



Mediated images of physical activity and sport: Girls gone wild?

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Abstract

Wiese-Bjornstal & LaVoi (2007) claim critical literacy is one of the best practices to maximize the psychosocial benefits of participating in sport. This paper is a semiotic analysis of two years' issues of *Seventeen*, *Girls' Life* and *New Moon Girls* magazines using ideology and hegemony as a framework. Analysis reveals that motives for participating in physical activity/sport and messages supporting/discouraging girls to participate in particular physical activities/sports differ by magazine. *Seventeen* presents physical activity as a means to sculpt a "perfect" body, focusing specifically on "abs," "butts," and legs. *Girls' Life* presents physical activity as a means to shape a "bikini body," which can be achieved with minimal time and effort. *New Moon Girls* frames physical activity in terms of health and enjoyment, not as incentive for girls to achieve a specific body type. *Seventeen* and *Girls' Life* send mixed messages about participating in sports, presenting activities as dangerous in some articles and engaging in others. *New Moon Girls* depicts a wide variety of activities as appropriate for girls. *Seventeen* and *Girls' Life* co-opt physical activity and sport while exuding negative influence. Alternately, publications like *New Moon Girls* promote more healthy practices.

Background

- Participating in both physical activity and sport provides physiological, psychological, and social benefits for children of all ages.
- By the age of 14, girls' sport drop-out rate is six times higher than boys'
 - Why? Identity insecurity, "proper" feminine gender roles, other activities, homework, jobs, dating, elitism in sports programs, negative coaching, injuries, eating disorders, harassment, abuse, homophobia, access and opportunity, and other psychological factors.
 - Less documented is the potential influence of mediated messages about physical activity and body image as they may or may not contribute to girls' sport drop-out rate.

Methods

- Semiotic analysis** of 2008-09 issues of *Seventeen*, *Girls' Life*, and *New Moon Girls* to discern how representations of physical activity and sport contribute to an ideology of how girls should participate in these endeavors
- Framework:** ideology and hegemony
- Research questions**
 - What motives are presented for participating in physical activity and sports in media directed toward adolescent girls?
 - Do mediated messages directed toward girls support or discourage girls participating in physical activity and sport in general? More specifically, are certain physical activities and sports encouraged/discouraged?

Results/Discussion

- Motives for participating in physical activity and sport**
- Seventeen and Girls' Life:** exercising is for a "perfect" or "bikini" body, focusing specifically on toning problem areas like "abs," "butts," and legs.
 - Achieved with minimal time and effort using two-week or three-week plans put forth by the magazines.
 - Contradictions emerge when valid information about health is coupled with messages about shaping "problem" areas.
 - New Moon Girls:** physical activity and sport are tools to manage common adolescent ills; leisure is fun, enjoyable, and available to all girls, regardless of body type.

Messages Supporting or Discouraging Girls to Participate in Physical Activity and Sport

- Seventeen and Girls' Life** – similar results
 - Feature-length articles about organized sport reveal mixed messages about participating in sport: dangers of sport (e.g., steroids and cheer injuries) but also articles about benefits of participating in sport
 - Fashion articles using sporting equipment as accessories takes away from viewing women as competent athletes. Additionally, the models in these articles are thin and do not appear to have the strength required to participate in the sports they represent.
- New Moon Girls**
 - Presents a multiplicity of sports and activities for girls with different levels of athletic prowess, encouraging everyone to participate, regardless of ability

Results/Discussion, cont.

- New Moon Girls, cont.**
 - Traditional sports like baseball/softball and basketball are featured, but non-mainstream youth sports like yoga, rock climbing, belly dancing, and snowboarding/alpine skiing are also presented
- Hinshaw (2009) claims at least 25 percent of adolescent girls will fall victim to self-mutilation, eating disorders, violence, depression, or suicide. Reasons for these issues include overly sexualized images of girls and women, the spread of consumerism, loss of community, the growing influence of cyberculture, and the media (Hinshaw, 2009). Analyzing mediated messages directed toward girls presents opportunities to organize counter strategies so girls, who are dangerously "unmothered, unprotected, and unguided," (Wolf, 2002) do not fall victim to social ills.

Duncan (2007) cites "critiquing the public discourse—the limiting and oppressive messages about gender and femininity—that shape girls' everyday experience of their bodies" (p. 45), is crucial for girls to succeed in physical activity and sport. Analysis of *Seventeen*, *Girls' Life*, and *New Moon Girls* reveals both troubling and encouraging representation of physical activity and sport contributing to an ideology of adolescence. Favoring magazines that present physical activity and sport as empowering rather than as a means to shape "problem" areas should be encouraged so adolescent girls can take advantage of the physiological, psychological, and social benefits of these activities.