For them sexism in sports is perceived to be a component of bourgeois ideology which underpins the sexual division of labour, essential to the stability of capitalism, thus equality between the sexes can never be achieved under capitalism.

Both strands hold credence and are an important point for consideration particularly when it comes to deliberating over and analysing the findings of the research that was carried out with respect to this study.

#### *2.2.4. Gender and Class*

According to feminist research carried out in the eighties particularly in Britain (Deem 1986; Green, Hebron & Woodward 1987; Griffin, Hobson, MacIntosh & McCabe 1982; Hargreaves 1989; Talbot 1988; Wimbush 1986):

[...] the oppressive characteristics of the private sphere of the home and the demands of domestic labour and mothering limit women's leisure, in general, but affect working-class women to a greater extent than their middle-class counterparts. Not surprisingly, although more working class-class females are participating in sports than ever before, it is still the case that they do so in smaller numbers than middle-class women and that active participation plays no part whatsoever in the lives of huge numbers of working-class women. In addition, most of those who actively campaign for the rights of women in sports are middle-class, as are the majority of those women who hold positions of responsibility and power in sports, in common with those who theorise about it. (cited in Hargreaves, 1994: 35)

There is a serious deficiency in information about the specific ways in which class inequalities accentuate gender inequalities in sports. There is a need for more complex theoretical analysis which can deal with the connections between class, gender and cultural power than either radical or Marxist feminism provides. Socialist feminism has taken up this issue in more depth. This form of feminism developed out of a desire to reassess orthodox Marxist theory on the position of women, in order to understand the complexities of the relationship between, and the relative independence of capitalist relations and gender relations (Hargreaves, 1994: 36). However the opposition that has been posed between patriarchy and capitalism has tended to mask the significance of other variables, such as ethnicity, which themselves are related to gender and class.

### **2.3. Sexploitation**

The extent to which a sport is framed as feminine or masculine controls if and how women participate in it. Because sport offers women the potential for reducing physical power imbalances on which patriarchy is founded and reified one way to limit and deemphasise women's physical power and capabilities is to associate female athleticism with female sex appeal (Catelnuvo & Guthrie; cited in Roth & Barsow, 2004: 252). There is a tendency of ensuring the acceptability of female athletes by making them appealing to men and it is referred to as 'the female apologetic' (Lawler; Theberge; cited in Roth & Barsow, 2004: 252). This explains why the use of sex to reinforce femininity applies to all sports even those that may not be sexy themselves, e.g. basketball and track and field, but that are sold through sex.

In recent years, through diverse forms of media and publications, an increased focus has been placed on the physical attributes of female athletes. This focus has, in many instances, detracted from the sporting performances and abilities of the athletes so portrayed. It has done so by sexualising the female athlete at the expense of her sporting achievements (Borrie, 2000). The athlete's portrayal as a sportswoman becomes less than the titillating factor of a naked or scantily clad body. The promotion of female athletes in this manner is underpinned by a certain irony, as it is only due to their sporting performances that they are able to attract the media in this way. It is obviously regrettable that in many sports the sexualised female athlete holds more value for promotion than being world champion. The female body is used to sell many products in throughout society, from cars to washing powder. In certain forms of promotion through sport, the female athlete is also being treated as a commodity - in this case, an overtly sexualised one. This type of promotion is held to be a form of exploitation. And, as is common with exploitation, it can have various negative effects, both on the individual athlete and the sport as a whole. It is therefore crucial that we understand the possible ramifications of using sex to promote women's sport (Borrie, 2000). Sexploitation is used in this context to describe attempts to gain media coverage which focuses attention on the sexual attributes of female athletes, especially the visibility of their bodies. Sexploitation judges the value of the female athlete primarily in terms of her body type and attractiveness, rather than for the qualities that define her as an athlete. This creates an ironic situation for elite athletes. In order to attract media and sponsor interest, many female athletes resort to marketing themselves or their sport for their 'voyeuristic potential' (Borrie, 2000). Therefore it becomes important to also look at promotion as exploitation and this leads us to look at the

negative effects of sexploitation e.g. anxiety and embarrassment linked into issues of self-esteem which can lead to a compromised performance by the athletes.

### *2.3.1. Promotion as Exploitation*

Both sexploitation and a need for sponsorship are not limited to female athletes. However, the issue is presently less contentious for men's sport as it has far greater media coverage, greater sponsorship, and society in general still views sportsmen in a different light to sportswomen, as delineated in Chapter Two. Historically, sport has been considered a male domain and has been used by society to define masculine virtues in terms of physical attributes as well as behaviour such as competitiveness and aggression. Traditionally the male athlete has been glorified by sport and viewed by society and the media with greater credibility as athletes (Borrie, 2000). Consequently, men's sport has traditionally received the vast majority of media coverage. Male athletes also generally have greater access to sponsorship and other forms of financial support. There is undoubtedly some sexual aspect to this process (for example, male NFL footballers playing in tight lycra trousers and male swimmers wearing revealing body hugging one-piece swimsuits) but it is endorsed by society as a positive reinforcement of the athlete both as an individual and, most importantly, in terms of his athletic abilities. Regrettably, the same does not hold true for female athletes.

Viewing female athletes primarily in terms of their sexual attributes rather than their athletic endeavours has the potential to denigrate the individual both as an athlete and as a woman. Sexploitation is not simply a matter of skimpy costumes on female bodies. It is also the inappropriate portrayal of female athletes either in their sporting apparel or in alternative situations. In athletics, track and field athletes of both sexes wear body-hugging outfits of lightweight material. These costumes are designed for technological and functional purposes: to go faster and higher with the least restriction and wind resistance (Borrie, 2000). When Christine Ohuruogu of Great Britain (Gold medal winner at the 2008 Beijing Olympics in the women's 400 metres) competes, the focus is on her achievements not on her clothing or female physical attributes. In their reporting, the media, both print and visual, can then celebrate Christine's success as an outstanding, highly trained athlete. Women's beach volleyball, on the other hand, has introduced uniforms intentionally to focus attention on the athletes' bodies rather than for any technological, practical or performance-enhancing reasons. Women must compete in bra-style tops and bikini bottoms that must not exceed six centimetres in width at the hip (men compete in shorts and T-shirts). The motivation for the

changes to volleyball costumes is reinforced by comments from Mr. Craig Carracher, former CEO of Volleyball Australia, 'If we can show off these bodies at the same time as presenting our sport then we are going to do that' (Barbeliuk; cited in Borrie, 2000).

### **3. Theoretical Frame – Cultural Studies**

Cultural studies as a theoretical approach acknowledges the power of ideology and the hegemonic forces of the ruling class. Nonetheless it also sees audiences as active participants in the communication process with the ability to generate their own meanings. This then works well within this particular study seeing as media representations women athletes are read and interpreted differently by individuals depending on their, cultural and religious backgrounds, class and gender and therefore it is important to unpack the coverage of women's beach volleyball at the 2008 Beijing Olympics with this in mind. We must recall that cultural studies deduce that an active society consists of different conflicting ideologies. Therefore as Griffen explains:

[...] cultural studies place the academic spotlight directly in the ways media representations of culture reproduce social inequalities. And they keep the average person more or less powerless to do anything but operate within a corporatized, commodified world. The ultimate issue for cultural studies is not what information is presented, but whose information it is. (Cited in Fourie, 2007: 142)

In addition, cultural studies becomes relevant in this case because it is balanced between a structuralist perspective according to which people's lives are determined by the socio-economic structures they live in, and a culturalist perspective, according to which people possess social and cultural resources that enable them to create meaningful lives for themselves and to challenge the sociostructural determinants (Hall; cited in Schroder *et al.*, 2003: 41).

#### **3.1. Intertextuality**

Intertextuality as a practice has been around almost as long as humans have told stories. The seeds of intertextuality as a concept can be said to lie alongside the origins of semiotics in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. Firstly, the distinction of signifier and signified demonstrated the arbitrary nature of language. Secondly, the definition between *langue* and *parole* was an important step towards the notion of modern intertextuality – as separating individual instances of communication (*parole*) from the system of communication (*langue*) provides a platform for analysis of each. The idea of the pre-existing 'langue' system was taken up by Barthes in 1984, when he said:

It [*la langue*] is the social part of language, the individual cannot himself either create or modify it" (cited in Allen, 2000:9) providing a step towards his notion of no text being truly original, the famously quoted 'death of the author', and "the impossibility of living outside the infinite text (Barthes; cited in Davies, 2003: 1).

This interdependent relationship between texts can take a number of different forms. It often transcends both genres and media forms so that a text created in one particular medium will be used in some way in another medium. Advertising and music videos are two genres that rely heavily on the use of intertextuality to achieve a particular effect. Often this borrowing of a text to link it to a second one is stylistic. This means that a text will mimic or otherwise copy certain stylistic features of another text. Usually this is done in order to create a particular impact, although there may be instances where this borrowing may seem simply a matter of convenience to give a music video, for example, a particular look (Mean, 2001:790). For the reader of the image, however, the connotative power of the original text is likely to be carried through into the new text.

Intertextuality is drawn upon seeing as it proposes that a text is read in relation to other similar texts. It implies interdependence between texts, the continual deferring of meaning through and between texts (Kristeva, 1980: 69). It occurs regularly in popular media where intertextual tie-ins occur between various popular media from television to films as well as newspaper articles. In most forms of popular media such as film and television one may find that women are mostly to be found playing either matriarchal roles, subservient roles, sexual roles or the role of victims and a male figure is usually portrayed as a saviour, protector or hero (protecting the weak and vulnerable woman) as well as the villain (Mean, 2001:788). Therefore you find that different media e.g. television, film and newspapers share the same generic codes of the 'woman genre' and these stereotypes get perpetuated in society as well as the news media and they become a main stay of what is reported and focused upon continually (Mean, 2001:789)

With respect to the sporting arena the intertextuality of sport and war is a good example of how the male and female divide is represented in the mainstream press. Most sporting situations are represented as battlefields in which male athletes are powerful gladiator type figures whose bodies in most cases are referenced as weaponry (Mean, 2001: 790). Consequently, the exclusion and resistance to women's participation has been especially strong with traditionally 'male' sports, which have been made categorically unacceptable for females due to their emphasis on power, strength, aggressiveness and speed (Snyder & Spreitzer; cited in Mean, 2001: 790). Defending this masculinised categorisation entails the positioning of female athletes as having an unsuitable 'nature' and physical build; ideas

which are strongly supported by intertextual links to other prevalent discourses about the nature of sexes and reproduction e.g. medical discourses (McCrone; cited in Mean, 2001: 790).

### **3.2. Ideology in a Gendered Sporting Context: Theories of Reproduction**

The writings of Louis Althusser and Pierre Bourdieu have been applied to studies of culture and sports. Their approaches are different but also share similarities that identify them as ‘reproduction theorists’. Reproduction theorists argue that sports possess their own specific characteristics, making them relatively autonomous from other aspects of culture but they also have their own unique dynamics (Hargreaves, 1994:18).

For Althusser (Hargreaves, 1994:18-19), ideology became seen as an all-pervasive way of seeing that is taken for granted and naturalised. It is a partial view of the world, systematically favouring the interests of dominant groups at the expense of subordinate groups. The ruling class ideology is the cohesive force on which the reproduction of the social relations of modern capitalist production depends. He describes a number of distinct and specialised institutions as a ‘plurality of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) which ‘function’ massively and predominantly by ideology (cited in Hargreaves, 1994:19).

Education is identified as the dominant ISA in established capitalist societies – noteworthy with respect to this study because school-going children participate in sports as prescribed by their curriculums. In addition to education Althusser also cites cultural ISAs such as literature and the arts as, well as communication ISAs like radio and television and the family ISA through all of which we individuals experience sport (Hargreaves, 1994:19). For him these are institutions where overriding ideology is concentrated and becomes the ‘lived condition’. Although sports are said to have their own effective sphere of influence or relative autonomy from other superstructural levels, it is argued that the ISAs are collectively and ultimately determined by the economic base (Hargreaves, 1994: 19). Althusser tells us that:

[...] the ideologies that characterise modern sports such as competitiveness, chauvinism, nationalism and sexism, function to reproduce existing patterns of domination. In sports, it is claimed; people learn rules and meanings unconsciously so that culture is automatically reproduced in way which serves the needs of capitalism. Sports are conceived in this formulation, not as an area of free expression, of opposition, or of complexity, but essentially as an area of conformity. (1971; Cited in Hargreaves, 1994: 19)

For Althusser patriarchy is assumed to be an ideological realm and sexism in sports as with other ISAs is depicted as an abstract and essentially a historical category which acts as a

functional necessity of capitalist society. Men and women are implied to be passive agents who are persuaded through sport to accept conformist gender divisions. In Althusser 's work a static relationship between sexuality and capitalism is implied but it fails to examine the unevenness of power relations between men and women. However it is useful in that it argues that sports possess their own specific characteristics, making them relatively autonomous from other aspects of culture that also have their unique dynamics.

In structuralist fashion Bourdieu (1978, 1984; cited in Hargreaves, 1994: 19) posits cultural spheres such as sports as having unique features, tempos and crises which are not reflections of what is happening in other spheres, but which are 'homologous' with the capitalist economy and dominant social relations (1978: 821; cited in Hargreaves, 1994: 20). The term 'homologous' is used to argue that, 'in spite of the specific logic of the different fields', such as sports, there is an overall logic about the way these structures work together to reproduce the power relations between the classes. 'Without any deliberate pursuit of coherence,' he says, 'there is, inevitably, class identity and harmony', (1984:173; cited in Hargreaves, 1994: 20).

The term 'habitus' is used to explain the process of reproduction. One's habitus is a set of beliefs, dispositions and behaviour patterns founded on the different class and class fractions and which is the result of upbringing and education (Garnham and Williams; Bourdieu; cited in Hargreaves, 1994:20). The habitus implies that individuals are locked into class-specific lifestyles which encompass cultural tastes like sports. Furthermore the individuals relationship with their physicality (body) is a primary feature of the habitus which is different not only between classes, but between class fractions, defined through indices such as occupation, income or educational level and also according to gender. He argues further that:

Sexual properties are as inseparable from class properties as the yellowness of a lemon is from its acidity: a class is defined by the place and value it gives to the two sexes and to their socially constituted dispositions. This is why there are so many ways of realising femininity as there are classes and class fractions. (Bourdieu, 1984: 107-108; Cited in Hargreaves, 1994: 20)

The focal point of Bourdieu's analysis is class relations which incorporates gender relations. For example he argues that the working classes have a 'practical philosophy of the male body as a sort of power, big and strong, with enormous, imperative, brutal needs which is asserted in every male posture'. He maintains that it is possible to 'map out a universe of class bodies' which tends to reproduce in its specific logic the universe of the social structure'.

Employing a passive model of human behaviour he views social space as 'objective space' which determines people's interactions and experiences. For him women's sports are determined by their class: he states for example that 'differences between the sexes in sports participation increase as one moves down the social hierarchy' (Hargreaves, 1994: 21). Petit-bourgeois women, Bourdieu says, are almost as dissatisfied with their bodies as working-class women and sacrifice much more time and effort to improve their appearance (Hargreaves, 1994: 21).

Social classes and the relations between them are presented by Bourdieu as 'cultural facts' which have primacy over power relations between men and women. Class struggle for Bourdieu is a reproductive struggle, since those who enter the chase are beaten from the start, as the constancy of the gap testifies (Hargreaves, 1994:21). In Bourdieu's work people are treated as if they are properties of the system and he fails to appreciate how cultural fields, such as sports, contain the capacity for people (women) to resist and change social and gender relations.

At this stage it is relevant to introduce Stuart Hall's model of preferred reading that he developed in his key paper – Encoding/Decoding (1980).

### **3.3. Stuart Hall – Model of Preferred Reading**

Hall (1981) used this model to explain the different positions readers take when using and interpreting media messages. According to Hall's theory:

[...] the focus should be on the communication process as a whole, from the moment of producing the programme to the moment of audience exposure to that message and the interpretation thereof. When one relates this theory to culture we see that Hall regards culture as a constant site of struggle between those with and without power. He adds that although major social practices and forms of cultural expression may offer a variety of meanings, their structure generally prefers a set of meanings that works to maintain the dominant ideology. (Fourie, 2007: 281)

We must always keep in mind that the audience is heterogeneous and capable of interpreting a text's messages in a multitude of ways based on contextual factors. Hall has attempted to address theoretically the issue of how audiences make sense of media texts, differing from Althusser in emphasising more scope for diversity of response to media texts. Hall's model suggests three hypothetical interpretation codes for audiences of the text, dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings. Hall argued that the dominant or mainstream ideology is typically inscribed as preferred reading in a media text but that the reader does not automatically adopt this. The social situations of readers, viewers, and listeners may lead

them to adopt different stances. However, ‘negotiated’ readings which are produced by those who inflect the preferred reading to take account of their social position; and ‘oppositional’ readings which are produced by those whose social position puts them into direct conflict with the preferred readings (Hall, 1981:180). Hall’s argument is strong and covers most members of the media audience. We accept the dominant ideology in mainstream media preferred reading, except some of the audience will look in between the lines of negotiated reading or reject the reading and think in favour of our own reading of the text oppositional reading. The framework is based on the assumption that media messages are encrypted with dominant code.

For the purposes of informing this particular research process Hall’s model is valuable because it can clarify that NBC Olympics website is not a complete closed ideological discourse and it also allows for different interpretations of women athletes by different readers. Additionally it moves attention away from the texts in question towards media users who now become the site for the struggle of meaning, where the meanings are actually endorsed (Fourie, 2007: 282).

### **3.4. Sports and Eroticisation**

Female athletes are photographed more often than not in poses that blur the line between sport and soft-core pornography (Duncan, 1990), where the camera tends to linger on parts of the body such as the breasts, buttocks and genitals. In photographing the female athlete the sporting connection is incidental; the sexual one is of paramount importance. As discussed throughout this chapter the meanings we apply to representations of this sort are based on ideas we already have about femininity and sports from our everyday lives. Winship (cited in Hargreaves, 1994:166) argues that these ideas are anchored by the patriarchal relations in which we as individuals have a history and which we already know about. Furthermore:

[...] such signification of the female body depends on sexual imagery and more specifically on the female as a sexual person: these images eroticise the female body and present it as an intimate object made accessible to the voyeur. They trivialise female sports using them simply as channels for the commodification of the female body. In these instances female sporting images derive their meanings from the link with commercial representations of the female body: the marketing of the female body through sports is extremely profitable. (Hargreaves, 1994:167)

Sportified images of female sexuality are metaphors for male desire. Therefore it comes as no shock that sports photography has become a major player in mass market pornography. Apart from using of real female athletes in suggestive poses while playing games like beach

volleyball, models in immodest and suggestive poses holding and wearing sporting attire make for popular pornographic images (Hargreaves, 1994:167). Hargreaves adds:

Snooker cues, cricket bats, boxing gloves and footballs are such obvious symbols of manliness that for bare-breasted women to be holding them suggests a provocative sexual message: that 'real' sports are for men, and women are there to provide excitement and arousal. It is as if women's bodies are part of the equipment – apparatuses of male 'sporting' pleasure – 'playthings' for men. (1994:167)

Sport is typically understood as the male domain; therefore combining sporting images with the insignia of female sexuality provides a provocative illusion i.e. eroticised subordination; for those who enjoy it.

### **3.5. Gramsci: Common Sense or Good Sense?**

This study places itself within the audience-reception paradigm which tells us that the audience can be active (constantly filtering or resisting content) or passive (complying and vulnerable). Furthermore with respect to reception theory this means that a 'text'—be it a photograph, article or other creative work—is not simply passively accepted by the audience, but that the reader or viewer interprets the meanings of the text based on their individual cultural background and life experiences. In essence, the meaning of a text is not inherent within the text itself, but is created within the relationship between the text and the reader.

How does this then tie into the Gramscian conception of 'common sense' and 'good sense'? The answer is not straightforward but his distinction between 'common sense' and 'good sense', might shed light onto audiences (particularly participants in this study) and the counter-hegemonic ideologies they will bring into the focus groups and individual interviews.

#### *3.5.1. Ideological Hegemony*

Often the term 'ideology' is seen as referring simply to a system of ideas and beliefs (Burke, 2005). However, it is closely tied to the concept of power and the definition given by Anthony Giddens is probably the easiest to understand. Giddens defines ideology as 'shared ideas or beliefs which serve to justify the interests of dominant groups' (cited in Burke, 2005). Its relationship to power is that it legitimises the differential power that groups hold and as such it distorts the real situation that people find themselves in.

According to Burke (2005) Gramsci felt that what was missing was an understanding of the subtle but pervasive forms of ideological control and manipulation that served to perpetuate all repressive structures. He identified two quite distinct forms of political control:

domination, which referred to direct physical coercion by police and armed forces and hegemony which referred to both ideological control and more crucially, consent. He assumed that no regime, regardless of how authoritarian it might be, could sustain itself primarily through organised state power and armed force. In the long run, it had to have popular support and legitimacy in order to maintain stability. Burke goes on to tell us:

By hegemony, Gramsci meant the permeation *throughout* society of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs and morality that has the effect of supporting the status quo in power relations. Hegemony in this sense might be defined as an 'organising principle' that is diffused by the process of socialisation into every area of daily life. To the extent that this prevailing consciousness is internalised by the population it becomes part of what is generally called 'common sense' so that the philosophy, culture and morality of the ruling elite comes to appear as the natural order of things (Boggs,1976:39; Cited in Burke 2005).

### 3.5.1.1. *Common Sense*

In a Gramscian sense, common sense comprises the 'diffuse, uncoordinated features of a general form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment'. It contains 'a healthy nucleus of good sense' which, he argues, 'deserves to be made more unitary and coherent' (Gramsci 1971:328; cited in Coben, 1998). Gramsci states that:

Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is. At those times when a homogeneous social group is brought into being, there comes into being also, in opposition to common sense, a homogeneous - in other words coherent and systematic - philosophy. (Gramsci, 1971:419; Cited in Coben, 1998).

He further describes common sense as 'a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions and one can find there anything one likes' (Gramsci 1971:422). It is 'an ambiguous, contradictory and multiform concept'. Nonetheless, although it is 'crudely neophobe and conservative' (Gramsci 1971:423), it contains truths. Gramsci insists that both 'common sense' and 'good sense' are historically and socially situated: 'Every social stratum has its own 'common sense' and its own 'good sense', which are basically the most widespread conception of life and of man' (Gramsci 1971:326). To put it simply common sense can be understood as a cultural universe where the dominant ideology is practiced and spread.

### 3.5.1.2. *Good Sense*

For Gramsci, 'good sense' is best exemplified by the concept of Marxism which he often refers to as the 'philosophy of praxis'. Good sense corresponds to 'philosophy', in that it is inherently coherent and critical. As he says, 'Philosophy is criticism and the superseding of

religion and common sense and therefore it coincides with 'good' as opposed to 'common sense'. Good sense is thus an 'intellectual unity and an ethic in conformity with a conception of reality that has gone beyond common sense and become, if only within narrow limits, a critical conception' (Gramsci 1971: 326 - 333). In order for common sense to be renewed, i.e., to become good sense, one must start with:

[...] a philosophy which already enjoys, or could enjoy, a certain diffusion, because it is connected to an implicit to practical life, and elaborating it so that it becomes a renewed common sense possessing the coherence and sinew of individual philosophies. But this can only happen if the demands of cultural contact with the 'simple' are continually felt (Gramsci 1971:330; Cited in Coben, 1998).

Good sense, for Gramsci, may be created out of common sense through educative Marxist politics. This process does not entail introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity (Gramsci 1971:331).

### *3.5.2. Gramsci and the Media*

From a Gramscian perspective, the mass media have to be interpreted as an instrument to spread and reinforce the dominant hegemony, although they could be used by those who want to spread counter-hegemonic ideas too.

[...] Pop culture and the mass media are subject to the production, reproduction and transformation of hegemony through the institution of civil society which cover the areas of cultural production and consumption. Hegemony operates culturally and ideologically through the institutions of civil society which characterises mature liberal-democratic, capitalist societies. These institutions include education, the family, the church, the mass media, popular culture, etc (Strinati, 1995: 168-169).

For this study Gramsci's idea of a prominent discourse will be utilised and reinterpreted and be worked into a suitable explanation about culture, the construction of beliefs, identities, opinions and relations i.e. everything under the influence of a dominant 'common sense'.

## **4. Conclusion**

The theoretical literature supporting this study was discussed in this chapter. The main focus has been on the sexualised representation of the female athlete and how the media is a chief perpetrator in this instance. It has tied in the literature on feminist theory, the values of the media and their trivialisation and objectification of feminised images, sport feminism and the concept of sexploitation and how this contributes to a society wide reading of the female athlete. From here the discussion moved into theories within cultural studies i.e.

intertextuality as it pertains to how society 'reads' female athletes, ideology, the preferred readings of texts as theorised by Stuart Hall and the eroticisation of the female athlete through imagery as well as the Gramscian idea of common sense and good sense.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS METHODS**

#### **1. Introduction**

The research is based on qualitative methods of research namely, audience-reception analysis through the use of focus groups, individual in-depth interviews and qualitative content analysis of articles and images taken from the NBC Olympics website. This chapter first deals with the relevance as well as importance of qualitative research as it pertains to my collection of data for this particular study. A discussion of the methods follows next and this is followed by an in-depth look at how data was generated to inform the research process, sampling procedures as well as the methods of data analysis employed.

#### **2. METHODOLOGY: Qualitative Methods**

##### *2.1. What is Qualitative Research?*

Qualitative research methods were employed for the collection of data. These methods were utilised since they are conducted in the natural setting of the social actors, focusing on the process rather than the outcome with the insider view being emphasised (Schroder *et al.*, 2003:28). The primary aim in this instance is to access in-depth descriptions and a subjective understanding of events and actions. The chief concern was to understand social action in terms of its specific context rather than attempting to generalise some theoretical population (Schroder *et al.*, 2003:28). In qualitative research, the research process is often inductive in its approach resulting in the generation of hypotheses and theories. Moreover the researcher is seen as the main instrument in the research process. Additionally Schroder *et al.* tells us:

Research involving qualitative observation constructs records by employing words and images in order to register and interpret the salient verbal and visual features, manifest and latent, of communication processes, and in order to categorise them into different types. In audience research this is the chief methodology used in the cultural studies tradition where a variety of qualitative tools are used for different purposes, e.g. semiotic analysis and discourse analysis of media as text, participant observation of media consumption and various kinds of verbalised accounts of the audience experience elicited in face-to-face interviews with individuals or groups. (2003:30)

Furthermore Bryman (1984) explains that there is a simultaneous expression of preference for a contextual understanding so that behaviour is to be understood in the context of meaning systems employed by a particular group or society. Qualitative approaches to research

examine meaning production as a process which is contextualised and inextricably integrated with wider social and cultural practices.

Thus, according to Lindlof, it is important to explain what observed behaviour or verbal utterances mean in context:

The analytic task is to show the meaningful coherence of these expressions, as it is experienced by the people who are studied. These arguments are then used to construct theoretical propositions which, in the case of media studies, may address such domains as the interpersonal negotiation of media content, or on a more macro level, the societal constitution of mediated communication, or both. (1995:25)

## *2.2. What can we learn from Qualitative Research?*

The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue. In addition:

It provides information about the human element of an issue i.e. the often contradictory behaviours, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of individuals. Qualitative methods are also effective in identifying intangible factors, such as social norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion, whose role in the research issue may not be readily apparent. Although findings from qualitative data can often be extended to people with characteristics similar to those in the study population, gaining a rich and complex understanding of a specific social context or phenomenon typically takes precedence over eliciting data that can be generalised to other geographical areas or populations. In this sense, qualitative research differs slightly from scientific research in general. (Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide: 1-2)

## *2.3. What are the benefits of Qualitative Research?*

Rainwater (2007) highlights the fact that qualitative research has a lower cost, is faster than other methods of research and can an opportunity for more in depth analysis when compared to quantitative methods of data collection. He adds:

It is more practical and creates greater confidentiality and accuracy. The research creates a better acceptance of results and data from entire small populations can be obtained. There should be no random sample error and it does not require a complex theory to select a representative sample or in deciphering results. Data can be reported on every segment of the population and when there are differences it is easier to detect. (Rainwater, 2007)

Another advantage of qualitative methods over other research methodologies such as quantitative methods is that the use of open-ended questions and probing gives participants the opportunity to respond in their own words, rather than forcing them to choose from fixed responses, as quantitative methods do. However, questionnaires are appropriate in some cases. Open-ended questions have the ability to evoke responses that are: meaningful and

culturally salient to the participant, unanticipated by the researcher and rich as well as explanatory in nature (Mabweazara, 2006: 47).

Moreover they allow the researcher the flexibility to probe the participant i.e. to ask the why or how questions. The researcher must listen carefully to what participants say, engage with them according to their individual personalities and styles, and use probes to encourage them to elaborate on their answers (Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide: 4).

It is important to highlight the fact that philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research have generally led to the questioning by quantitative researchers of the validity and reliability of qualitative research findings. However as Maxwell (Cited in Strelitz, 2005: 65) states, there is a place for the issue of validity in qualitative research if one applies the concept primarily to accounts, not to methods. He adds:

The applicability of the concept of validity ...does not depend on the existence of some absolute truth or reality to which an account can be compared, but only the fact that there exist ways of assessing accounts that do not depend entirely on features of the account itself, but in some way relate to those things that the account claims to be about. (Strelitz, 2005: 64)

Maxwell's understandings informed the approach to my study in that they allowed for a broader reading of the research findings and hence allowed for flexibility in informing the conclusion to this study – as evidenced in the chapters that follow.

For this study an analysis of content is most relevant and therefore it will be done using reception analysis that incorporates a three-stage design which includes: qualitative content analysis, focus group interviews and individual in-depth interviews. The reason for using this research design is that qualitative research stresses that audience research, in order to construct a valid account of the reception, uses and impact of media, must become audience-cum-content analysis (Jensen et.al, 1991: 135).

### **3. METHODS: Data Collection**

For the reception analysis aspect of the research I utilised a sample selection of respondents to interview using a semi-structured interview schedule within four focus group settings followed by four in-depth individual interviews. I also undertook a qualitative content and image analysis of articles and images from the NBC Olympics website that specifically covered women's beach volleyball events at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The sections that follow will discuss each of these stages of the research process as well as the sampling procedures.

#### **3.1. Reception Analysis**

In reception analysis, texts and their recipients are complementary elements of one area of inquiry which thus addresses both the discursive and the social aspects of communication. It combines a qualitative approach to media as texts, producing and circulating meaning in society, with an empirical interest in the recipients as co-producers of meaning (Jensen, 1988: 3). It has made a departure from conventional reception research and communication methodology, by studying in-depth the actual processes through which media discourses are incorporated to the discourses and cultural practices of audiences. Jensen writes:

Audiences are seen as active producers of meaning, not passive consumers of media meanings. They decode media texts in ways which are related to their social and cultural circumstances and the ways that they individually experience those circumstances. Qualitative reception or audience analysis offers new insights into recipients due to the fact that it takes a processual view of reception; it is able to register how the recipients formulate as well as question particular categories of understanding. (1988: 4)

According to Hall (cited in Schroder et. al, 2003: 122) a basic tenet of reception research is that meaning is never just transferred from the media to their audiences. Meaning in media as well as in face-to-face interaction is generated according to the communicative repertoires, or codes, of the encoder(s) and interpreted according to the communicative repertoires of the decoder(s) – and there is no natural fit between the encoding and decoding. Additionally, media/audience meaning processes are firmly embedded in the social contexts of everyday life in which people use the media.

This tenet is key in informing this particular study and forms the basis of the sort of questions that were formulated and asked at the focus group interviews to understand the participants' process of meaning making – were the images of female beach volleyball players overtly sexualised? Did the participants notice this or were the bikini's just uniforms?

## 3.2. Research Procedure and Sampling

The research utilises a three-stage design which allows for conjectures drawn from one data source to be corroborated or followed up by another. Following herein is a discussion of the three stages of the research process and the sampling procedures i.e. qualitative content analysis; focus group interviews and individual in-depth interviews.

### 3.2.1. *Qualitative Content and Image Analysis*

The purpose of content analysis is to quantify salient and manifest features of a large number of texts (in this case images as well) and the statistics are used to make broader inferences about the processes and politics of representation (Deacon *et al.*, 1999: 119). Deacon *et al.* (1999: 195) tells us that photographs are iconic signs par excellence because they can be mobilised so easily to support the claims to objectivity expressed in the familiar adage ‘the camera cannot lie’. This is due to the fact that the photograph is more literal than any other sign. This makes it imperative to unpack the images that are printed alongside the news text in articles relevant to the research question.

Taking this a step further qualitative content analysis defines itself within this framework as an approach of empirical, methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytical rules and step by step models, without rash quantification (Mayring, 2000). It can be described as a thematic reading of a text. This method adopts an interpretive approach that seeks to explore the ways in which language and images are presented, combined and used in complementary fashion.

This involves exploring the meanings that are embedded in the representations as opposed to looking at the frequency of particular themes as a reflection of particular phenomena which is characteristic of quantitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis allows the reader to probe into and discover content in a different way from the ordinary way of reading a book or watching a television programme (Neuman, 1997:273).

#### 3.2.1.2. *The Epistemology of Reception Analysis*

Reception analysis it must be noted at the outset does not seek to expose people to a predetermined set of questions with predetermined response options. Instead it explores media experiences through the medium of extended talk. It looks to clarify audience practices and experiences; by getting those involved to articulate them in the non-natural but open situation of the qualitative research interview (focus groups in this study) in which participants have considerable power to influence the agenda (Schroder *et al.*, 2003:146). Schroder adds:

Reception analysis is as adamant about securing good data as any other methodological approach. Any study should therefore live up to the standard criteria of reliability, validity and generalisation, as they are conventionally defined by the qualitative research community. (2003: 147)

### *3.2.1.3. How is Qualitative Content Analysis different to Quantitative Content Analysis?*

It can be said that qualitative content analysis wants to preserve the advantages of quantitative content analysis for a more qualitative text interpretation.

For this particular stage of the study Thompson's framework of ideology i.e. modes of operation of ideology (See Chapter 2) were used to undertake the analysis of the articles taken from the NBC Olympics website. In the tradition of critical theory, interpreting ideology is viewed as a particular methodological form of depth hermeneutics (Thompson, 1990). It is relevant to this study because the objective of critical depth-hermeneutics is to illuminate the interplay of meanings that are mobilized by symbolic forms and to discover how these meanings establish, support and sustain given social structures – in this instance the articles and images on the NBC Olympics website and how *they* sustain given social structures of patriarchy.

However, I did not provide a detailed textual analysis; it was carried out in order to familiarise myself with the text sufficiently enough to be able to pursue the cultural research that motivates the project (Schroder, 2003: 126). Mabweazara articulates the point of this step succinctly:

The qualitative content analysis consists of rudimentary textual analysis with the sole purpose of preparing the researcher sufficiently for the role of interview facilitator in the succeeding in-depth interviews. (2006:56)

### *3.2.1.4. Qualitative Content Analysis – Thompsons Modes of Operation of Ideology*

The practice of ideological interpretation requires an identification of symbolic texts that address contested terrains – such as, in this study, the use of sexually suggestive imagery and text in descriptions of female athletes. From this point a 'bottom-up' procedure was applied that sought to identify certain structures in the text, such as metaphorical or figurative uses of language. These forms were then examined for their strategic importance in the symbolic construction of preferred meanings and perspectives.

The five modes through which his conception of ideology can operate are: legitimation, dissimulation, unification, fragmentation and reification. Each of these is outlined below based on Thompson (1990):

*Legitimation* is a representation of something as rightful. This can be achieved via *narrativisation* which can be simply described as claims in stories which recount the past and treat the present as part of a timeless and cherished tradition. It can also be done via *rationalisation* which is basically constructing a chain of reasoning to defend or justify a set of social rules. Legitimation can also be realised using *universalisation*, these are institutional arrangements which serve individual interests but are represented as serving the interests of all. The second mode is *Dissimulation* and it is what Thompson (1990) describes as sustaining of relations of domination that are concealed, denied and obscured. Or they can be represented in a way which deflects attention from or glosses over existing relations or processes. By *euphemisation* and by the figurative use of language – tropes - actions, institutions or social relationships can be described in a way which elicits a positive response (Hattingh, 1998).

Third amongst Thompson's (1990) modes is *Unification*, a form of unity which embraces individuals in collective identity irrespective of difficulties and divisions. It includes *standardisation* – these are symbolic forms adapted to a standard framework; and what Thompson refers to as *symbolisation of unity* which is a collective identity which overrides differences and divisions. The fourth mode is *Fragmentation*, which operates by partitioning those people who might be able to mount a serious challenge to the dominant group. It consists of differentiation which is when differences are emphasised so as to fragment gaps that may otherwise lead to unity and therefore a challenge to the dominant group. It also includes what is termed as *expurgation of the other* which is effective in neutralising potential opposition by painting it as an enemy or a threat that has to be resisted or cut down. The fifth and final mode of operation of ideology is *Reification* whereby transitory states are presented as being permanent and natural. The sociological and historical character of certain instances of society is eclipsed. It includes *naturalisation* wherein a social institution is linked to physiological characteristics. Through *externalisation* social historical phenomena are portrayed as permanent and unchanging. *Nominalisation/passivisation* occurs by removing the agency focus on particular themes at the expense of others.

Either one of these modes may be used to serve a range of ideological functions, or in some instances you could even have two or more of them combine or overlap in their functions. The primary concern of this conception is to understand the ways in which symbolic forms intersect with relations of power.

I have drawn on this model of ideology in conducting the qualitative content analysis for the purposes of the research and this will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

### *3.3.1. Focus Groups and Sample Selection*

This study utilised what Deacon *et al.* (1999: 58) calls researcher-constituted groups which are assembled at the researcher's discretion giving them greater control over the composition of the sample to form my focus groups. Focus groups are extremely important tools in reception analysis because they are seen to produce rich qualitative material, well suited to detailed interpretive analysis and will be this study's primary method of data generation. Research based on focus groups involves bringing small groups of people together to discuss issues identified by researchers. Focus group research is becoming an ever more popular qualitative research method within communication and cultural studies (Morrison, 1998; Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999; Cited in Deacon, *et al.* 1999: 57). Focus groups according to McQuail (1997: 19) are increasingly associated with the reception analysis paradigm which is effectively the audience research arm of cultural studies. Furthermore:

[...] their group basis is claimed to provide insight into the interactive dynamics of small groups (May, 1993: 95), and to mimic the way that everyday media interpretations tend to be 'collectively constructed' by people in social, familial and professional networks (Richardson and Corner 1986, Cited in Deacon, *et al.* 1999: 57).

The drawback of focus group interviews is that they generate normative consensus (Schroeder *et. al.*, 2003: 153).

In line with reception analysis all the participants were required to access the NBC Olympics website prior to participating in the focus groups and during the sessions, particularly the pages on female beach volleyball, in order to make sense of NBC's coverage of the event. In eliciting the participant's responses I probed their consumption of other media texts in which the sexualisation of women is prevalent. This was done in order to further unpack the impact of intertextuality in the reading of various texts by various individuals and to demonstrate the possibility of there being a strong correlation between reading and viewing highly sexualised images in magazines, for example, and watching female athletes participating in competitive sports such as beach volleyball.

The factors considered in the stratification of the participants included an active readership of men's magazines (for the male participants principally) e.g. *Sports Illustrated* and *FHM*, based on Gramsci's common sense understandings. Amongst the female participants there were active members of women's organisations (e.g. Women's Academic Solidarity Association i.e. WASA) at Rhodes University; who it was presumed would come to the interviews possessing a counter-hegemonic ideology based on their readings of texts other than men's magazines – Gramsci's good sense understandings. Members of WASA are mainly academics working for Rhodes in various departments as well as post-graduate students and hence represent a well-informed and highly opinionated sub-section of the Grahamstown populace with many of them professing a feminist ethos in their work and lifestyles.

Furthermore, an interest in sport and issues revolving around gender discourse assisted the researcher in deciding who participated to attempt to move the findings away from normative consensus as much as possible. Having diversity (age, gender, race, religious and spiritual beliefs and professional and academic achievements as well as designations) in the groups paved the way for unanticipated avenues of discussion and enabled a more telling result. The respondents were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule within four focus group settings. See Appendix One for the Interview Guide and Schedule.

Snowball sampling was the most appropriate technique to utilise in this instance as no formal listing exists at Rhodes University for me to refer to in order to get participants for my study i.e. people (students and faculty alike) who were interested in sporting events and gender issues and who were willing to partake in the focus groups. I relied on my personal contacts to get the respondents. Consideration was given to the fact that focus group studies in media research have rarely sought to obtain groups representative of the general population as is the characteristic of most qualitative research (Hansen et al., 1998:265).

I attempted to have the focus groups in a very neutral and comfortable setting as far as all the participants were concerned (Strelitz, 2005:63). One main setting was used, a seminar room at the Journalism and Media Studies Department (African Media Matrix Building) at the Rhodes University Campus in Grahamstown. This particular location was chosen because it provided ease of access to all the participants and it came equipped with an overhead projector and internet access which enabled one to show the texts and images directly off the NBC Olympics website whilst conducting the interviews. Prior to coming in for the

interviews each participant was provided with links to the NBC Olympics website to go over to ensure familiarity with the topic and focus of the study – a necessity of reception research.

As moderator I ensured that all participants were at ease with participating and giving their opinions, I also ensured confidentiality and made it clear that I sought out their opinion and perspectives on the NBC Olympics website, the representation of female athletes in sporting media and how their opinions are informed by readings of other media sources in addition to websites such as these. Furthermore as moderator I ensured that the conversations did not stray too far out of context.

I conducted six focus groups and four individual in-depth interviews. The first four focus groups consisted of 8 individuals and the second set of focus groups had four participants each.

### *3.3.2. Individual In-Depth Interviews*

Due to the fact that group interviews can be characterised as producing consensus I felt it important to complement them with individual interviews. The reason being to bring out depth in the responses i.e. an individual informant can express themselves more and has a greater opportunity to develop an argument in an hour than any group member does in the same amount of time (Schroder, et al: 2003: 153).

Individual in-depth interviews are to all intents and purposes an amalgamation of one-to-one interviews and that is why they are widely utilised within the field of media studies. This one-to-one situation also enables the researcher to ask much more detailed questions that maybe tailored to the specific circumstances revealed by the informants. They have similarities to conversation and are appropriate in tapping the social agents' perspectives on the media, since spoken language remains the primary and familiar mode of social interaction (Jensen, 1982: 240). Schroder *et al.* add:

The individual interview also avoids the 'spiral of silence' effect that may prevent idiosyncratic or controversial views and experiences from being expressed in a group context. The individual interview may thus be the best choice for a researcher who wishes to illuminate a sensitive issue, located beyond the discursive range of the socially acceptable or the politically correct – or an issue that is felt by the individual to be too sensitive to talk about in the presence of others, other than a researcher who grants the informant full anonymity. (2003:153)

As far as sampling is concerned in these types of interviews respondents are selected based on a pre-determined set of screening requirements hence the candidates are purposively

selected from the participants in the focus group interviews. In choosing them fastidious consideration was given to the most eloquent and expressive participants.

For this study in particular careful care was taken to ensure the comfort of the interviewees as with the focus groups. The interview was set up to enable open-ended dialogue in a continuous free flowing interview setting. This was done to give the researcher access to relatively unfiltered and spontaneous meanings from the informants lived experiences (Schroder *et al.*, 2003: 112).

### 3.3.3. Interview Guide

Schroder et al. contend that:

Reception research methodology is predicated upon the qualitative research interview, which is used as a discursive generator for obtaining insight into the interpretive repertoires at the disposal of the informants (participants) as they make sense of a specific media product. The interview is thus a vehicle for bringing forward the media-induced meanings of the informants' life world, but in order to achieve this goal it is the first priority of the interview, in individual in-depth interviews as well as in group interviews, to make the informants (participants) cooperate in the discursive production of meaning. (2003: 156)

I employed semi-structured interviews for both the focus group and individual in-depth interviews because they offer a degree of flexibility in probing and determining certain subjects in greater depth that is not easy to do with a structured interview format (Fontana & Frey, 1994). I set up an interview guide (See Appendix One) that contained clearly formulated questions for the interviews. In coming up with the questions I drew on the theoretical framing and objectives that informed my research. Open-response questions were best suited to this type of an interview setting seeing as I sought unbiased and unconstrained opinion from the respondents and it completely removed any possibility of 'leading' the responses.

## 3.4. Analysing the Data

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed into text and an attempt was made to maintain the sense of meaning which emerged in all the conversations. After which the data was interpreted and analysed further. Given that the interviews produced data in the form of verbatim transcripts, it was the researchers task to interpret the meaning of these data and present their most salient features in critical and coherent form (Jhally & Lewis in Ruddock 2001: 138 – 139; cited in Mabweazara, 2006: 64).

I utilised thematic coding as the mode of analysis of all the transcripts. This approach according to Jensen is:

[...] loosely inductive categorisation of interview extracts with reference to various concepts, headings or themes. The process comprises the comparing, contrasting and abstracting of the constitutive elements of meaning. (1982:247)

Seeing as I had formulated an interview guide to assist me in moderating the focus groups I was able to label and categorise the responses around themes I had pre-conceived within the guide. However unanticipated themes did arise out of the discussions and these were also considered and categorised accordingly for the analysis.

### **3.5. Limitations of the Study**

After the completion of all the research interviews i.e. the focus groups and individual interviews it became apparent upon self-reflection and sustained feedback from my thesis supervisor that there was a link missing in so far as the sorts of response I got and the theme of intertextuality that informed much of the theory and basis of this reception study. One of the main factors in hindsight that limited my findings was that most of the interviewees come from a humanities background and were still deeply involved in the area of representation and power either as students or as academics. This then served to inform their responses and opinions on women and their role in the sporting sphere. Two more factors that possibly also affected the participants is that the focus groups were not homogenous i.e. they were mixed with an equal number of male and female participants and secondly during the individual interviews the male participants in particular, were also possibly constrained by the fact that they were being interviewed by a female, who they knew and perhaps did not want to offend with honest yet stereotypical, politically incorrect and patriarchal views on the subject. Finally, in retrospect it became apparent that many of the male respondents might have also been constrained in expressing their views because of the presence of strong feminist focus group members.

In order to possibly off-set the limited and ambiguous set of original findings from the interviews I set up another individual interview, in Dubai, with a man who I do not know on a personal level and who does not share any mutual friends. This was done in order to try and achieve as much of an honest and unbridled response to the questioning in so far as the reception study on the NBC Olympics website was concerned. This proved effective in garnering responses that exemplified the power of intertextuality and its transference into the

consumption of sport media by a young, professional heterosexual man. The reason this particular individual interview was carried out in my hometown of Dubai in the UAE is that after the initial research was carried out including all the focus groups and individual interviews I had to leave South Africa as my student visa had run out and I had commitments to return to in Dubai. I continued working on my thesis and communicating with my supervisor long-distance. He felt that ideally I should re-do the focus group stage of my research but my funding limitations made it impossible for me to do so. A further limitation to my study was my limited access to academic theories and relevant resource materials in the UAE. I was unable to get access to academic libraries at local Universities without being a full-time registered student. Whatever resources I needed I had to access online and this constrained but did not limit my research or the findings too profoundly. I speak further to this in the following findings chapters.

#### ***4. Conclusion***

This chapter discussed the research methodology that underpins this study and the design that was implemented in order to make sense of the topic and the findings. Qualitative methodological techniques were the principal tools chosen to undertake the research process and this was done solely using approaches within reception analysis.

A three stage approach was employed which included qualitative content analysis i.e. thematic readings of texts and images, focus group interviews and individual in-depth interviews. This design was applied because it permits for inferences to be drawn from one data source to be substantiated by another –making for a clearer and concise mapping of findings and conclusions.

The next chapter presents an in depth analysis of the findings of the research based on the methods and design discussed in this chapter.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS**

#### **1. Introduction**

The key purpose of the research is to use the theoretical perspectives within feminist theory as well as cultural studies, reception theory and the notion of intertextuality to probe the research topic i.e. the coverage of beach volleyball at the Beijing 2008 Olympics by the NBC Olympics website. Additionally by carrying out a reception analysis the study explores and attempts to account for the ‘naturalisation’ of the images and texts on the website, a naturalisation that arguably the image producers are also subject to. The emphasis is on probing the differential readings given to texts and to provide a structural account for these different *reading communities*.

Chapter Five and Six both discuss the research findings. They deal with the interpretation of these findings based on the research carried out following the design discussed in the previous chapter. The presentation of these findings is predicated upon the theoretical framework and perspectives discussed in Chapters Two and Three. The findings discussed herein i.e. Chapter Five, are based on carrying out the qualitative content analysis of the text and images on the NBC Olympics website and in Chapter Six on the focus group and individual in-depth interviews.

I will begin with presenting the data and findings from the qualitative content analysis of the sampled articles on beach volleyball (at the 2008 Beijing Olympics) and images in the ‘Cracking the Code’ gallery on the NBC Olympics website. This will be done using Thompson’s model of ideology i.e. the modes of operation of ideology as well as theory on the interpretation of images.

This data will be used alongside the findings from both the focus group interviews and the individual in-depth interviews – see Chapter Six.

## ***2. Qualitative Content Analysis***

As was discussed in the previous chapter, qualitative content analysis is one of numerous research methods used to analyse texts. Research using qualitative content analysis focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text (Hsieh, 2005: 1278). This method goes beyond merely counting words to examining language intensely for the purpose of classifying large amounts of text into an efficient number of categories that represent similar meanings (Weber, 1990; Cited in Hsieh, 2005:1278). These categories can represent either clear communication or contingent communication. Furthermore in most studies whereby qualitative content analysis is carried out the sample size tends to be smaller and that was the case in this instance as well.

### **2.1. Thompson's Conception of Ideology – Strategies of Symbolic Construction**

For this study I drew on Thompson's *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (1984) and *Ideology and Modern Culture* (1990) in order to uncover how the 'language' in the sampled texts from the NBC Olympics website does its cultural work i.e. how it produces meaning and what is the nature of the meaning. Thompson's primary concern is to understand the ways in which symbolic forms intersect with relations of power. He states that ideologies are manifested in the language and symbolism used in the communicative process. He introduces us to general modes of operation, a new formulation of the concept of ideology that can be distinguished and linked to typical strategies of symbolic construction. These strategies are not in themselves ideological; they have this effect only if, under certain conditions, they establish and perpetuate relationships of domination or exploitation (Thompson, 1990). As was discussed in Chapter Three Thompson argues that there are five modes through which his conception of ideology can operate: legitimation, dissimulation, unification, fragmentation and reification.

#### *2.1.2. Thompson: A Tool for Media Analysis*

It is imperative to understand ideology and particularly how it is utilised in a media context. Thompson's (1990) conception of ideology is relevant in that he tells us that ideological content cannot just be 'read off' a media text. Our task is to understand the initial encoding by media professionals, the structure of the text in question and what audiences make of and do with the text (Hanyes, 2004:6).

To overcome the systematic deficiencies of previous theories, Thompson grounds his concept of ideology in theories of culture, mass communication, and hermeneutical social criticism (Kellner, 1992:1185). On the other hand we must also consider the flipside to this issue, as Hanyes tells us:

Critics of the concept of ideology have railed against its supposed ambiguity; they have accused its proponents of being guilty of the ‘sin of inference’ in terms of how media analysis is undertaken; and they have also suggested that researchers who favour the concept of ideology have engaged in simplistic analysis of media and other texts. Ideological analysis is also accused of downplaying the prospect of audience agency in the face of dominant and other forms of ideology. As media sociologists we do not readily accept that an interpretative ‘free-for all’ exists amongst audience members. Audiences do have agency; they can resist, reconstruct and reject ideological content in a media setting but such practices only serves to confirm the existence of dominant ideological content in the first place. (2004:4)

Thompson (1990) has developed a critical concept of ideology that defines it as discourse and symbolic forms that sustain relations of domination, legitimating relations that involve asymmetrical relations of power. Producers of a media text design it with a certain meaning in mind hoping that audiences will decode their text in a certain way. Preferred readings are those which tie in with hegemonic beliefs - for instance, the idea of beauty and the ‘ideal’ female shape propounded in Western magazines. It is accepted as ‘natural’ that models in women's magazines should be young and drastically underweight. Since the 1960s the preferred reading has been that these women are beautiful. However, there are signs that, as hegemonic belief begins to adapt to the concerns of many that this body shape is actually unhealthy, the preferred reading is beginning to shift (Thompson, 1990).

When using Thompson in a study such as this one, you can only decide whether a text is ideological when you understand how it is made sense of at the point of reception.

Janks speaks to the rationale of using Thompson’s modes most articulately:

Any deconstructive analysis entails breaking a construction into bits in order to see how the bits were put together. It is necessarily atomizing. Having looked at the bits, one can begin to consider how they relate to and affect one another, that is one can begin to put the bits back together again. In using Thompson’s model one can, for example, find instances of rationalisation, ask how and what the use of rationalisation legitimates and then using these insights ask the power question – whose interests are served by these legitimations? Finally one can put all the modes of operation of ideology together to see how the text serves particular interests. Because in the end the bits have to be reassembled, it does not matter where one begins with the analysis. One must simply work through the model systematically and in doing so you show that these modes interact and reinforce one another. In some instances one mode may simultaneously operate as another mode, so for example a rationalisation may also be a dissimulation. (Janks, 1998:200)

2.1.3. Using Thompson to Unpack Articles on Beach Volleyball on the NBC Olympics Website

I will now apply this model in analysing four articles published on the NBC Olympics website that specifically dealt with female beach volleyball events at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Furthermore the articles concentrate on the gold medal winning duo from the USA – Kerri Walsh and Misty May-Treanor. There were 16 more articles on the website that covered beach volleyball but these were the ones given most prominence by the broadcaster (NBC) and had the most readership (view counter) based on figures published on the website. Therefore, it is important to unpack them with respect to the theory discussed thus far. Table 1 below presents a summary of the four articles being examined.

<b>Article Title and Number</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Date of Publication</b>
1. Big dig reveals Walsh’s missing ring  <i>Sub Heading:</i> Volunteers with metal detectors find the U.S. beach volleyball star’s ring	The Associated Press	Sunday, August 10, 2008
2. Walsh, May-Treanor want gold medal, bundle of joy  <i>Sub Heading:</i> Beach volleyball players want to start families	The Associated Press	Tuesday, August 12, 2008
3. May-Treanor, Walsh first duo to win back-to-back golds	The Associated Press	Wednesday, August 20, 2008
4. May/Walsh’s win proves historic, iconic	Alan Abrahamson, NBCOlympics.com	Thursday, August 21, 2008

Table 1 – See Appendix One for all four articles

Either one of these modes may be used to serve a range of ideological functions, or in some instances you could even have two or more of them combine or overlap in their functions.

### **2.1.3.1. Legitimation in the website Articles**

#### *Rationalisation*

The articles (See Appendix Two) use chains of reasoning which rely on the establishment of cause and effect. In article 1 the photo caption states that Kerri Walsh did not lose her concentration even after ‘losing her wedding ring.’ In article 2 rationalisation is further evidenced where Walsh is quoted as saying, “[I] have so much love to give and just want to share it.” This is in reference to starting a family which she wants to do ‘after winning a gold medal.’ Another instance of rationalisation occurs in article three where it happens with respect to the uniforms the athletes wear. May-Treanor is quoted here in legitimising wearing a two-piece swimsuit to play the game. On that particular day they played in heavy rain and she says – ‘this is just another reason why we play in bathing suits.’ Furthermore the driving rain is presented as being ‘no problem for the Americans.’

Once again the athlete’s personal lives are brought into this article: May-Treanor’s exhausting playing schedule is portrayed as possibly having a detrimental effect on her marriage to a fellow athlete (NFL player Matt Treanor). She is quoted as saying, “I’d like to see my husband more often and I’d like to walk in the door and say honey what’s for dinner, instead of cooking for myself.” In article 4 the title is a good example of a rationalisation, ‘May/Walsh’s Win Proves Historic.’ It sets the reader up for an article that is all about a chain of reasoning as to why they won. The first paragraph alone describes beach volleyball as a sport that is about ‘endless summer’, ‘ripped guys’, ‘bikini - clad girls’ and ‘the smell of suntan lotion’. Moving on the article rationalises beach volleyball as a “ferocious competition of the highest order.” Then the achievements of the gold medal winning duo are brought in, their win is described as ‘phenomenal’ because ‘the calibre of the game has improved significantly since 2004.’ Following this they are described ‘unequivocally’ as the ‘greatest’ beach volleyball team of all time. Once again playing in two-piece swimsuits is rationalised and we are reminded that they had ‘won again’ and ‘done so much more’ (than any other beach volleyball female duo).

The overall reasoning behind the rationalisations in all four articles is that this duo are superb athletes who have achieved so much. However at the same time they are gendered and in effect sexualised in that they cannot imagine playing in anything other than two-piece

swimsuits. And because they are women, they definitely want to have children – legitimising them as ‘normal’, ‘nurturing’ women.

### *Universalisation*

In this instance across all four articles what can only be described as ‘American family values’ are propagated by continually referencing the fact both the athletes want to start families with their husbands who also happen to be athletes. These values are represented as universal values that the two women subscribe to, thus legitimising their ‘womanhood’; meaning they are not the stereotypical ‘lesbian careerist female athletes.’ No – these two are wholesome American women. In article 1 which discusses Walsh losing her wedding ring the author ensures her husband, Casey Jennings, is mentioned because he too is beach volleyball pro-athlete and ‘former NCAA champion.’ In the second article examples of universalisation occur when emphasis is placed on them wanting ‘to start families with their husbands.’ Once again in article 3 reference is made to ‘husbands’ and this time we are told about Misty May-Treanor’s husband who ‘like his wife’ is also an athlete (catcher for the Florida Marlins). All this is repeated in article 4 where again words and phrases like ‘married’ and ‘starting a family’ are reinforced with respect to the athletes.

### *Narrativisation*

The articles make no overt use of stories or traditions in their descriptions. The title of article two does have echoes of narrativisation though: ‘Walsh, May-Treanor want gold medal, bundle of joy.’ Also Walsh is quoted as saying she got a call from her husband saying that he is excited for her to accomplish one ‘dream’ in Beijing and they can ‘start a new dream’ in reference to starting a family. With beach volleyball culture in mind (presumably) the opening paragraph in article four makes use of narrativisation, describing it as, ‘A piece of California culture that has raced around the world.’ Also in the fourth article Walsh is quoted as saying, ‘The rain made it a little more romantic out there... You feel like you are a warrior out there, battling the elements.’ This has the effect of making them sound like they are strong and capable athletes but they are women with romantic notions of their game and who have ‘dreams’ of starting families.

### *Summary: Legitimation*

In the texts overall, legitimation works to portray Kerri Walsh and Misty May-Treanor as wholesome women with natural urges that have led them to become wives and future mothers in addition to being champion athletes. The focus is on their ‘family values’ even more so

than it is on their achievements as athletes. Basically it is implied that the two women have maternal instincts because women are generally expected to be ‘maternal’ and hence the legitimating effect takes place in the texts. If the articles had been about male athletes, being married men or fathers would have not been the focus.

### **2.1.3.2. Dissimulation in the website Articles**

#### *Euphemism*

In paragraph twelve of article 1, Walsh’s wedding ring and the gold medal she won at the 2004 Athens Olympics are both described as ‘golden baubles’. In the title for article 2, ‘bundle of joy’ is used as a replacement for ‘children’ and ‘family’. Article 3 has an occurrence of euphemism (paragraph four) where Walsh describes herself and her partner playing in a heavy downpour as ‘warriors’. In article 4 the rain is described as ‘driving and relentless’. An ideological reading cannot be directly read of these phrases and words however it serves to remind us that writers tend to use ‘colourful’ language in their work to gloss over things.

#### *Trope*

Figurative language is used in article 1 in the first paragraph and sentence where volunteers are described metaphorically as ‘going for gold’ when looking for Walsh’s missing wedding ring. Looking for the ring in paragraph four is described metaphorically as ‘looking for a needle in a haystack’. Again in paragraph seven, ‘stroke of luck’ another metaphor is used in talking about the availability of metal detectors to aide in the search for the ring. In article 2 with respect to the recurring theme of ‘starting families’ Walsh and May – Treanor are described as planning to go ‘from barefoot to pregnant’ a play on words that is derogatory in a gendered sense. Because as women they are not only barefoot on the beach volleyball court but ‘obviously’ they will be ‘in the home’ when they are ‘pregnant’. This is derogatory simply because the authors again make presumptions that just because the two athletes are women they will do what women are meant to do in their life-cycle: establish their careers, reach the peak (preferably before their mid-thirties) have children and be the homemakers that they were programmed to become. Additionally the phrase ‘ticking biological clock’ (metaphor) is used to again discuss starting families. Having children is described using another quote from Walsh as ‘squeezing one out’, a slightly vulgar metaphor, in the context of giving birth. Despite all the positive reinforcement thus far in painting them as motherly women, Walsh is made to sound as though she views having children as just squeezing out a

‘thing’ not a ‘child’ or ‘life’. In article 3 the ball being used play in the heavy rainfall is described as ‘wet and heavy’, a clear instance of metonymy – a phrase clearly loaded with the act of sex as forbearer. Moreover in paragraph twenty one another metaphor is used where May-Treanor’s husband is described as ‘crying like a baby’ when speaking to his wife on the phone after their win.

#### *Summary: Dissimulation*

One of the main arguments in relation to these articles is that they work hard to portray the two athletes as women first with natural yearnings for motherhood. This dissimulates their talent and achievements in most cases. They are all overt in highlighting that Kerri Walsh and Misty May-Treanor do want to be mothers –and this then means that issues of gender and power are hidden. Parenthood is constructed as a responsibility for those who subscribe to heterosexual family values. It ignores power relations in the domain of sexual practices and reproduction and promotes the societal assumptions that all women eventually want to have children - with their husbands of course. Nonetheless, it can be said that these two women have bought into this ideology and these articles and their authors simply reflect this.

#### **2.1.3.3. Unification in the website Articles**

##### *Standardisation*

Once again this mode is used across all the articles in detailing the duos ‘need’ to start families and in describing their greatness as athletes. In article 3, paragraph nine, one of their opponents in the final, Tian Jia of China, is quoted as saying, ‘The Americans are better than we are.’ In a sense offering up the brilliance of the American team as the norm. In article 4 standardisation is found once again, in describing how Walsh and Treanor (paragraph 32) hug each other in ‘relief’, ‘joy’ and ‘pride’ after collapsing into the sand after they hit the match winning serve. They are a ‘unified force of greatness’. All this serves to standardise and normalise in the readers minds that these two athletes are so brilliant and even the ‘Chinese’ relent to this. Issues of gender are utilised but sidelined in this instances to play on the political rivalry between the United States and China.

##### *Symbolisation of Unity*

In article 2 symbolisation of unity comes to the fore when in paragraph twelve Walsh says she is offering unlimited babysitting services to May-Treanor when she has her baby. This suggests that they are united and supportive over the decision to have families. This is further highlighted in the third article in constructing an assumed unity between the two athletes

when they hug each other and run over to hug their families after winning the game (paragraph 12) and when May-Treanor after winning ‘finally gets to speak to her husband’ in paragraph 20. It supports relationships of domination and subordination in that women regardless of their professions and ambitions have a maternal instinct.

#### **2.1.3.4. Fragmentation in the website Articles**

##### *Differentiation*

This is first evidenced in article 2 in paragraph seven where the author presumes the partnership might end once children come into the picture; because Walsh might bring her ‘yet unconceived baby on the road’ and May-Treanor does not want to. Article 3 has examples of this first in paragraph nine where the Chinese player Tian is quoted saying (about the American team), ‘They are more experienced and stronger. But we have made great strides for these Olympic Games. This is the best we could do.’ The next instance has to do with May-Treanor’s relationship with her husband; paragraph fourteen emphasises the fact that due to their busy schedules they hardly spend time together and this may in turn ‘break-up’ her partnership with Walsh. Moving on the author in article 4 seems almost vindictive in talking about the Chinese team in paragraph 18 where it is set out as ‘unbelievable’ that there are good Chinese beach volleyball players. Once again this occurs in paragraph twenty seven where the Chinese are *othered* for stopping play due to injury or is it because they want to delay their inevitable loss?

##### *Expurgation of the Other*

No examples of this are found in any article except the fourth one. In paragraph five where Walsh and May-Treanor, ‘the warriors’ are described as ‘weathering everything thrown at them’ by their opponents and a ‘rowdy home crowd’. The Chinese team and presumably a predominantly Chinese crowd are ‘othered’, debased and made to sound aggressive and violent.

##### *Summary: Unification and Fragmentation*

The ideological effects of unification and fragmentation in all these articles has been to construct unity between the two ‘great’ American athletes – who fought hard to get where they are. Unity is necessary in order to legitimate their winning ways, however their American family values always come first. Fragmentation is inevitable because their history proves as a powerhouse in the world of professional competitive beach volleyball proves this and therefore they dominate and are better than any other team and particularly the Chinese

team who ‘unbelievably’ got into the final. Another way of looking at the effect of fragmentation could be to do with the fact that they have differing desires when it comes to when they want to start families and embark on motherhood.

### **2.1.3.5. Reification in the website Articles**

#### *Naturalisation*

Much is naturalised across all four texts: that the duo are the best, they want to have children, they subscribe to American family values and they are ‘warriors’. The sub-heading in article 2 captures this succinctly: ‘Beach volleyball players want to start families’. In paragraph four you have phrases like ‘sense of kinship’ and ‘familial yearnings’. Again in paragraph thirteen you find the author naturalising, Walsh has always been ‘eager to become a mother’ and ‘this has intensified because her brother has twins and another baby on the way and she is jealous’. This illustrates not only her maternal instincts but her competitive nature as well. In article 3, paragraph nine, Tian the Chinese athlete is quoted as saying that the Americans are ‘more experienced and stronger.’ In paragraph sixteen the need for families is again naturalised: ‘they want to have babies soon after the games’. They are reified in this sense in article 4, paragraph six, they are ‘repeated Olympic Champions’ and ‘no team has ever before done so’. In paragraph eight they are naturalised as the ‘greatest beach volleyball team of all time’. In the twentieth paragraph we are told they made a point of ‘practising in the rain’ before the final game. Finally in paragraph thirty two their reification continues when the author states, ‘No one in beach volleyball history has proven more relentless’. As stated in Chapter four, history is presented as nature.

#### *Nominalisation and Passivisation*

There are numerous examples of nominalisation and passivisation in the articles. In paragraph three of article 2 Walsh says, ‘Misty and I absolutely want to win a gold medal and then start a family.’ In putting in this quote the author nominalises these women and motherhood. Article 3, paragraph six has an overt example of nominalisation and passivisation, where the cheerleaders are described as dancers (in bikinis) who ‘jiggled to rock music’, naturally the dancers are presumed ‘sexy’ ‘busty’ women and therefore they ‘jiggle’ like ‘objects’ when they dance.

#### *Summary: Reification*

This mode is used to naturalise the current position of Walsh and May-Treanor as the best female beach volleyball players in the world and possibly ever. Any shortcomings or setbacks

in their playing careers are completely effaced from the text i.e. their human vulnerabilities are denied, they are superwomen who are also: 'beach volleyball stars', 'favourites', 'Olympic Champions', 'Winners', 'best ever' and 'the greatest' in addition to being 'women' who are most definitely 'mothers', 'wives' and 'warriors'.

#### **2.1.4. Whose Interests Are Served?**

If we put the insights obtained from applying Thompson's model to these articles together, is it possible to answer the question of whose interests are served by these representations? As outlined above, the ideological modes of legitimation, unification, fragmentation, dissimulation and reification present the reader with certain codes or symbols with which to interpret and construct the image of the female athlete and in this case Kerri Walsh and Misty May-Treanor. Through these techniques the discourse of the female athlete goes beyond explaining their athleticism and femininity and shifts toward constructing world views to position the readers (Watson, 2003). The website can be said to operate like a typical tabloid in that it collapses the distinction between the public and private lives of the two athletes. I have posited that the interest-framed discourse of the sexy female beach volleyball player not only explains the ideal female athlete with her family values, but serves to construct a reality through the use of specific symbols that in turn legitimate and defend such portrayals (Hall, 1981). From the readings of the four articles it can be said that ideology not only reflects chauvinism and sexism, it is embedded in the structure and means of media production and it also provides the standards by which we tend to evaluate the defensibility and fairness of the sexualisation and gendered representations of female athletes. Although we cannot answer with any accuracy the question of the degree or the extent of ideology's influence, we can see ideological effects at work in the everyday discourse proffered by media outlets such as the NBC Olympics website in attempting to sustain their integrity. In applying Thompson's (1990) model to the articles we are able to detect a number of ideological strategies that should clearly influence socially and symbolically constructed meanings. Additionally if one puts this analysis alongside the social and discursive contexts of sport feminism and ideology it becomes clear that the articles do not work in the interests of the American beach volleyball women's Olympic team, irrespective of their achievements as female athletes.

### 3.1. Cracking the Images: Analysing the Visual Signals

The Cracking the Code gallery on the NBC Olympics website is dedicated to explaining the hand signals that form an intricate part of the beach volleyball game. The NBC Olympics website chose to use images of female athletes exclusively in depicting these hand signals (See Appendix Four). The shots are close-up photographs of the athlete's buttocks. A sexually attractive visual appearance in humans generally involves a general body shape and appearance sanctioned by the local culture, a lack of visible disease or deformity, a high degree of mirror symmetry between the left and right sides of the body, particularly of the face and pleasing bodily posture. Another strong aspect to attraction has to do with proportion and when it comes to the physical beauty of females their breasts and buttocks need to be deemed proportionate. According to Fernandez (2003) one idea of physical beauty regarding the breasts of women is that the best shape approaches the shape of a three dimensional parabola (which is called a Paraboloid of revolution) as opposed to a hyperbola, or a sphere. Conversely, the shape of the buttocks of an attractive person (male or female) tends to resemble the shape of a cardioid, which is the inverse transform of a parabola (Fernandez, 2003).

Twenty photographs (See Appendix Three) are used to demonstrate the hand signals and yet no substantial explanation is given of any of the hand signals and there is even an option to 'hide' the caption so that the viewer can enjoy the image on its own. This type of gallery can be traced to our cultures obsession with explicit portrayals of sex – gender and sex in our iconography continue to dominate our cultural discourse. As Goffman writes:

[...] one of the most deeply seated traits of man, it is felt, is gender; femininity and masculinity are in a sense the prototypes of essential expression – something that can be conveyed fleetingly in any social situation and yet something that strikes at the most basic characteristics of the individual. (Cited in Jhally, 1990:136)

Most media has always defined women primarily in sexual terms and gender is almost exclusively equated with sex (Jhally, 1990: 136). The most important thing about women is their sexual behaviour regardless of whether they are athletes, mothers or fire fighters. As the debate on pornography has indicated, viewing women from this restricted point of view can result in treating women as less than truly human (Jhally, 1990: 137). The concentration on one aspect of behaviour detracts from seeing people as people rather than as standing from something or being associated with one thing (Jhally, 1990:138).

The theoretical point of reference for this study is the claim that sexual stereotyping is intrinsic to the media coverage of women's sports and that being 'sexy' is often read as 'natural' because it is not dissimilar to sexualised representation of women across a range of media- from men's magazine to mainstream Hollywood movies. Focusing on textual and image reception has enabled me to explore the intertextuality of the hegemonic field held in place not only by the NBC Olympics website but by various forms of popular culture such as men's magazines, music videos, advertisements and pornography. Therefore demonstrating the central role of intertextuality in the production of meaning i.e. when meaning is not transferred directly from writer to reader but instead is mediated through, or filtered by, codes imparted to the writer and reader by other texts (Kristeva, 1980: 69).

### **3.1.1. Reading the Images**

Viewing an image entails first and foremost, and before anything else has happened, being located in a particular social way by and in relation to the image (Kress and van Leeuwen (1990:27). With images what gets represented, how it is represented, as well as how it is read and used, are all effects of the social place of producers and viewers of the images.

For the purpose of this analysis seeing as all the images in the Cracking the Code gallery are basically photographs of different women's buttocks from more or less the same angle I will discuss the gallery based on this one type of photograph i.e. a close-up shot of a female athletes buttock and the connotations of this within the context of this study.

#### *3.1.1.1. Offers and Demands*

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1990:27) in the visual semiotics of Western cultures, images are used to perform two primary types of 'image act': *demands and offers*. Some images 'want something from the viewer' and others do not. In those pictures which 'want something from the viewer' – visual demands - one or more pair of eyes looks directly at the viewer and therefore it appeals to the viewer forming a pseudo social bond of a particular kind with the represented participant(s). Furthermore:

Visual offers on the other hand are realised by images which offer to the viewer represented participants as objects for contemplation, but do not demand that the viewer enter into an imaginary social relation with them. All images which do not contain human or quasi-human participants looking directly at the viewer are of this kind. (Kress and van Leeuwen 1990:29)

This is the type of photograph found in the Cracking the Code gallery – the women's buttocks are depicted as sexual objects for the contemplation of the viewer (See Appendix 1).

The subjects who are in most instances talented female athletes are reduced to 'being a buttock' which is partially covered by a bikini bottom and in some photographs covered in sand. In the galleries on the website where the focus is on the athletes winning gold medals on the other hand – particularly Kerri Walsh and Misty May-Treanor - there are more visual demands, the athletes are photographed smiling at the viewer. However even in most instances when they do look at the viewer all the female beach volleyball athlete's do so from a long distance, which greatly diminishes the impact of their look or they are in the background and look accidentally or blankly at the camera. The male beach volleyball players on the other hand are always photographed in more demanding poses where the focus is on their athleticism and strength – basically the male photographs are predominantly 'action' shots.

### *3.1.1.2. Subjective and Objective Images*

There is another dimension to the interactive meaning of images according to Kress and van Leeuwen (1990:30), the dimension of point of view i.e. the possibility of expressing subjective attitudes towards represented participants. Subjective images are those with perspective and hence with a built-in point of view and images without perspective i.e. without a built-in point of view are objective.

When it comes to subjective images there is a clear division between the represented world and the physical space in which the image is viewed: the frame. In these images the viewer can see what there is to see only from a particular point of view. Alternatively in objective images the image reveals everything there is to know about the represented participants even if to do so it is necessary to violate the laws of naturalistic depiction, or indeed the laws of nature (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1990:31).

The photographs in the Cracking the Code gallery are categorically subjective because everything is seen from one particular viewpoint and everything in the image is arranged around the viewer. The images in the gallery have been purposively selected for the viewer implying a kind of symmetry between the way the producer of the images relates to the female beach volleyball athletes buttocks and the way the viewers must also relate to them. Therefore as Kress and van Leeuwen put it:

The perspective image compels the viewer to become, together with the institution that has produced the image, and 'us' with respect to a 'them' or an 'it' i.e. with respect to the participants represented in the image (1990:32).

The photographer or the NBC Olympics website (depending on who you view as the producer) imposes the point of view not only on the female athletes but also on the viewer and the viewer's subjectivity is therefore subjective in the original sense of the word i.e. the sense of being subjected to something.

### *3.1.1.3. Horizontal Angles: Involvement*

In photography, horizontal angles work as functions of the relation between the frontal plane of the image maker and the frontal plane of the represented participants. The two can either be parallel, aligned with one another, form an angle or diverge from one another. The image can either have a frontal or an oblique point of view (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1990: 35). The difference between these two points of view is a difference of involvement. Horizontal angle encodes whether or not the image maker and hence the viewer is 'involved' with the represented participants or not. The photographs in the Cracking the Code gallery have a frontal point of view (ironically) of the athletes' backsides. The frontal angle tells the viewer that what they see is part of 'our world' and something that they are involved with i.e. it builds that sense of familiarity with the viewer and eventually relegates it in their minds as 'an object'. It can therefore be said that the photographers have aligned themselves with the athletes and their buttocks – for their own voyeuristic pleasures or mandates from their supervisors and editors. Viewers of the images in the gallery have no choice but to see these represented participants as they have been depicted. As viewers we are addressed as individuals for whom 'involvement' takes these particular values – people who enjoy 'checking out' women's buttocks. However in reality and in most cases we might not – we may be female viewers for example. I quote once more from Kress and van Leeuwen who tell us:

It is one thing for the viewer to be limited by what the photograph shows (and to understand what this means, for example, exclusion, in the case of a female viewer); it is another thing to actually identify with the viewpoint encoded in the photo (1990:36).

In language, involvement is realised in the system of possessive pronouns. However the two systems, the visual system of horizontal angle and the linguistic system of possessive pronouns, differ in many ways. In language one cannot easily have degrees of 'ourness' and 'theirness', in images such gradation is an intrinsic part of the system of involvement. Finally, there is no 'yours' in the system of horizontal angle; the visual 'you-relation' is, as we have seen, realised by the system of 'offer and demand'. Perspective puts a barrier between the viewer and the represented participants, even in the case of the frontal angle: the

viewer looks at the represented participants and has an attitude towards them (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1990: 37).

#### *3.1.1.4. Size of Frame and Social Distance*

Another dimension the social meaning of images is realised by the choice between close up, medium shot and long shot photographs. To further explain the close shot (or close up) shows head and shoulders of the subject, and the very close shot ('extreme close up') anything less than that. The medium close shot cuts off the subject approximately at the waist, the medium shot approximately at the knees, whereas the medium long shot shows the full figure. In the long shot the human figure inhabits about half the height of the image and the very long shot is anything 'wider' than that (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1990: 44).

In social relations (face-to-face communication in most cases) the distances people keep depend on whether they have a permanent kind of social relation e.g. family, friends or strangers; or the kind of social relation that lasts for the duration of the social interaction and is determined by context, for example, someone in the audience of a speech given by an acquaintance or relative would nevertheless stay at public distance i.e. the distance of a stranger. But these distances also, and at the same time, determine how much of the other person is in our field of sharp vision – just as does the framing of a person in a portrait or a photograph (Hall, 1996: 110; Cited in Kress and van Leeuwen, 1990: 44-45). These distances are also culturally specific.

Even though we see the images of some people more than others (film stars, star athletes) this kind of familiarity does not determine whether they will be shown in close, medium or long shot. The relation between the human participants represented in images and the viewer is once again an imaginary relation. Most people are photographed as though they are friends, or as though they are strangers, regardless of their actual relation to the viewer. Images such as the ones in the Cracking the Code gallery allow us to imaginarily come as close to public figures as though they were our friends or in their case as sexual objects. The images of the beach volleyball athletes' buttocks are all close ups and if this is all we could see of them in reality, we would be close enough to grope their buttocks.

#### *3.1.1.5. Narrativisation of the Subjective Image*

It is not always apparent what the motivation (on the photographers part) for the point of view and size of frame is. Photographic angles may be high and frontal, and so convey power

over and involvement with the represented participants, but the precise nature of the relation of power and involvement is not specified in the final result. Other sorts of depictions could also work to make concrete the relation of power and involvement. In the case of the buttock images in the Cracking the Code gallery the angles are close up and frontal – emphasising the voyeuristic appeal of the buttocks and the viewer is involved completely in the sense of being able to ‘grab’ the athletes buttocks – these buttocks are depicted as objects i.e. sexual objects. Additionally the athletes demonstrative ‘hand signals’ are almost completely forgotten or overshadowed by the photographers lens focusing on the buttocks. These sort of hyper-sexualised images of female athletes function to normalise them for men in the sports culture.

#### ***4. Conclusion***

The chief purpose of this chapter has been to unpack the findings of the research i.e. the first set of research results. This was mainly with respect to the articles on the website as well as the images in the ‘Cracking the Code’ photo gallery that had twenty images of female beach volleyball players in suggestive poses.

These findings and conclusions were reached through the utilisation of qualitative methods of data collection i.e. qualitative content and image analysis, drawing on Thompsons modes of ideology for articles on the website and various other media and image theorists with respect to the images on the website. The findings indicate that there are numerous ideological underpinnings and views that are to be found throughout the NBC Olympics website specifically with respect to their coverage of female beach volleyball at the Beijing Olympics 2008. A more concise conclusion will be reached after the findings in Chapter six are discussed.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS**

#### **1. Introduction**

In this Chapter I will substantiate the findings of the study by quoting from my focus group and individual interviews. In order to create a coherent and logically relevant understanding of the responses from the interviews with respect to the study these findings will be unpacked under four main categories (themes):

- i. Dispositions and discourses – focused life history with respect to sport. To get participants to reconstruct events in their past e.g. at home, school or work. This is necessary so as to place their interest in sport in the current context of their lives i.e. to understand where they are coming from as sports fans or not and therefore whether they consume sporting imagery on a regular basis and to account for a naturalisation in how they view these images and those on the pages of *Maxim* or *Sports Illustrated*.
- ii. Present experience with the topic and area of study i.e. beach volleyball, the NBC Olympics website, depictions of gender and sexuality in a sporting context – with the aim of exploring common-sense assumptions, attire of female beach volleyball players and informed choices with respect to viewing sport. For the purposes of the focus groups and interviews they were required to go through the website prior to attending, to give them a feel for what the study was based on.
- iii. Representations of gender – reflection on the meaning of their experience, so as to understand how factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation and opinions on gender and representation. This is important so as to get to any underlying factors in that may also influence the process of naturalisation of the images in question.
- iv. Group discussion around images on NBC Olympics website – specifically images in ‘Cracking the Code’ gallery and how they relate this to other media they are consuming i.e. the influence of intertextuality.

These categories are by no means distinct and in many occurrences the themes overlap between categories. However, in presenting the data it is important to separate them into categories to ensure a concise and clear representation of the findings and analysis is presented.

### **2.1. Dispositions and discourses – focused life history with respect to sport**

The aim of this section was to get participants to reconstruct events in their past e.g. at home, school or work that placed their interest in sport in the current context of their lives. It also seeks to highlight the factors that underlie the distinctive nature of their consumption of sport or not. It works towards understanding how for the participants taking part in sport is correlated with physical self-efficacy, positive body image, high self-esteem, peer acceptance, as well as academic and professional success or not i.e. how socio-structural influences have played a part in their opinions of sport or not. All the participants were asked if they were followers of sport in a broad sense and most answered in the affirmative. And almost all the male participants (twelve in all) were currently active athletes. This point was highlighted by Mavundla AKA 'Mave' a male, fifth year LLB student:

I basically play every sport. I got provincial colours in swimming in high school. I played rugby too, but being a contact sport I broke a collar bone and tore muscles. But now it's more laid back – play res rugby and soccer.

For this young man it is evident that sport has played an important role in his life. However, participation in sports by women has been on an upswing over the last three decades and young women today are increasingly active in various competitive sports (Hargreaves, 1994:36). Following herein are extracts from the female interviewees who have been and currently are active athletes:

Injairu: I play soccer on Sundays. It's not really hi-tech – just chasing the ball and getting my heart beating. Occasionally I will watch soccer with someone/people and just choose a team to support on the night. (Injairu Kulundu, Masters in Politics, Rhodes University, Female).

Sally: I did do a lot of sport. In school I did cross-country and netball. I do dance – not sure if it counts as sport? (Sally Matthews, Lecturer, Politics Department, Rhodes University, Female).

Mo: I'm pretty much an active athlete. I've been playing hockey since 1994 and I've basically played keeper, forward, up and down and I even tried figure skating at one point and got provincial colours for that. Now it's mountain climbing. (Motlatsi Khosi AKA *Mo*, BSocSci, Third Year, Rhodes University, Female).

Leigh: I did ballet for 13 years – don't know if that counts? I also did swimming and quite a bit of cycling and netball. And now I do fun stuff like spinning and tennis. (Leigh Raymond, BJourn, Third Year, Rhodes University, Female).

George: I used to play tennis and netball and football quite a lot. Now I cycle mostly. (Georgina Barrett AKA *George*, Lecturer and PhD Student, Politics Department, Rhodes University, Female).

Kut: I basically played every single sport that there was in school. Whatever was in season I played? Now I just walk and go to the occasional spinning class. (Kutlano Kunutu AKA *Kut*, BA, Third Year, Rhodes University, Female).

Megan: Well I go to the gym but in terms of other sport, no. (Megan McCarthy, Bachelor of Journalism, Third Year, Rhodes University, Female).

A point to take into consideration is that it was not a requirement for the participants in the study to be active athletes it was a coincidence that most of them were. For the interviews that took place in South Africa I believe the reason was in my opinion thanks to a great emphasis being placed on sporting achievements in the South African context from a very young age via the respective education systems.

The influence of family, friends and incidentally the media can also work towards shaping a person's opinions of women. The participants had mixed views on this, the first three particularly reflect patriarchy that is evident in more traditional cultures:

Sebastian: I grew up with two brothers so it was a very male dominated household. But I was raised primarily by my grandmother. My mum was a medical doctor and she left the house at six in the morning and returned at six in the evening. My grandmother did everything for me especially when I was much younger in terms of rearing. My mum has very much shaped my opinion on what I expect from a woman because I could not imagine dating or marrying a woman that has no ambitions in her professional and work life – I'd have a hard time with that. That is because of the ideal I have of a mother. My grandmother herself worked until she was seventy seven years old and lived to one hundred and five years. She started raising me when she was eight five (Sebastian Alexander Funke, Filmmaker, Germany)

Noizee: I think my friends and I are always talking about women in any context. There is always some comment made be it about race or something but it always comes back to women. Like I work at E.Q. (Grahamstown nightclub) and I was there this Thursday and it was ladies night and it was a whole world of knowledge for me. Just watching how girls act in that context and because it's like a college type party the guys have no tops on and suddenly it's time to like alcohol off each other's bodies and lesbian kisses. Then you see these girls and you would not think they would be these type of girls (not that there is anything wrong with licking alcohol off each others bodies) but it is the way they act in those kinds of situations you can see it is very manufactured – by men. And you ask why are you being like that – you are not even like that (Nozikile AKA *Noizee* Zulu, Honours, Anthropology, Rhodes University, Female).

Gurleen: Well in my culture – the Indian culture – the boys are seen as the superior gender and females not so much. A lot of emphasis is placed on having a boy in the family so females are not held in high regard. (Gurleen Sehmi, Honours in Organisational Psychology, Rhodes University, Female).

Megan: In my family I always felt I was treated equally to my brother. And my father has always treated my mother with respect and that is the one thing she instilled in me that you should respect yourself and men should have respect for you. In terms of the media I think it does affect us unconsciously – with respect to women. But in a lot of magazines nowadays it is not just about fashion, beauty and shallow women a lot of them deal with the sexual liberation of women. And as women we are free to do whatever we want in terms of that and in most cultures. I feel like I've grown up in a very liberal society. (Megan McCarthy, Third Year, Bachelor of Journalism, Rhodes University, Female).

Willem: In my family it was never really an issue – it never really influenced me that much. And women's sports amongst my friends we don't really talk about because we don't really watch it or take it seriously. With the media I think it is very sexist. (Willem Venter, Third Year, Bachelor of Fine Art, Rhodes University, Male).

Based on the answers given I had to surmise that most of these respondents thanks to their background of studying and therefore being influenced by the humanities and a liberal arts education are hyper-sensitive towards aligning themselves with politically incorrect and insensitive lines of reasoning and opinion. Therefore this proved to be a hurdle in the information gathering process because these opinions had been shaped by intertextual referencing that had to do with their sociology and politics texts books more so than *GQ* or *Cosmopolitan*.

However, in terms of parents and sport, research indicates that many parents view their sons as more competent at sports than their daughters (Fredericks and Eccles cited in Grusec and Hastings, 2006:571). These parental beliefs may become self-fulfilling prophecies. Parents generally (but fathers especially) tend to encourage active forms of play with sons more than daughters. However as support for young female involvement in sport grows, more parents are promoting physical activity in their daughters (Weiss and Barber, cited in Grusec and Hastings, 2006:571).

Female stereotypes continue to thrive in the media we consume every day and female athletes are trivialised in the media (Klein, 1988: 136). Media images of women in sports are also very different from the familiar pictures of male athletes in action. Female athletes are increasingly photographed in what can be described as 'hyper-sexualized poses'. To quote directly from the Media Awareness Website (2002):

When it was once enough to feminise women athletes, now it is necessary to sexualise them for men'. Sport reporting in the media presents a discursive field which not only reflects social gender differentiation, but also strengthens these differences through the use of particular language and graphic styles. ([http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/women\\_and\\_girls/women\\_coverage.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/women_and_girls/women_coverage.cfm))

Klein speaks to this further:

Discursive strategies used by the media include exclusion of women from reports, as well as numerous mechanisms restricting the crossing of group boundaries into previously male domains, e.g. trivialising women's sport, making them into 'non-sport', or use of irony. These could be interpreted as a means of controlling or a reactive strategy to the discourse of emancipation. (1988: 139)

In terms of the media (e.g. men's magazines and Hollywood movies) stereotyping and representing different ideals of body type to male and female audiences, Noizee, articulated it the best:

Yes definitely, I think for a woman to be successful in Hollywood she has to have the archetypal perfect body. Skinny, round and perky but not necessarily huge boobs, pretty long hair. A woman needs to be aesthetically gorgeous in a magazine sense. As for the guys you can be (look) like anything and still get women, (for example) people like Vince Vaughn. Any male actor gets more responses and is more popular than a woman who would be less attractive.

I have attempted here to demarcate the relationship and opinions of sport and particularly the role of women in sport. In this light, it is evident that different people from different backgrounds do indeed have different readings of sport and women in sport – but this will be dealt with in more detail in the sections following this one. The aim is to balance out the findings of the study and give enough berth for a wider set of findings.

## **2.2. Present Experience with the Topic and Area of Study**

This section of the interviews deals with the depictions of gender and sexuality in a sporting context, the attire of female beach volleyball players and informed choices with respect to viewing sport.

The mass media is an important source for acquiring cultural information about gender. Female athletes continue to be under-represented in news coverage, and are often stereotypically portrayed when they are included (Borrie, 2000). This formed a basis for the questions in this section of the interviews. All the participants were required to read the website prior to coming into the focus groups and in-depth interviews and therefore they all had an opinion with respect to the website and particularly the Cracking the Code gallery. Mave, a male, fifth year, LLB student noted:

The first thing I thought was that it was a modelling website – based on the initial link you sent me of (the article) Cracking the Code. Then only did I realise it was the Olympics website. Basically when you scroll down you come across the guys section (gallery) the pictures are more about volleyball and guys being friends. Whereas with the women all you see is 'tities.

Whereas Megan's first impression of the website was as follows:

They objectify women and their photos are more sexualised with them frolicking in the sand and there are very few photos of men doing the same thing. The men are depicted in more powerful positions and the women are like hugging each other. And even in one of the article on the US men's team the journalist writes: 'Although not common for men the US men's team holds the US women's team as role models'. It just made me think why that had to be pointed out; it shows that it is a very gendered space.

With respect to the sporting arena being a gendered space it holds true in that sport represents a potent medium through which biological or physical differences interface with social and cultural interpretations of gender role expectations (Creedon, 1994: 31). As far as the media is concerned Kane has pointed out a distressing pattern of coverage:

Even when an (sports) article did emphasise how successful and talented these women were, another theme emerged: that they were plagued by such character flaws as emotional dependency, anxiety and depression, sexual identity conflicts and role conflicts. The overriding message in these types of articles was quite clear: female athletes should be recognised and remembered for their stereotypical gender role, not their athletic role. (1989:61; Cited in Creedon, 1994: 17)

Ching adds to this, in saying:

From a formal point of view – I study linguistics – we're doing something called critical discourse analysis (CDA) and we are actually looking at adverts and how women are portrayed; actually not just women – people. They talk about false-consciousness where for example if I'm thin I'll find love more easily or if I'm rich I'll be happy. The dangers of that come about when a person naturalises that and when it starts becoming common sense. And for people who are not aware of these things those ideologies can become common sense and natural. As soon as they become natural that is when you start wanting to be like that or this person. For example I'm sure for girls now (I know I'm not a girl and I don't want to speak on behalf of them) when they were younger and they see a woman on the cover of FHM – it becomes (a situation whereby): 'oh my gosh! I want to look like that'.

Thanks to his exposure to relevant academic texts, this critical point by Ching highlights the importance of intertextuality when it comes to reading and naturalising sexualised images of female athletes. Olympians and athletes in general are often referred to as being the best, the strongest, the most powerful; which are obviously all very stereotypically 'masculine' qualities (Borrie, 2000). The confusion over hearing such adjectives to describe women is quickly brought to an end by countless women's magazines doing features with Olympians in dresses and men's magazines compiling articles with titles like, 'Banging Babe Who Can Throw Pretty Hard, for a Girl' (Borrie, 2000). This continual intertextuality across various media works to reinforce stereotypical attitudes about women and can work its way into our ideas and opinions about female athletes. With respect the media coverage of female athletes Phillips is quoted as saying:

Women were often photographed in inactive shots, in relationship caricatures or as models; men were more often shown in active poses, less in relationships and never as models. Similarly, the writing that described women's and men's sport reinforced a gender dichotomy. Women were stereotyped by their physical traits, their clothes, their emotions and their relationships; men by their courage, aggression and toughness ... These socially constructed images lead to a gender hierarchy in which women's sport is not taken as seriously as men's. (An Illusory Image: A Report on the Media Coverage and Portrayal of Women's Sport in Australia 1996, Canberra: Australian Sports Commission, 1997; Cited in Borrie, 2000)

It is important to understand that what is being considered in this study is the partnership between the media and sport based on certain Western cultural attitudes towards women. We encounter many different male and female role models in the course of a day's media consumption. The issue is that although these different role models may at first glance appear to be very varied, do they actually represent enough of a range of men/women? Are we simply given variations on a stereotype that become sub-stereotypes in themselves? There were a range of answers to these questions in the interviews based on the participant's experiences of the NBC Olympics website, beach volleyball and other experiences with the media and gender constructs:

Corinne: I think it's very naive to believe that women's volleyball has evolved as a way to celebrate in a way to celebrate women who play volleyball well. It's been channelled by a male audience to do what they want to do and that is to suit themselves. So it's not – how this dress evolved is not the women deciding one day lets wear bikinis – beach volleyball evolved with people playing in bikinis. But going on to camera and on multi-access sites is big money and it is driven by a project that is about competitive and oppressive way of life that is capitalist and masculine that rules sport. Masculinity places women in a particular way – and the male gaze is very much a part of the sport whether you are the photographer or umpire or the spectator (Corinne Knowles, Junior Lecturer, Extended Studies Unit, Masters in Sociology, Feminist Activist, Rhodes University, Female).

Sally: If the women were covering up their entire bodies –because some men object to seeing their bodies like they do in certain countries...I don't think it would be anymore liberating – but I'm not convinced that someone wearing something so uncomfortable is so liberated. In that sense I'm not sure that if you are playing beach volleyball in that you'd be very comfortable...I think it's be strange if all the women wearing that would feel comfortable.

Mo: I think there is a big emphasis to their sexuality. I was looking through I think it was FHM magazine and a girl I know who plays for SA (hockey) was in the magazine and I check it out and she's in a bikini and there is no hockey stick in sight. Meanwhile you look at the other hockey player who is a guy and he looks busy with the game and all sporty. But the girl was just posing there. There was even an issue with one woman posing with her boobs covered with a hockey stick.

Noizee: If we did not have to look at their bums (female beach volleyball players) the whole time and actually see them playing volleyball maybe we'd begin to see them as we see male volleyball players. When you see a male volleyball player you can say he is quite hot but he also happens to play beach volleyball but for women it is always she is HOT first and then the fact that she is an athlete comes into it later.

With respect to sport and intertextuality, which is the basis of this study, these comments add clout to the fact that naturalisation is serviced by various media in addition to primary sport media sources. Just before and during the Olympics various men's magazines (for example *Maxim* and *FHM*) and their respective websites tend to compile large lists of the most physically attractive women in the Olympics, while making fun of the less attractive women and rooting against them. These features tend to include a lot of shots of beach volleyball athletes buttocks (feministing.org) as seen in the Cracking the Code gallery. This reinforces the idea that if a young man who enjoys reading his *Sports Illustrated* and *Maxim* comes across a website like the NBC Olympics one and sees these images it can easily become the same sort of imagery for him. And this raises the question as to whether it blurs the line between sport and the glamorisation of women? These extracts are what some of the respondents had to say:

Sebastian: In magazines like *Playboy*, again, the women are portrayed simply as sex objects. In magazines like *GQ* I wouldn't say the women are degraded to sex objects and in Hollywood movies it is hard to say, but in a bad movie yes and a good one no. In action films you see the woman with the big breasts running around just so you have a girl running around. Sometimes you have a movie whereby the female has depth and character and then she is degraded to her sexuality.

Noizee: Men might start to not see the difference in the different roles they occupy. Wherever they are it becomes the same thing.

Leigh: Well, I guess so, but I think the media was secondary to what we subscribed to already (in our tastes). The media was not the initial perpetrator. I think a million years ago some guy came up with the idea of what looks sexy and then the media were like that is a great way to sell magazines!

Jerry: I wouldn't say that it is necessarily sexist – I don't get that impression of it being sexist. It is possible where the world is so sexualised now I see things like that and I don't see them as sexist; I see them more as marketing ploys.

Jerry's response above serves to exemplify that he has bought into the ideology and that intertextuality is a given in his reading of the images of beach volleyball players in the Cracking the Code gallery. For this individual the images on the NBC website are there to increase readership numbers and please sponsors much in the same way having a semi-naked TV soap star on the cover of *GQ* or *FHM* helps increase sales and market penetration. The lines are not even blurred they are barely there.

Much discussion centred on the attire worn by female beach volleyball players and whether this has a direct bearing on the audience choosing to watch a beach volleyball game or not. Following herein are some extracts that speak to that:

Sally: ...if you're walking past the (TV) screen and you see people in shorts and T-shirts whacking balls you are less likely to stop and watch...this (women in two-piece bathing suits) is more likely to catch your eye.

Mave: To be honest I think it will. I've caught myself sticking on the channel 2-3 seconds longer just because of what they are wearing.

Leigh: The attire does not bother me as long as they have a choice. Now that I know that they can appeal to the FIVB, I'm a lot more comfortable with it. What does bother me is when they don't have a choice about it and where their images are portrayed like this and they go up on this website in this particular framing.

While it is difficult to take a broad view from the interviews conducted, a fundamental point that was reiterated from the study is that men and women read images that are gendered differently and therefore relate to the imagery differently. Hence, most of the female participants felt that the images from the Cracking the Code gallery were in effect a debasement of the talented female athletes whereas the male participants, as will be shown below, mostly felt it was justified due to the fact that beach volleyball constituted a 'boring' sport for most of them – and having women's buttocks on display was the best way to keep it entertaining. Additionally, most of the participants were inclined to agree, that in their coverage of the beach volleyball at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the NBC Olympics website placed a greater emphasis on the sexuality of the athletes rather than on their talents or sporting prowess:

Jerry: Even if it's not portrayed in a sexual context most of these women are very comfortable with what they are wearing and they prefer to wear that and we interpret it in a sexual manner. Or can we say that women showing more flesh has more sexual connotations than men showing more flesh? Does that make sense? We are interpreting it in a sexual manner simply because of what they are wearing, I think nudity can be non-sexual if it's in a natural context. I think the bum/crack pictures are very sexual (Cracking the Code gallery).

Sebastian: I think emphasis was placed on their sexuality. Because I do not look at the head or face first I look at the behind (ass). It was very sexy and I found it classy (Cracking the Code gallery). Besides I think that most athletes, in general have a very good figure just because they work out a lot. And then you have cases whereby the media focuses just on the sexiness, for example, you have Anna Kournikova who never really did anything of superb merit in tennis but she got all that coverage nevertheless and was a super star because she was great for the advertising industry. On the other hand you have people like Steffi Graff and the focus was never on her sex appeal or sexuality people and the media were just amazed at her strengths and feats in tennis. Or Martina Navratilova, who I cannot say is pretty, but she was very well respected.

Theo: You have people like Serena Williams who are a five time Wimbledon champions and the focus is on her athleticism.

Kut: You see that has already been established: that she is not pretty. So it is easier to focus on her athleticism. In the media you also get the comparisons of Venus being prettier than Serena and therefore the media doesn't maybe find them attractive and focuses on their talent. But like with Anna Kournikova, Vince said she had to work pretty hard to get where she did,

but I did not know that, all I knew was what her long (blonde) braid looked like. What brand her tennis skirt was and that was kind of all I knew.

Tom: It's all about them hugging (Galleries showing American duo that won the female gold). I was going to comment on all these lesbian poses they seem to be captured in (Thomas AKA *Tom* Holder, Bachelor of Social Science, Third Year, Rhodes University, Male).

The question of what is really being promoted through websites such as NBC Olympics or certain types of uniforms is, put simply, woman as sex object or woman as athlete? As mentioned by Kut above, one of the participants in the focus groups, Anna Kournikova is an excellent example: she has never won a singles tennis Grand Slam title, yet is extremely popular. However, media and public comments and interest predominantly relate to her sex appeal rather than her game. It is unfortunate for the other female tennis players who are more successful on the tennis circuit and who play more exciting tennis. These female players do not attract the same media interest because they do not dress or promote themselves in a provocative manner (Borrie, 2000).

Many objects, not just humans, are represented by the media as being particularly masculine or feminine and we grow up with an awareness of what constitutes appropriate characteristics for each gender. We therefore are constantly aware of the media perpetuated stereotypes, for example 'how a man should look' and 'how a woman should be captured'. In men's magazines for instance men are more often than not depicted as fearless, competitive, and 'laddish', ignoring the emotional, sensitive male, and women are depicted as objects for men's contemplation and enjoyment (Brown, 2000). The respondents when posed with the question as to whether there was a marked difference in the depiction of male and female athletes on the NBC Olympics website commented thus:

Shaun: If there was some sport that men played in this sort of attire where they used hand-signals at their waist in the front – you would never get 'crotch' shots of men. You just wouldn't get bulges and things – they just would not show that. Because that would be inappropriate and you would not get bum shots either. But women are just expected to be just sexy.

Sally: I think that a lot of that may not be so much the difference in the way that the journalist is covering men and women's bodies but the differences in the way that we SEE men and women's bodies. You understand what I mean. You can be just a journalist snapping photos and you're not even trying to frame them in a particular way – women's bodies are seen as sexual more easily than men's bodies.

Tom: More clothing (on the men) less clothing (on the women).

Clearly the media holds a lot of clout in terms of colouring our opinions – they play a key role in the lives of most people and can also shape individuals sense of themselves – but most

of these respondents are young, educated and informed of what constitutes 'appropriate' and therefore may not fit into this demographic in society. Unfortunately, this has to be marked as a shortcoming in the study i.e. not having a wider set of respondents to choose from in a small community such as Rhodes University that is populated chiefly by individuals with a strong sense of what is constituted as politically correct or not thanks to their backgrounds in the liberal arts.

### **2.3. Representations of Gender – reflect on the meaning of their experience**

The purpose of this line of questioning was to understand how factors in the lives of the participants interacted to bring them to their present situation and opinions on gender and representation.

The first line of questioning dealt with the role of female athletes in a sporting context. It is unfortunate that it has to be described as a 'role' whereas for men and male athletes the sporting sphere is seen as their natural domain much like cooking is seen for women. This was a sentiment that most of the participants and interviewees had a lot of insight on:

Sally: I think that women play sport and women are encouraged to play sport for different reasons. At school level girls are encouraged to play sport not to look sexy. But when it reaches the competitive (professional) level; because a lot of that is about attracting media attention and sponsorship and since most men sport and coverage is geared towards men you have to make it attractive to them. But women are encouraged to be athletes for other reasons...like in school it's one thing we have to do to be fit and whatever.(However) It's (also) part of school spirit and just fun.

Shaun: So you can say it is like women at a younger age in school are encouraged to play sport for the same reasons as guys. It makes you a well-rounded person for team building and making friends and that kind of thing. But once it reaches that level it changes.

Theo Moyo got straight to the point:

I think their role is just the same as men. If I was coaching a women's team it would not make a difference. They would also have to play with heart and passion. Give everything you can – just being a female does not make a difference. It should not be an issue, it should not even be a question.

With recent controversies, trepidation and countenance over the size and body weight of fashion models it is important to try and understand how and why the 'skinny as a rail' body type is the ideal and additionally why the transference of this ideal has moved into the sporting sphere (as evidenced by the likes of Anna Kournikova and Maria Sharapova). The respondents to this study provided some useful and enlightened information on the subject.

When the question was put to the interviewees over whether the bodies of the female beach volleyball athletes profiled on the NBC Olympics website represented the ideal female body type, the answers were varied once again but well articulated, describing the images on the website this is what they had to say:

Corinne: It is a sexy body as sexy body is defined by the mass media, but not to me.

Vince: I don't find them sexy either. In most of the photos they are in very unsexy positions. They are just photographs really of people in motion.

Noizee: I don't know – ideal is a loaded word. Are they attractive – yes; are they the ideal? I wouldn't like to use that word. From their neck down their bodies are yes – ideal. I think they are attractive and could possibly go into a sports illustrated right now and that is what is attractive for general people. But you also get a lot of other people who find girls who are absolutely emaciated attractive.

Sebastian: Yes. And I think the criteria is fit and healthy which also means that they have to be skinny. And for women they have to have generalised beauty.

Wafa: What is a generalised beauty, to you?

Sebastian: To me it is a woman that has very little obvious mistakes. You will never find an actress or model with a huge nose but has a lot of character. I think they go for a look that is more pretty and symmetrical. And for men it is the opposite they can have a lot of character and still be perceived as 'pretty' even though their faces may not be symmetrical at all for example Joaquin Phoenix or someone like that.

Megan: Well obviously I think the look is valued because there are so many photos of these women. You would not see the same amount of photos of women wrestlers or bodybuilders as women like these (beach volleyball players) in skimpy bikinis. So I feel this look is valued.

Jarret: But I think the athlete's body is valued by everyone because to get that body takes a lot of hard work and you have to maintain it. So people look up to that and people want to look like that. They are toned and healthy. And especially in American society where everyone is eating serious junk food and are overweight and that is why they idolise these kind of bodies more than other people.

When some of the respondents who gave individual interviews were asked what criteria they use in assessing the physical attractiveness of a person of the opposite gender, these were their responses:

Jerry: I actually do not have specific criteria that I choose from – like tall or slim. As long as her features are put together well I don't have a problem. I suppose I like girls who are particular about and take care of their nails and their hair.

Noizee: Hair, particularly facial hair not moustaches though – the rugged look. And for the body it is relative, sometimes I like built guys, sometimes skinny, sometimes I don't really care. He has to be taller than me though, all the time.

Sebastian: Well her figure is important i.e. whether she is sporty or not. The eyes are very important, hair is very important and her behind is more important than her breasts. And the way

they walk is very important in terms of posture i.e. they should walk upright and not slouch at all, they should be like ballerina's and they should be tall.

It is essential to recall that women's bodies have always been a source of beauty and inspiration to artisans and most people for various reasons. But their idyllic size has altered throughout time. In the mid-1600's, women were celebrated for their curvy bodies and childbearing hips (Kress and van Leeuwen (1990:27). Kress and van Leeuwen add:

Paintings from that era show females as having 'normal imperfections' like sagging skin, fat and round bellies. This continued throughout the 1800's, where tapestries show the female form with ample curves and weight. They're usually naked and seem comfortable in their natural glory. The 1920's brought the flappers and women were used in advertising to promote products. They are fully clothed here and more demure than their former counterparts. Along came Marilyn Monroe in the 1950's, and most people compare models of today with her. She was reportedly a size 14 or 16, which would roughly translate to a size 8 today. But then Twiggy came along in the 1960's and became the first underweight woman to be an inspiration to millions. Some say this landmark was the beginning of the end. (1990:28)

The 21st century continued with very thin models and supermodels like Gisele Bundchen were upheld as the new 'curvy' woman – she has successfully modelled for both *Sports Illustrated* and Victoria's Secret. She has a tall, lanky frame and has been praised for encouraging people to eat junk food and not starve themselves. Further shifts are beginning as designers and magazines are starting to feature larger women. The September 2009 issue of *Glamour* magazine – a well-respected fashion magazine in the US – featured Lizzie Miller a 180 lb. model (she is considered a 'plus' size model in the fashion industry). Her photo appeared alongside an article on women's body confidence and depicted Miller in all her blond beauty, flashing a confident smile — but also flashing a slightly bulging stomach that hangs over her thong bikini – a realistic portrayal of most women and most *Glamour* readers alike. It created a lot of buzz in the mainstream press and blogosphere the world over with most of it positive but as with everything a few voices of discontent added to the debate. To get some further background on these varied opinions, during the individual interviews, I posed the questions as to whether the media perpetuate 'appropriate' physical characteristics for each gender, and the responses I got were:

Jerry: No I don't think those are the right sort images but I suppose that is what people will see. If that is all you see it becomes the norm.

Leigh: I don't know it depends on if it is a healthy body. But if the women have ridiculously round and enormous boobs then no but. When the media idolises the skinny anorexic look it is also not appropriate – overemphasising the skinny look that a lot of models try to emulate. And

these are the ideals that no one can get to in a healthy way – so I think that kind of imagery would be more inappropriate.

Noizee: When you are slender and toned I suppose it is healthy and some people do find that more appealing. But there are those skinny female celebrities and models who portray the negative images for young girls and women. The images definitely do not correlate with reality.

Sebastian: No. Well I think the media should portray reality and reality is that people have crooked noses and they don't have super strong hair. They just sometimes do not reflect reality. The media is giving us an image of what we think beauty should be and as we are all influenced by the media we sort of take that image into ourselves. And then ask questions of ourselves, like, am I pretty even though I have a crooked eyebrow and I have other flaws.

However, it is refreshing to know that a magazine like *Glamour* is finally conceding to portraying the reality that is a woman's body. Hopefully this trend continues and these sorts of readings help transfer into the sporting sphere and ultimately what is focused upon in sports coverage of female events.

#### **2.4. Group discussion around images on NBC Olympics website – specifically images in 'CRACKING THE CODE' gallery**

The final section and area of discussion covered throughout the interviews deals solely with the 'Cracking the Code' gallery and the respondents take on it. The line of questioning was developed so as to elicit whether the readers are aware of the sexualisation of the beach volleyball players.

The whole point of the gallery in question is to demonstrate the hand signals that are used by beach volleyball athletes, players, professionals etc – both male and female. However, the content producers and editors (presumably) of the NBC Olympics website chose to use images of hand signals being demonstrated by the female athletes only. This meant that the focus was on the rear end of the players – making the images highly suggestive and sexual – the fact that sport is involved is completely negated.

The first area covered when the discussions were carried out was for the respondents to comment on the title of the gallery – 'Cracking the Code':

Sally: The whole idea of cracking the code is: what kind of people want to get entry? So what are you trying to crack the code for?

Mo: I had to be told. It has sexual connotations – I mean to get in 'there' - Cracking the Code!

Yoshi: Yes, they've pushed it too far.

Theo: It is kind of funny (comical) everyone goes HAHA it's 'cracking the code'.

Noizee: Typical – the title wreaks of American toilet humour. It is a terrible use of a pun for the bum. If this was a British or American website they wouldn't have used 'Cracking the Code'.

Gurleen: It is very derogatory reducing a woman to a butt crack.

The next question posed was: Is it necessary to use images of female beach volleyball athletes to demonstrate the 'hand signals'? And they answered as follows:

Laura: It is not but I think perhaps if you were to put the images against a man's behind and uniform the signals won't be as visible. With the women because there is a lot more skin it is more visible. But then again if you use men you won't be showing any flesh and it is called 'cracking the code'.

Ching: With men if you look at the picture you may not even notice you are looking at a hand signal. But with women you will look and there is a bum there so you might as well look at it anyway. The bum works as a focus point.

The next area of inquiry had to do with intertextual referencing when it comes to the consumption of sport and pornographic images. First, to get a concise background reading of whether this holds true, the individual interviewees were asked about their reading habits:

Do you read or watch any of the following:

- a. men's magazines (please name them)
- b. pornography
- c. mainstream Hollywood movies??

The answers:

Noizee: Men's magazines yes, my brother used to get them in the house. Movies also not really action movies and yes, everyone has seen a little bit of porn - to be honest, let's be fair.

Jerry: Yes. I read Men's Health and Muscle and Fitness. And as for pornography - not really. But I live in a men's residence and whenever something interesting is on we share it – it is inevitable really. And yes, I watch movies.

Sebastian: I wouldn't say I really read men's magazines but I consume GQ, Men's Health etc.

Wafa: Do you read the articles or is it to look at the pictures of the women in the magazines?

Sebastian: It is a combination.

Wafa: Would you still consume these magazines if they did not have pictures of girls in them?

Sebastian: I would probably read them where I can but I wouldn't actually purchase them.

Wafa: Pornography?

Sebastian: Pornography, I don't buy it, but Playboy magazine, I actually read it sometimes because they have very interesting articles. But I don't like the aesthetics of the Playboy pictures because it looks cheap to me but with a slight touch of classiness so it becomes even cheaper.

There are other magazines in Germany that contain very rough and cheap pornography but they have a lot more class than Playboy.

Wafa: Do you watch or buy any other sorts of pornography?

Sebastian: I don't buy pornography because nowadays it's all available on the internet and there are pages and pages where you can view porn.

Wafa: Mainstream Hollywood movies? Do you watch them on a regular basis?

Sebastian: Yes.

Wafa: What genre do you prefer?

Sebastian: Thrillers, action movies and dramas.

To further speak to the issue the following questions and answers are important to consider:

Are magazines for men and pornography likely to reinforce stereotypical, 'macho' and sexist attitudes in their readers and watchers?

Jerry: Well not men's magazines but pornography yes. (For example) European porn is very aggressive and graphic. It is always designed to depict pain and to put the women down. It does affect your own sex life because you may want to act that out and you actually feel like hitting out at the women like spanking them which can actually be quite violent but it becomes normal and you feel the need to do so.

Leigh: No, I really do not believe that, because most people get into it knowing what they are doing. I am not willing to believe that any of these women are forced to be on the cover of GQ.

Wafa: But aren't they being objectified regardless?

Leigh: They are highly aware of the fact that they are being objectified which empowers them.

Noizee: Yes, I think so. Pornography does have an influence on how men start to see women and what they expect of women especially when it comes to sex. The whole idea that the woman is always the passive party and she is always dumb- and they always have just two lines to say. It has a big influence on boys who start watching pornography at a young age it does factor into how they understand and their expectations of women. They expect us to behave and look like the women in the pornography.

Sebastian: I think you can't generalise. If you look at a magazine like GQ for instance, I don't think it tries to portray men as this macho type. I think they cater to a man who is more into fashion and looking good. So I don't think Men's Health and GQ do that but I think Playboy in a way does it with the way they portray women as cheap and degraded.

Based on these responses a more informed analysis of the next area of questioning undertaken during the focus groups can be done. The next question was whether the gallery makes for a more interesting read because the focus is on the athlete's buttocks?

Vince: To be honest if it was a whole bunch of guys – I would have probably stopped on the third photograph. But since it was a bunch of women I looked at the whole gallery.

Tom: From a purely sexual interest – yes.

Megan: Well NBC pays a lot to show the Olympic games and they impose more Western ideals on women who are more traditional and not used to wearing bikinis – this just makes them more attractive to male viewers. So I think that was their main purpose – which just shows that they are further objectifying female athletes.

They were further asked if they derived any pleasure from these images, and they answered as follows:

Megan: Not the Cracking the Code pictures because after a while it just got a bit monotonous. Butts, butts and more butts.

Willem: I would be lying if I said I did not enjoy it but it was just overstimulation really, image after image after image.

I asked the respondents to comment on the ratings out of five that were given to each photograph in the gallery – which served to move the images further away from being about sport.

Jerry: The rating just confirms the whole sexual element of it. It's very porno – it's the sort of stuff that goes on in porn sites.

Megan: Well with the ratings some women have 3 star and some 4 and it is all about rating women's bodies – some are better looking than others.

### ***3. Conclusion***

In Chapters five and six I have presented the findings of the research based on the data and findings from the qualitative content analysis of the sampled articles on beach volleyball and images in the 'Cracking the Code' gallery on the NBC Olympics website. Additionally, under four different themes information gathered from both the focus group interviews and the individual in-depth interviews were analysed in-depth. The general discussion of the study findings was guided by the theoretical frameworks informing it.

Most of the answers given by the respondents were based on their opinions and relevant readings of society and the topic on hand. What became evident throughout is that seeing as all of them had a background in the Humanities – they were more careful with their responses – and possessed a degree of distance. This was an unfortunate limitation directly correlated to the fact that access to a wider variety of people and opinions in a small University town is largely limited. As noted earlier, because I realised the limitations of my interviews, I decided to interview, Sebastian Funke, who was not from the University or its environs and was interviewed in a completely different setting in Dubai. His answers were less constrained and

more revelatory in terms of how he views female athletes and that at the end of the day these images were much the same to him as those on the pages of *Maxim* and *Playboy*. When probed on the issue of why NBC tends to focus on female beach volleyball to draw in audiences during the summer Olympics he had this to say:

Sebastian: I don't think it is a bad idea. I am pretty much neutral on it. I think with amateur beach volleyball players they get a chance to cash-in on their sport so in that sense it is positive. I think it attracts a lot of male viewers, for example, my dad suddenly started to watch the Olympics for the beach volleyball and he wouldn't have watched it if they were all covered up in shorts and stuff. For me personally, I liked to watch beach volleyball before but I must say I don't like to watch women's sports generally. But I like to watch the women's beach volleyball because they are very elegant and sexy just the same as I would leaf through a *GQ* or *Esquire* to check out the babes on display.

Based on the analysis a reiteration of the original hypotheses has occurred in that the evidence gathered supports the fact that men's sport has always been taken more seriously and given more attention than women's and continues to do so and that recent efforts to popularise women's sports have focused on sexualising female athletes. When the FIVB instituted a new uniform code for women players in 1998 which replaced looser uniforms with tight two-piece bikinis it further served to prove that if women and sports were ever going to be popularised in mainstream consciousness, 'sex', was going to be the catalyst for this association. This 'sex sells' strategy is not helping gain further respect for women's sports. It only serves to reinforce stereotypes which have caused women immense physical and emotional damage. The next chapter will give a broader and succinct summary of the findings of the study.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### ***1. Introduction***

This chapter will provide the final word on the findings of this body of work. Based on countless reiterations it should be absolutely clear to the reader that the central premise of this study was to investigate how the images of female athletes in the mainstream sporting press, with a focus on beach volleyball, is overdetermined by the construction of women in other popular texts such as men's magazines etc. In focusing on the meanings obtained from the content of the NBC Olympics website (texts and images), the study explored how these meanings are naturalised in specific moments of production as well as through their intertextual relationships with similar texts involved in the objectified glamorisation of female athletes.

Sport is a powerful cultural institution with a strong correlation to identity and ideology which consistently and methodically creates and reinforces the ideology of male superiority and actively resists the inclusion of women. As an important site for the construction of male identity, sport is becoming increasingly significant as it provides opportunities for men to assert their dominance at a time when male hegemony is continually challenged and opposed in everyday life (Mean, 2001: 789). In other words men have let women vote, thrive in the professional ranks and lead nations but if they want any involvement or perceived legitimacy in sport and its imagery the defining words for their involvement are sex, sexy, flesh and 'babes'. There is no honourable space available unless they are willing to indulge in the voyeuristic tendencies that generally plague the average human heterosexual man.

#### ***2. Summary***

For all intents and purposes sport and the media both serve society as conservators of convention. It seems that they primarily work towards the strengthening of traditional values rather than to challenge or lead in the transformation to more enlightened thinking. This is especially interesting because these are the same media that sometimes choose to challenge convention, raise questions, and take on the power elite over issues of social consequence and political and economic hegemony (Cohen, 1993: 172).

This is an area of concern because the image of the 'ideal' of 'the feminine' body is also transmitted to women and men in virtually all aspects of life and through all societal institutions: family, religion and professional life. However, the media holds the most clout in terms of proliferating hyper-sexualised imagery and this unfortunately holds true with respect to the sporting arena.

Based on the hypothesis articulated in Chapter one, the study, rooted in the concept of reception analysis, explored and attempted to account for the 'naturalisation' of these texts and images. It is a naturalisation that the image producers are also subject to and based on the interviews carried out it is a sentiment agreed to by most. Through the research I have endeavoured to account for the connotative power of other texts i.e. men's magazines and pornography, and how this is carried through into shaping the meanings that are read off the website. Therefore, what I have come to find is that the production of the NBC texts and images are overdetermined by the existence of similar texts already in transmission in the circuit of culture.

One of the respondents in the interviews carried out for the purposes of the study articulated this position very well in answering the following question:

Are magazines for men and pornography likely to reinforce stereotypical, 'macho' and sexist attitudes in their readers and watchers?

Noizee: Yes, I think so. Pornography does have an influence on how men start to see women and what they expect of women especially when it comes to sex. The whole idea that the woman is always the passive party and she is always dumb- and they always have just two lines to say. It has a big influence on boys who start watching pornography at a young age it does factor into how they understand and their expectations of women. They expect us to behave and look like the women in the pornography.

Do these magazines, pornography and movies symbolically relegate women to subordinate positions as sex objects?

Noizee: Definitely.

In order to come to this conclusion the study has evolved and delved into various areas that have to do with sport, women and the media. In addition to contextualising NBC with respect to its relevance to the study, I examined firstly the context within which it's Olympics website is produced, transmitted and received. A discussion of sports journalism was carried out and unpacked and it was evident that it has enormous influence on individuals in a cultural context especially when it comes to gender values.

Secondly, an in-depth discussion was carried out of the theory that formed the basis of this study. This included an analysis of feminist theory and its historical and current relationship with sport. This was achieved through an assessment of the values of our media systems and the values that are used to construct media representations of women. A comprehensive delineation of the cultural studies paradigm followed focusing on the concept of intertextuality, ideology, Stuart Hall's model of preferred reading, sports and eroticisation and Antonio Gramsci's concept of common sense and good sense.

Thirdly, I ensured a complete explanation of the methods of research was included in the study so as to project a clear vision of where I saw the research going and in the process guaranteeing a comprehensible and concise set of findings. Qualitative methodological techniques were the principal tools chosen to undertake the research process and this was done solely using approaches within reception analysis. In order to explore the interpretation of the media constructed by consumers in their lives, I undertook thematic readings of texts and images, focus group interviews and individual in-depth interviews. Utilising this design was imperative due to the fact that it allowed for inferences to be drawn from one data source to be substantiated by another – easing the process. Based on this the findings did not surprise or shock but gave a clear indication of the indifference (by the male respondents mainly) surrounding female athletes and their sexualisation in sporting reportage. Therefore the chief finding was that the images of sexy beach volleyball players are indeed naturalised because they are all over the pages of *Maxim* and are celebrated every year by the *Sports Illustrated* swim suit edition. And this naturalisation serves to propagate and justify the beach volleyball players' sexy image and ultimate objectification because of the FIVB mandated uniform they wear.

It is widely accepted that beach volleyball is not exactly the most interesting game to watch and does not fit the bill of traditional 'spectator' sports such as football and tennis – it simply is not as thrilling in addition to the fact that its format and scoring is not understood by most discerning members of the public. However, female beach volleyball still attracts some of the highest rates of TV coverage by mainstream media particularly during the Olympics because of the sexy overtones it sells. I will repeat a quote from Chapter Three where Hinckley tells us:

[...] in America the second week of the NBC's Beijing 2008 Olympic coverage was dominated by women's beach volleyball. The coverage of the whole scantily-clad-women beach volleyball package was so thorough, that some viewers may be wondering if this wasn't just

setting us up for the 2012 London Games to give gold medals in lap dancing. There was a lot of Bikini Babes on Parade, a fact of which NBC seemed acutely aware. Any time their antennae sensed that guys might be reaching for the remote, someone instinctively threw up a promo that said, 'Next: More Beach Volleyball!' (2008)

The mantle of 'sex sells' when it comes to women and sports does not get any clearer. The arousing nature of the body and intensification of pleasure are central enunciative motifs of modern sexual strategies (Klein, 1988: 144-145), which also occur in reports on female athletes and their events. Linguistically in all the articles that were analysed, sexual connotations are evident in descriptions of body build, character, and in emphasising the aesthetic components of women's sport.

If female athletes happen to correspond to current ideals of attractiveness, then very often the report concentrates on their appearance. On the pictorial level, some sports photographs can directly evoke erotic 'phantasies' in male readers through such motifs of the female body as barely covered nakedness in skin-tight sport's clothes, graceful poses, fully stretched bodies, legs wide apart and skimpy bikinis. In all the photographs in the 'Cracking the Code' gallery (that was analysed for this study) the female athletes have been degraded to mere sex objects whereby patriarchal dominance is clearly evident. Although this sexualising strategy governed the coverage of female beach volleyball at the Beijing 2008 Olympics by the NBC Olympics website it occurs across all forms of media i.e. from the tabloids press to broadsheets to the highly lauded pages of *Playboy*.

In October 2009, Serena Williams certainly served up a surprise on the cover of America's *ESPN the Magazine's* inaugural 'Body Issue'. The tennis champion peeled off her usual sportswear to appear completely naked on the magazine's cover. Williams was among the most prominent stars in a line-up of professional and amateur athletes (male and female) posing naked for the magazine. Editor-in-chief Gary Belsky was quoted as saying, 'We were actually looking for something slightly different than what people might have imagined.' Adding, 'We wanted to look at all the different kinds of bodies that can excel at the highest level of athletic competition' and 'show how different bodies match with different sports.' He said both the editors and the athletes wanted to keep a sense of humour about the project, and convey a seriousness that would upend some of the expectations -- and criticisms. Belsky does anticipate that the 'Body Issue' will be an annual event; a 'serious franchise' for the magazine, which still trails *Sports Illustrated* in subscribers, 2.1 million to 3.2 million. But *ESPN the Magazine* has been gaining, and the 'Body Issue' could give it some more

visibility, as well as an edge in the kind of writing that the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue generally is not known for (Gibson, 2009).

The 28-year-old Williams looks a picture of confidence while wearing nothing but a smile, her modesty saved only by some very strategic posing. But the athlete has previously admitted she struggles to accept her body shape. 'My thighs, I think they're too big,' she has said. 'And also my arms. I think they're too muscular. They're too thick.' 'Sometimes I look at myself in the mirror and I want to lose my inner thigh. I've got to do an hour of cardio today, or whatever. I try not to do it, but the insecurity comes back sometimes. 'I want women to know that it's okay. You can be whatever size you are, and you can be beautiful both inside and out.'

This stance and acceptance once again of a high profile magazine to feature prominently a woman who does not fit the 'skinny' ideal that predominates most cultural landscapes is to be applauded. Considering Serena Williams is an athlete is also worthy of some praise at least to a certain extent it can help women out there alleviate their own body image issues. However, the fact that she is posing nude once again harkens back to the whole issue under consideration in this study and that is the sexualisation of female athletes. Serena must be well aware that she does not fit the sexy mould that her counterparts, for example, Anna Kournikova and even her own sister Venus fit into; and in choosing to pose nude on the cover of a mainstream magazine does not serve to propel her into that same sphere so to speak. Women whether they are athletes or not should not feel like they have to expose themselves and their bodies in order to prove their worth; their talents and achievements should speak to this on their behalf.

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX ONE: ARTICLES TAKEN FROM NBC OLYMPICS WEBSITE FOR QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

### *ARTICLE ONE:*

#### *Big dig reveals Walsh's missing ring*

Volunteers with metal detectors find the U.S. beach volleyball star's ring

By The Associated Press

Posted Sunday, August 10, 2008 7:12 AM ET

NBCOlympics.com

Kerri Walsh (right) didn't lose her concentration after losing her wedding ring, as she and teammate Misty May-Treanor went on to beat Japan.

BEIJING (AP) - Even the volunteers go for the gold at the Olympic beach volleyball venue.

When American beach volleyball star Kerri Walsh's wedding ring flew off during her opening match of the Olympics, venue workers combed the sand with metal detectors to find it. Volunteer Song Zhendong dug it up after about 20 minutes.

The ring came off when Walsh went up for a block in Sunday morning's match against Japan's Mika Saiki and Chiaki Kusuhara. American broadcasters could see what happened, and they called officials from the international volleyball federation to see if the ring could be recovered.

Some 17,000 tons of sand were brought into Chaoyang Park to create the beach volleyball venue, which includes a 12,200-seat centre court and a practice area with eight nets nearby. So if finding the ring wasn't exactly a needle in a haystack, it was close.

The video helped them figure out where to look, but the ring could have moved considerably between Walsh's 9 a.m. match and the end of the morning session at 3 p.m.

"The problem is, we rake the court," said Peter Paul Hreszczuk, the FIVB official manning the metal detector. "We heard a few noises; a few were false alarms. When we found it, it was pretty much under the net."

Even the availability of the metal detectors was a stroke of luck.

Hreszczuk said they're part of the federation's checklist for international play, because many of the events are on actual beaches and foreign objects are common.

"In this case there are no foreign objects in the sand, because this is specially procured, which is the best sand that's available," he said. "It's really something we use - not to search for wedding rings. That's not the prime objective."

Walsh found out the ring had been recovered, but she did not have it back on Sunday night, U.S. beach volleyball team leader Al Lau said. A meeting with the volunteer has been set up for Monday.

"It's a plain gold band," Hreszczuk said, "but obviously very precious."

It might not be the last golden bauble for Walsh, who is married to fellow beach volleyball pro and former NCAA champion Casey Jennings. She and partner Misty May-Treanor won the gold medal at the Athens Games in 2004 and are the favourites to repeat in Beijing.

### **ARTICLE TWO:**

#### ***Walsh, May-Treanor want gold medal, bundle of joy***

Beach volleyball players want to start families

By the Associated Press

Posted Tuesday, August 12, 2008 3:30 AM ET

BEIJING (AP) - Kerri Walsh and Misty May-Treanor are planning to go from barefoot to pregnant.

The beach volleyball teammates intend to take some time off after the Olympics and start families with their husbands, a move they've delayed so they can compete in Beijing and go for their second straight gold medal.

"Misty and I absolutely want to win a gold medal and then start a family," Walsh said Tuesday after the Athens Olympic champions improved to 2-0 in the Beijing opening round with a straight sets victory over Cuba. "I have so much love to give, and I just want to share it."

As partners on the professional beach volleyball tour, Walsh and May-Treanor spend a lot of time together during the season, a sisterhood that gives them a sense of kinship but doesn't quite satisfy all of their familial yearnings.

They're like family. But they're not really family.

"I've been ready forever," Walsh said. "I thought I'd have like three babies by now."

Having kids - and taking time off to raise them - could create an opening in 2009 on the medal stands of the domestic and international tours they've dominated. But it could also leave Walsh looking for a new partner because she wants to bring her yet-unconceived baby on the road, and May-Treanor does not.

"I think you've got to have your feet grounded," May-Treanor said, referring to a travel schedule that would, for example, take them from Poland to Brazil to Dubai to Thailand if they chose to play in the last four events after the Olympics this season.

May-Treanor is married to Florida Marlins catcher Matt Treanor, meaning they already see little of each other during the summer because they're both in-season at the same time. Having time off to be with her husband would be an adjustment, she joked.

"I don't know what we'd do," she said. "It would be like, 'Get in the other room. Let's talk on the computer.'"

Walsh is married to pro beach volleyball player Casey Jennings, so they are already able to mix their work and home lives. Walsh points to other women's beach volleyball players who have continued to play while raising kids, including two-time Olympic medalist Kerri Pottharst and current Olympian Ana Paula.

"They've balanced it," Walsh said. "I love my job. I love my lifestyle. I'm offering my unlimited babysitting services (to May-Treanor)."

Walsh turns 30 on Friday, but she says it's not the ticking of a biological clock that makes her want to have kids. She has always been eager to become a mother, she said, a feeling intensified because her brother has twins and another baby on the way.

"So I'm jealous," she said.

Jennings and his partner Matt Feurbringer were the No. 3 American team in Olympic qualifying - 16th on the world list for the 24-team field. But federation rules limit each country to no more than two teams, so they missed the cut.

Jennings has been back home in California, with plans to join his wife on Thursday before the medal round gets going. This week, Walsh said, she got a message from him saying, "Babe, I'm so excited for you to accomplish one dream in Beijing and then we can start on a new dream."

Walsh said she and Jennings considered trying to have a baby in 2006, which might have allowed her enough time to get back for Beijing.

"In retrospect," she said, "it just didn't make any sense to try to squeeze one out between Olympics."

Walsh and May-Treanor virtually assured themselves of a spot in the medal round with a 21-15, 21-16 victory over Dalixia Fernandez Grasset and Tamara Larrea - their 103rd consecutive win. The Cubans, ninth-place finishers in both Athens and Sydney, fell to 1-1.

In other action on Tuesday morning Efthalia Koutroumanidou and Maria Tsiartsiani of Greece defeated Judith Augoustides and Vitalina Nel of South Africa, 21-12, 21-8; Norway's Nila Haakedal and Ingrid Toerlen beat Mika Saiki and Chiaki Kusuhara of Japan 21-8, 21-18; and Bibiana Candelas and Mayra Garcia of Mexico beat Vassiliki Arvaniti and Vasso Karantasiou of Greece 21-17, 16-21, 15-12.

On the men's side, Wu Penggen and Xu Linyin of China survived a scare by Estonians Kristjan Kais and Rivo Vesik to win 15-21, 21-11, 15-13; Clemens Doppler and Peter Gartmayer of Austria upset Brazilians Marcio and Fabio 20-22, 21-19, 15-11.

**ARTICLE THREE:**

***May-Treanor, Walsh first duo to win back-to-back golds***

China's Xue, Zhang earn bronze

By the Associated Press

Posted Wednesday, August 20, 2008 5:45 PM ET

BEIJING (AP) - Kerri Walsh and Misty May-Treanor were prepared for the downpour, just as they were for a young Chinese team that was the latest to challenge their four-year reign over women's beach volleyball.

"This is just another reason why we play in bathing suits," May-Treanor said.

Ignoring the rain that drenched their uniforms and left them squinting into the sky where the sun should be, Walsh and May-Treanor won their second consecutive gold medal Thursday by beating China in straight sets. It was the 108th consecutive victory overall and 14th straight at the Olympics for the Americans, who did not lose a set in either Athens or Beijing.

"I dreamt about rain last night. It could have been 500 degrees or 500 below, and we'd be happy," Walsh said, after beating Wang Jie and Tian Jia 21-18, 21-18. "The rain makes it better. We felt like warriors out there."

Known as "Six Feet of Sunshine" for her bubbly smile, Walsh's personality couldn't part the clouds that drenched the Chaoyang Park venue for the bronze- and gold-medal matches. It was no day to be at the beach - not for Wang and Tian, and not for the fans that huddled under pastel ponchos and umbrellas.

But the 12,200-seat venue was packed, the dancers in bikinis jiggled to rock music and the players pressed on without concern for the weather. The wet and heavy ball forced them to bump-set instead of doing it over their heads, and the sometimes driving rain made it difficult to look up to receive passes.

It was no problem for the Americans.

And neither were the Chinese.

## **ARTICLE FOUR:**

### ***May/Walsh's win proves historic, iconic***

By Alan Abrahamson, NBCOlympics.com

Posted Thursday, August 21, 2008 2:13 AM ET

BEIJING -- The image of beach volleyball, the piece of California culture that has raced around the world, is of course the promise of endless summer -- the ripped guys, the bikini-clad girls, the smell of suntan lotion, all of that.

In a driving, relentless rain better suited for football, or maybe orienteering, Americans Kerri Walsh and Misty May-Treanor on Thursday defeated the Chinese duo of Tian Jia and Wang Jie to win the gold medal in women's beach volleyball at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Misty and Kerri first to win back-to-back Olympic golds.

And prove, emphatically, so much more. For this match, when they write the history of beach volleyball, will forever be a turning point. Because beach volleyball is so much more than endless summer. It is ferocious athletic competition of the highest order.

The diehards, their coolers at the ready on the sand back in Hermosa or Huntington, knew that already. But this -- this was there for all the world to see, and appreciate, the best of what beach volleyball is about, far away from a beach and on the farthest thing from a beachy keen day, shown during prime time back home in the States, broadcast here in China and elsewhere to millions more.

Walsh and May-Treanor weathered everything Tian and Wang, and a rowdy if rain-soaked home crowd, could throw at them. They prevailed 21-18, 21-18.

In winning, May-Treanor and Walsh repeated as Olympic champions. No team had ever before done so.

Moreover, just as they did in Athens in 2004, Walsh and May-Treanor at these 2008 Olympics not only did not lose a match, they did not even drop a single set -- a phenomenal achievement because the calibre of beach play has improved significantly since 2004.

The victory Thursday unequivocally establishes Walsh, 30, and May-Treanor, 31, as the greatest beach volleyball team of all time.

Others certainly stand as greats on various teams -- for instance, Karch Kiraly, a three-time Olympic gold medalist, twice in indoor volleyball, and 1996 in beach.

But, male or female, no one has matched Walsh or May-Treanor. In winning Thursday, they not only returned to the gold-medal stand, they:

- Won their 108th straight match.
- Won May-Treanor's 103rd career tournament.
- Won Walsh's 100th career tournament.

Afterward, each talked about wanting to start a family. Walsh is married to another pro volleyballer, Casey Jennings; May-Treanor is married to Matt Treanor of the Florida Marlins.

Maybe Walsh and May-Treanor will be back at the Olympics in 2012. Maybe not.

"There are so many amazing players that came before us and girls yet to come," Walsh said. "But I'm so proud of what we've done."

"Everyone talks about streaks and records, and now we really are," she said, patting her gold medal, "in the history books."

May-Treanor said, "We're making footprints of our own."

The last time Walsh and May-Treanor had lost in an international match had been against the same Chinese pair, in July 2007, at a tournament in Norway. If anything speaks to the way beach volleyball has gotten tougher since Athens, that's it right there.

Chinese beach volleyball players? Who are good? Believe it.

The bronze medalists at this Olympic tournament: China's Xue Chen and Zhang Xi, who earlier Thursday defeated Brazilians Talita Antunes and Renata Ribeiro, 21-19, 21-17.

The rain Thursday at Chaoyang Park came down hard -- a rain so severe that, over at BMX, which also has that California vibe, they postponed Thursday's action. Walsh and May-Treanor had made a point of saying beforehand that they practice in the rain.

They also, as beach junkies knew, had played over the years in other adverse weather. In Marseilles, France, for instance, in howling winds. In Hong Kong in sweltering heat and humidity.

But those matches were not played under the glare of Olympic gold.

"I think it's harder being a fan sitting out in the rain than being a player," May-Treanor said, adding with a big smile, "This is just another reason why we play in bathing suits."

"The rain made it a little more special, a little more romantic out there," Walsh said. "You feel like you're a warrior out there, battling the elements."

The first game proved taut, the two sides exchanging the lead, until 17, when the Americans ripped off three straight points. The Chinese saved one set point on brilliant teamwork -- Wang dropping the ball down the line off a set from Tian on her knees -- before the Americans closed it out.

The second set, again, proved back and forth. Tied at 11, at 12, at 13, 14, 15.

The Americans then won the next two and Tian called a five-minute medical timeout. Maybe she needed the work -- her left forearm and elbow got rubbed. Or maybe she just wanted to blunt the momentum.

When play resumed, a Tian dink shot, right to left, made it 17-16. On the next point, Wang, apparently thinking it was the third touch, not the second, tried to muscle the ball over while falling backwards -- but the ball fell into the net.

18-16, Americans.

The Chinese, however, took the next two. The score was tied again, now at 18.

"I knew they'd be extremely tough," Walsh said. "I knew they'd be relentless and they were."

No one in beach volleyball history has proven more relentless, however, than Walsh and May-Treanor. They won the next three points, Walsh sealing the match with a slam straight down the center, and as the ball hit the wet sand, so, too, on the other side, did Walsh and May-Treanor, hugging each other in relief and joy and pride.

They had won again. And done so much more.

"It's so poignant," Wash said. "It's so deep inside. We're older now. We can appreciate this. Athens was just an adrenaline rush, lightning in a bottle. This is more like soulful. It's wonderful."

## **APPENDIX TWO – GUIDE FOR FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS**

**PART ONE OF INTERVIEW:** Dispositions & Discourses – focused life history with respect to sport. AIM: Get participants to reconstruct events in their past e.g. at home, school or work that places their interest in sport in the current context of their lives.

- a) Are you a follower of sport?
- b) Where does your interest in sport stem from? / How old were you when this first happened?
- c) Have you ever been an active athlete? / Are you currently an active athlete?
- d) What is your main source of information as far as sport is concerned?
- e) Do you discuss the relationships between men and women? With who? What role have your friends/family played in forming your opinions? What about magazines/movies/websites?

**PART TWO OF INTERVIEW** – delve into their present experience with the topic/area of study.

- a) What is your take/ experience of the NBC Olympics website – how does it affect your overall opinion of sport – particularly beach volleyball?
- b) Do you think female athletes are depicted (both image and text) with respect to their talents or is emphasis placed on their sexuality? (On the website).
- c) Does it make a difference to you what attire female beach volleyball athletes choose to wear i.e. bikini's, one piece costumes or shorts and vests?
- d) Can you see a marked difference in the images of male and female beach volleyball players?
- e) Is it your opinion that the media focuses on the physical attractiveness (sexiness) rather than the sporting achievements of female athletes? If yes – why?
- f) If asked to choose between watching female weightlifting, bodybuilding, tennis or beach volleyball – what would you choose? Why?

- g) Discuss relationships with women in participants lives e.g. friends, mothers, sisters and female athletes and sports enthusiasts.

PART THREE OF INTERVIEW: Representations of Gender – reflect on the meaning of their experience. AIM: look at how factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation and opinions. DISCUSS PORN HERE TOO

- a) Given what you have said about your experiences with sport – what do you understand as the role of the female athlete?
- b) What kind of female athletes (beach volleyball) are depicted on the NBC Olympics website? What does the image say to you? (ELICIT: Do they show an ideal of a ‘sexy’ woman? Is it something all women should aspire to?)

PART FOUR OF INTERVIEW: Group discussion around images on NBC Olympics website – specifically images in ‘CRACKING THE CODE’ article.

- a) Is it necessary to use images of female beach volleyball athletes to demonstrate the ‘hand signals’?
- b) Does it make for a more interesting read because the focus is on the athletes buttocks? Why/not?
- c) Do you like or dislike it? Why?
- d) How do the female images compare to the male images?

(ELICIT: Are the readers aware of the sexualisation of the beach volleyball players? Do they derive any pleasure from the images? Do they notice the patriarchal discourse? Are they for or against the images?)

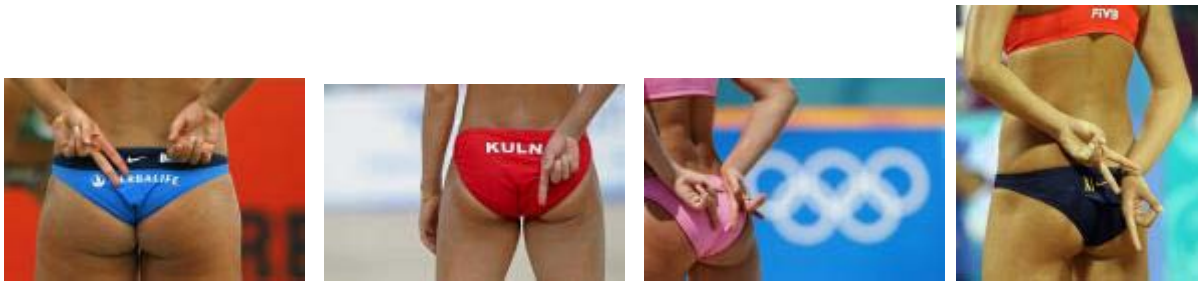
### **APPENDIX 3: GUIDE FOR INDIVIDUAL IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS**

**Aim:** In undertaking a reception analysis of the texts and images on the NBC Olympics website the study will explore and attempt to account for the ‘naturalisation’ of these texts and images, a naturalisation that arguably the image producers are also subject to. Through the research I intend to account for the connotative power of other texts i.e. the men’s magazines and pornography, and how this is likely to be carried through into shaping the meanings that are read off the website.

1. What are the criteria you use in assessing the physical attractiveness of a person of the opposite gender?
2. Do the media (e.g. men’s magazines and Hollywood movies) present different ideals (body type) to male and female audiences?
3. Do the media perpetuate ‘appropriate’ physical characteristics for each gender?
4. Has this influenced your opinions on gender in any way?
5. Do you read or watch any of the following:
  - a. men’s magazines (please name them)
  - b. pornography
  - c. mainstream Hollywood movies??
6. Are magazines for men and pornography likely to reinforce stereotypical, ‘macho’ and sexist attitudes in their readers and watchers?
7. Do these magazines, pornography and movies symbolically relegate women to subordinate positions as sex objects?
8. Do the media represent enough of a range of men and women?
9. Is it your opinion that women feel threatened by a media culture which constantly places great emphasis on how they look?
10. Does this work towards naturalising the ‘beach babe’ ideal for women across the board?

11. On the NBC Olympics website were the female athletes depicted (both image and text) with respect to their talents or was emphasis placed on their sexuality?
12. Are the beach volleyball athletes on the NBC Olympics website (particularly in the Cracking the Code gallery) variations of stereotypes that become sub-stereotypes in themselves?
13. Despite being titled 'Cracking the Code', the article offers no actual information on the meanings of the various beach volleyball signals, why do you think this is so?
14. Is this a prime example of sexist representations permeating sports media? Why is it that women cannot simply be portrayed as strong, powerful, and athletic?
15. Blog quote: Typically this type of brilliant display of journalism would be displayed in magazines such as Maxim, but NBC has come through on this one in a huge way. Way to go NBC! (<http://www.slybaldguys.com/serendipity/archives/207-NBC-cracks-the-code-to-hot-volleyball-ass.html>). COMMENT.
16. Did NBC use these images that resemble soft-core pornography just to draw in viewers?

**APPENDIX 4: SELECTION OF IMAGES FROM THE ‘CRACKING THE CODE’ GALLERY TAKEN OFF THE NBC OLYMPICS WEBSITE**  
(<http://www.2008.nbcolympics.com/beachvolleyball/photos/galleryid=122861.html> )



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