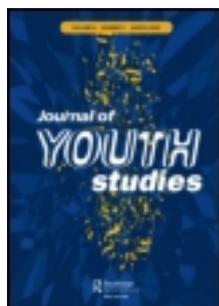


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A picture is worth a thousand words: constructing (non-) athletic bodies

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A picture is worth a thousand words: constructing (non-) athletic bodies

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In this article we explore body norms Dutch youth create in their discursive constructions of athletic and (non-)athletic bodies and how these norms are enforced by the Panopticon and the Synopticon. Our methodology consisted of auto-driven photo elicitation group interviews with 42 secondary school students. The results indicate the complexity of the discursive constructions that youth use. We created seven visual metaphors to illustrate the various narratives that emerged from the data: the Male Soccer Player; the Field Hockey Girl; the Female Boxer; the Male Dancer; the Fatty; the Sumo Wrestler; and the Computer Nerd. These visual metaphors show these teenagers conflated dominant discourses about health and appearance and how their discursive constructions of athleticism intersected with notions about gender, sexuality, social class, and race. Furthermore, our data illustrate how our participants reproduced and resisted dominant discourses that are produced by visual media.

Keywords: body; athleticism; gender; health; discourse

In the past decade, several scholars have argued that how young people see themselves and others in sport is inextricably connected to the ways they interpret media imagery of the body (e.g., Azzarito and Harrison 2008; Thorpe 2008; Azzarito 2009). However, media are not the only source by which imagery and knowledge about the body are produced and communicated. Knowledge about the body in relation to sport and physical activity is also communicated, reproduced and challenged through interaction with others in everyday life.

The overlapping discourses about appearance and about health communicate knowledge about the physically (in)active or (non-)athletic body. A dominant discourse about appearance suggests sport and physical activity are tools that produce a desirable body. This desirable body is gendered. The desirable body for girls and women in a Western context has been constructed as slender, White, firm, non-aggressive, and passive (Markula 1995; Bordo 2003). The desirable male body has been constructed as lean, muscular, tall, strong, aggressive, and competitive (Drummond 2003; Gorely *et al.* 2003).

In contrast and yet similarly, popular discourses about health construct sport and physical activities as means to manage body size and body weight. In an attempt to battle what they perceive as the ‘obesity epidemic,’ medical professionals,

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governments, schools, television producers etcetera convey messages about health in which they try to make people – and youth specifically – aware of the importance of being physically active and the dangers of being and eating ‘fat’ (e.g., Gard and Wright 2001; Evans 2003; Wright 2009).

Discourses about health and appearance may intersect because they both generate knowledge about which bodies are considered normal and desirable and which are not and see sport and physical activity as important tools to achieve that normality and desirability. Consequently, the increasing emphasis on the appearance of the body in contemporary Western societies has intensified practices of inclusion and exclusion in physical activity settings based on visible physical differences. Azzarito (2009) and Fitzgerald (2005) contend that those whose bodies do not conform to dominant norms of physical appearance, such as the disabled, the fat or racial minorities, are often marginalized in or excluded from physical activity settings. Attention to these issues of marginalization and exclusion, requires an understanding of how the physical appearance of the bodies they see around them informs youths’ discursive constructions of athletic and non-athletic bodies, that is, of athleticism.

The Panopticon and the Synopticon

According to Foucault (1979) looking at others is central to understanding the disciplinary power of discourses on the body. He uses the metaphor of a prison (the Panopticon) to explain this. In the Panopticon, guards observe prisoners who are isolated in separate cells from a central watch tower; the few see the many. Because prisoners can never be certain whether they are being watched, the fear of being observed is ever present. This fear, Foucault argues, pushes people to internalize the disciplinary regime to which they are subjected and use self-surveillance and self-discipline to adhere to norms produced by prevailing discourses. This symbolizes how via the Panopticon, power disciplines the body in relation to power/knowledge production around that body (Foucault 1972, 1979). In this article, we use the concept of the Panopticon to explore how the discursive constructions of athleticism that youth use are informed by the way they look at bodies around them, and how this generates discipline and surveillance in the area of sport and physical activities.

In a critique of Foucault’s theory, Mathiesen (1997) argues that especially in high-modern ‘viewer society’ it is not just the few who see the many (Panopticon) but also the many who see the few (Synopticon). Internet, television, advertisements, and other popular visual media paint a (gendered) picture of the ideal, desirable body that leaves little room for variation and has come to represent happiness and success (Bordo 2003; Wright 2004). This dominant construction of the body is controlled by a few (the producers of popular visual media such as television, films, video games, etc. who provide material images of embodied discourses) and seen by many (everyone who engages with popular visual media). In this study we use the concept of the Synopticon to explain how certain body images become dominant and desirable through the discursive constructions that youth use while others are marginalized. According to Mathiesen (1997) the Synopticon disciplines the consciousness. The Synopticon may therefore seriously impact the ways young people construct and experience their own and others’ bodies because it obstructs the

process of critical reflection on dominant discourses that is crucial in challenging this often oppressing dominant imagery.

Dominant imagery and dominant discourses can be challenged, however. According to Foucault (1987) reproduction of dominant discourses and resistance to these discourses go hand in hand. He argues that there are 'points of resistance' that can produce subtle shifts in power relations. These points of resistance are transitory and distributed in an irregular fashion over power relations (Foucault 1978 as cited in Markula and Pringle 2006, p. 88). We attempt to show the complex and convoluted ways in which Dutch youth discursively construct (non-)athletic bodies by using body imagery. This research project therefore includes an analysis of both points of resistance to and reproduction of dominant discourses.

Images of the physically (in)active body

Several critical feminist scholars have emphasized the importance of body imagery in discursive practices related to physical activity (e.g., Markula 1995; Hardin and Hardin 2004; Azzarito 2009; Azzarito and Sterling 2010). Azzarito (2009), for example, used a selection of body images drawn from sport and fitness magazines to explore young people's construction of the ideal body in physical education. Her findings show that the construction of the ideal feminine body '[...] was represented by a significantly narrow choice of pictures displaying ideals of sexualized slenderness and fashion, the white feminine fit body' (p. 35). In contrast, the construction of the ideal masculine body promoted a wider choice of physical activities and differences in muscularity, shape, and athleticism for boys. This study only partly explains youths' concepts of the body in relation to physical activity because its focus on the construction of an ideal body leaves untouched constructions of non-ideal, undesirable bodies and how these function in physical activity settings. Furthermore, Azzarito did not explore how discourses about health may play a role in the construction of athleticism as well.

The dominant discourse about health can, however, be considered a very powerful pedagogy that teaches youth values, attitudes, and beliefs about the relation between bodily appearance and physical activities (e.g., Evans *et al.* 2008; Rail 2009; Wright 2009). Evans *et al.* (2008), for instance, argue that in recent years popular media have not only sought to 'entertain' people by imagery that is pleasurable, media have also attempted to 'educate' and promote lifestyle changes, by promoting market behaviors from which commercial companies profit or by pursuing altruistic motives such as promoting better health. Their research shows how popular pedagogical narratives of body shape, exercise and food delivered by popular media appeal to the hopes and dreams of young people to achieve happiness and success. Through their engagement with and interpretation of visual imagery related to 'health', youth attempt to embody ideals of what it means to be a 'good,' 'attractive,' 'healthy,' and 'sporty' body, sometimes with the detrimental effect of developing an eating disorder (Evans *et al.* 2008).

Rail (2009, p. 148) found that Canadian youth who participated in her study seemed more concerned about 'looking good' and 'not being fat,' than about 'being healthy.' Burrows (2008) noticed a similar preoccupation with appearance in conceptions about health of New Zealand school children. The youth in her study said they 'looked' at a person (their size and shape, their eating and exercising

behavior) to determine whether or not she or he was healthy. This suggests that young people believe health can be ‘read off’ the body. However, neither Rail nor Burrows explored in detail how discourses about appearance are incorporated in the discursive constructions of athleticism that youth use.

Since media often celebrate body images that are unrealistic and young people’s capacities to distinguish real from unreal are hampered by the Synopticon (Azzarito 2010b), their increasing immersion in visual culture requires youth to negotiate cultural messages about the body. An exploration of this negotiation requires methodologies that might generate new ways of understanding how young people perceive and construct their own and others’ bodies in relation to sport and physical activities. The current study uses a participatory visual methodology to explore which body norms are constructed by Dutch youth in their discursive constructions of (non-)athletic bodies and how these norms may be enforced by panoptic and synoptic power.

Methodology

We used a participatory photographic methodology since this gives youth the opportunity to creatively express their own meanings and understandings of the body and enhance their reflexivity when combined with interviews (Clark-Ibáñez 2004; Azzarito 2010b). Most research that uses a participatory photographic methodology to explore how youth construct physicality focuses on the spatiality or geography of their embodiment (e.g., Colls and Hörschelmann 2009; Azzarito and Sterling 2010). Our research combines the inductive aspect of a participatory methodology with a focus on the interpretation of and meaning making around body imagery as it is often used in Photo Elicitation interviews. We asked research participants to bring their own photos that were later used as visual stimuli in a group interview. Clark-Ibáñez (2004) calls this the ‘auto-driven photo elicitation interview.’ She asserts that the use of a combination of photographic material with interviews in research with children and young people works well, because it engages them and provides them with a tangible visible probe. We chose to combine participatory photography with group interviews, because the focus of this study was to explore not just dominant discourses youth used to construct the (non-)athletic body but also the way these dominant ideas and images were challenged and resisted. In the group setting, young people were often confronted with ideas that differed from their own. We facilitated discussion to explore the negotiation of and points of resistance to dominant notions of athleticism.

A total of 42 secondary school students, 23 girls and 19 boys, aged 16–18 years from two secondary schools in the Netherlands participated in this research project as part of their social science class. We asked these students to bring a photo of a person they believed looked like they would be good at sports, physical activities, and physical education (an ‘athletic’ looking person) and a photo of a person they believed looked like they would not be very good at sports, physical activities, and physical education (a ‘non-athletic’ looking person). We suggested they could use a digital camera or cell phone, find a photo on the Internet, or devise another creative way of selecting or producing a photo.

Subsequently we divided them into focus groups of four to five students. The students were asked to reflect on the photos they had brought. The primary

researchers asked questions such as ‘Tell me about this photo. What do we see here?’ and ‘Why did you choose to bring this photo?’ After listening to the initial reflection of the student who brought the photo, other members of the group were invited to respond to the reflections and the photo.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour, were tape recorded and transcribed. To guarantee anonymity, we gave each student a pseudonym. We analyzed the interviews through a process of systematic organization and coding (Patton 1990) and searched for dominant as well as marginal themes. First, after careful reading and re-reading, the interviews were coded in the margins of the transcripts. Second, the codes were organized in different categories, each representing a visual metaphor. Finally, the categories were grouped in two main findings. The content of the participants’ photos was not analyzed since our purpose in using a participatory photography methodology was to engage students in the research process and enhance their reflexivity on the subject (Clark-Ibáñez 2004).

Results

Overall the data indicate that the constructions of athleticism used by these youth intersected with notions about gender, sexuality, race, social class, age, and health. The constructions were fluid and influenced by interactions in the group interviews. Our participants constantly negotiated and challenged their own and others’ discursive constructions. In the following section, we describe two main findings: ‘gendered and sexualized images of physically active bodies’ and ‘images of “unhealthy” and “non-athletic” bodies.’ Congruent with our visual methodology we created seven visual metaphors that reflect our data and paint a picture of the bodies constructed by our participants. We use the visual metaphors as a heuristic device to help unpack some of the complexities involved in the use of various discourses about the body. As such, the metaphors guide our argument through the complex and convoluted discursive constructions that our participants used.

Gendered and sexualized images of physically active bodies

The Male Soccer Player and the Field Hockey Girl

The participants often reproduced dominant gendered discourses on sport and the body when they commented on the photos. They drew on physical, behavioral, or personal characteristics to discursively construct both male and female athletic bodies. They associated physical characteristics such as muscles (e.g., ‘a six-pack’); upright posture; slenderness; a tanned complexion; and nice (sporty) clothes with athleticism. Furthermore, they assumed athletic looking people to be self-confident; energetic; extraverted; competitive; strong; youthful; happy and healthy. The comments made by Tahlia and Rachel about a photo of three runners (two men and one woman) reflect the complexity of their constructions of athletic bodies:

Interviewer: What can you tell me about the picture?

Tahlia: Well, they look healthy and muscular. The face of the man on the left looks a bit old, but if you can still run at that age I think you are athletic. And the others look really healthy and happy. They have good posture. And those clothes too!

Rachel: I think his complexion also plays a role. When I think of someone who's athletic I picture a person with a bit of a tan for some reason. For me that fits the description of being healthy.

Tahlia and Rachel used multiple traits (muscularity, age, posture, clothes, and skin complexion) to discursively construct the athletic body. Furthermore, they conflate athleticism with good health that, similar to findings of Evans *et al.* (2008), they associate with happiness. The following interview excerpts show how various participants construct an athletic look as something positive:

Valery: I thought this one looks athletic

Interviewer: Can you explain why?

Valery: It's a healthy guy with an athletic posture. I think his posture and his body are the main things that look athletic, active [...] He's standing straight.

Heather: He's smiling, he looks happy.

Isabel: And he's not fat.

Gillian: He feels comfortable in his body, you can tell. That's why I think he participates in sport. Or not, that's also a possibility . . .

Nathan: I think he plays soccer twice a week.

Britt: You can see he's active. He's very muscular. In this picture you can see a lot of muscles, so apparently he is very active in sport.

Fiona: I think he definitely has a beautiful body

Britt: He is really triangular [broad shoulders and a small waist].

These quotations reflect the positive associations these youth assign to an athletic look for men or boys. Similar to findings of Gorely *et al.* (2003), the reflections of Britt and Fiona exemplify that they consider visible muscularity as a desirable masculine trait.

The desirable male athletic body our participants described can be symbolized by the Male Soccer Player. Soccer was often mentioned by our participants as a masculine sport. Soccer is considered *the* national sport in the Netherlands and perceived as important to Dutch national identity (Lechner 2007). It has the largest percentage of male participants of any sport in the country and receives the most TV coverage of all sports. The effect of the Synopticon is evident in the way these respondents associated the male athletic body with soccer. Karen, Will, and Leila, for example, comment on pictures of athletic looking men as follows:

Karen: He just looks like he does sports, soccer or something like that. Yes, I think he looks athletic. He's just in good shape.

Leila: [Commenting on a picture of David Beckham without a shirt] I think those tattoos make him look even more athletic.

Will: They [tattoos red] make you look more pugnacious; show you're prepared to give it all

Leila: Dangerous

Will: That you would even sacrifice your own body; that you'd be willing to go that far.

Leila: You're taking the words out of my mouth.

Whereas the desirable male athletic body is symbolized by the visibly muscular, competitive, and aggressive Male Soccer Player, the desirable female athletic body looks different according to our participants. The desirable female athletic body is

not supposed to be visibly muscular and aggressive. Alice and Mary construct an ideal female athletic body as firm but not muscular:

Alicia: A six-pack is not really feminine

Mary: But when a guy has it, it's nice

Interviewer: Would you want to look like that [muscular, with a six-pack]?

Mary: No. No, it's ok to have a firm body. But there is a difference between firm and muscular, and I don't think being muscular is nice for a girl.

Karen, Rachel and Aiden construct the ideal female athletic body as a slender, well-dressed and confident one:

Karen: I think she looks athletic. Her clothes and the way she walks, self-confident. And she's slender.

Rachel: She really has a determined way of walking

Aiden: She looks like a typical hockey girl.

Although field hockey in the Netherlands is practiced by similar percentages of predominantly White, upper-class men and women, our participants mentioned female field hockey players quite often as exemplifying a desirable female appearance. These field hockey girls were not only described as slender and confident but also as rich and belonging to the upper class. The reactions of some of the boys in our study to body images that were interpreted as 'field hockey girls' (grinning, 'who'-ing, raising of eyebrows) suggests that these girls were constructed as heterosexually attractive. Thus, we use the metaphor of the Field Hockey Girl to symbolize the desirable female athletic body. Her appearance conforms to dominant standards of girlish heterosexual femininity (Boland 2008). The Hockey Girl can be considered the Dutch version of the Future/Alpha Girl as described by Azzarito (2010a). She is powerful, sporty, fit, highly educated, and successful and thus partly contradicts discourses of the traditional feminine docile body. The Hockey Girl represents the preferred reading of Dutch National identity through her upper-class background and her blond hair, which symbolizes her extreme Whiteness (Knoppen in Boland 2008). Although her Whiteness was not explicitly discussed in the group interviews, the visual material related to female athletic bodies did show an abundance of White bodies with long (often blond) hair. Thus, the Hockey Girl as the desirable feminine athletic body emerges at the intersection of gender, sexuality, social class, and race. The visual metaphor of the Hockey Girl as reflecting desirable femininity in the Dutch context possibly exemplifies the Synopticon. Its desirability may be due to the upsurge of professional female field hockey players as 'hot chicks' in popular media in the Netherlands.¹ After the success of the Dutch national women's field hockey team in the Olympic Games and World Championships over the past decade, media coverage of hockey games and participation of girls in field hockey have increased (Boland 2008). The past years female elite hockey players have appeared regularly in television soaps, talk shows, entertainment programs and advertisements and as a result some have become national icons.²

The narratives of Ally, Britt, Fiona and Ian illustrate assumptions of gender complementarity and heteronormativity in the discursive constructions of athletic bodies:

Ally: I think a girl should be kind and soft and a guy big and strong. That's probably the stereotype.

Britt: Girls should do stuff like dancing, gymnastic or ballet.

Fiona: I think it's human instinct that the man should protect the woman. I don't know, it's just in there somewhere. A strong muscular guy is more attractive than a shy chicken who cannot push anyone out of the way.

Ian: I think it would be really unpleasant for a guy to be non-athletic. It's certainly the ideal of women to have a strong, tough man. If you fail at every exercise in gym class... that would be a turn off for girls I think. It's less important for a girl to be athletic because that's not what guys look for in a girl.

The participants used masculinity and femininity as bipolar concepts to explain the different appearance norms for women and men. They assumed men and women complement each other in behavior and appearance. This assumption illustrates how they take the heterosexual norm for granted and construct femininity in opposition to masculinity (Butler 1990).

Ally's explicit reference to her idea being a stereotype shows a possible opening to challenge these gendered and sexualized constructions of the body and could be considered a point of resistance. However, our participants rarely questioned or resisted the dominant gendered and sexualized discourses on the body and physical activity while discursively constructing desirable athletic bodies. Butlers' theory (1990) on gender as performance can provide a possible explanation for this lack of resistance. She asserts that to avoid 'gender trouble,' most people intentionally or unintentionally perform what they think it is to be male or female on a daily basis. Similarly, Paechter (2003, p. 48) argues that since youth are often insecure about the appropriate performance of masculinity or femininity they often identify with and perform stereotypical hypermasculine and hyperfeminine roles and behaviors. To our participants, the Male Soccer Player and the Field Hockey Girl seem to symbolize the norms for a desirable masculine and feminine appearance and performance. By identifying with these constructions of masculinity and femininity, these teenagers may avoid 'gender trouble.' Yet these constructions were not total. In the next section we demonstrate how there were points of resistance to dominant gendered and sexualized discourses in the narratives of some of the girls in our study when they talked about gender inappropriate bodies.

The Male Dancer and the Female Boxer

The disciplining effect of dominant imagery of the body becomes evident when our participants talked about bodies that transgress the dominant norms. Women with a muscular appearance or broad shoulders, for example, are considered athletic, but they are not considered to be heterosexually desirable by our participants. Additionally, they constructed fighting, physical contact, and aggression as inappropriate for women. The athletic albeit undesirable body for women can be symbolized by the image of the Female Boxer. Her visible muscularity points to a lack of performed heterofemininity. The following excerpt shows how Darren, Will, and Thomas hint at the possible consequences of practicing what they consider an

inappropriate sport for women, while Leila resists their ideas on gender appropriate sports producing gender appropriate bodies:

Darren: I once read that girls who played soccer stopped because their calves were getting too muscular. And those girls didn't want that, so they stopped playing soccer. That shows that muscles are more masculine.

Will: I think that's why girls are more into dancing

Thomas: Or ballet

Leila: But dancing also makes your calves very muscular, you know.

Will: Soccer makes your leg muscles bulge. Ballet will make your muscles longer, and I think that's more beautiful for girls.

Darren: I think soccer is really a guys' sport. And rugby

Will: Rugby for example . . . I rather not see women wrestling, fighting and things like that. And boxing, I think that's really a guys' sport too.

This excerpt illustrates the possible disciplining power of the Panopticon, that is, of the biomedical and appearance discourses. According to Darren, girls internalize the feeling that they are being looked at with disapproval. He believes this encourages girls to discipline their bodies to the dominant heteronormative appearance norm. Leila, however, resists this idea by pointing out that a traditionally feminine physical activity (dance) can also produce so called masculine traits such as visible muscularity. Similarly, in the narrative below, some of the girls argue that they resist the negative evaluation of women playing sports that were defined as masculine (such as basketball, boxing, or soccer):

Leila: [About a classmate] Most people don't like her, but respect her because she likes to play basketball and she just goes and does it. A lot of girls hold back because they think 'I would like to play basketball but it's a guys' sport'. But she just grabs a ball and will play basketball, regardless of what others think.

Omar: Soccer is known as a guy thing.

Penny: I don't know . . . I disagree. Maybe in the old days, but it's changing now. Do you still consider basketball a guys' sport for example?

Omar: Yes, when I think of basketball I think of the NBA and men like Kobe Bryant.

Penny: It's funny that we have such different views on that. I have played basketball myself and I have a completely different view, because I know a lot of female basketball players.

Omar: Yeah, I don't know any.

Penny: Basketball is another one of those sports where there is a lot of physical contact, but I don't think that necessarily makes it a guys' sport.

Omar: I still think basketball is a guys' sport.

These narratives show Leila's and Penny's acceptance of girls and women who transgress the boundaries of traditional gender appropriateness in sports. Yet in other narratives the same girls drew on dominant discourses.

According to Paechter (2003) adolescents have a special investment in performing gender appropriate behavior through sports and physical activities because they are still struggling to work out what it means to be male or female. Not only do they try to perform what they see as desirable masculine and feminine behavior, they also position themselves as oppositional to anything that is perceived as belonging to the other gender or to a non-heterosexual orientation (Paechter 2003, p. 48). In

explaining their ideas on athleticism and the body, our participants often constructed heteronormative images:

Stella: I think very athletic men are more popular than very athletic women.

Robert: Yeah, very athletic looking women are not very attractive

Nathalie: You're talking about, like, body builders. But those hockey women for example, they *do* have high status

Stella: I think it relates to the idea that muscular men are attractive while muscularity for women is not done. Men feel they have to be more muscular than a girl. I don't think a female body builder attracts many guys.

Paul: I would be surprised if a woman had very broad shoulders. I don't think that's beautiful or anything.

Interviewer: And if a man has that?

Paul: It's not like I am attracted to men or anything, but that would be more normal, better.

This last comment by Paul illustrates the emphasis some of the boys placed on their heterosexuality. When they were asked about the desirability or attractiveness of a man in a photo, several boys stated that they did not know or could not tell because they were not attracted to men. Girls on the other hand, did not seem to have a problem evaluating the appearance of other females but did this through a heteronormative lens as we showed earlier.

The heteronormativity of their constructions of athleticism also emerged when our participants talked about what they considered feminine sports:

Gillian: Gymnastics always has a bit of a negative connotation when men practice it

Nathan: Yeah, gay.

Gillian: A teenaged guy would not admit to being a gymnast, unless he's really really good. And dancing I think is also a women's sport.

Leila: I have a boyfriend who dances and we get a lot of comments about that. They call him a faggot and things like that. Well, I know what he's really like and he's *not* gay.

We therefore depict the undesirable male sporting body using the visual metaphor of The Male Dancer.

The following discussion between Thomas, Jeff, Will, and Darren shows how their ideas about gender appropriateness in sport prevent them from engaging in certain physical activities. The panoptic power dynamic leads them to discipline their practices in physical activities and place judgments on what they perceive as gender inappropriate activities:

Will: We once had to dance in physical education

Jeff: All the boys said they were going to call in sick

Will: With boys, it's your pride. You won't let yourself . . .

Jeff: It's not masculine

Will: I refuse to dance

Leila: But at a school dance it's not a problem. It's just when the steps are rehearsed that you don't want to anymore

Darren: It's like with a little boy. You can give him a pink Barbie cup for drinking, but when he turns 5 or 6 he doesn't want the cup anymore. He then wants a blue cup,

because it's more masculine. He believes it [the pink cup] is a girl's thing. That's what Will means. Your pride and your masculinity are at stake with dancing.

The comments of Aiden and Max about a photo of a teenager whom they perceive as non-athletic, show that they associate gender inappropriate sports with inappropriate, undesirable bodies for men:

Aiden: I think this is a boy who is worried more about his appearance than about sports.

Max: I agree. Maybe he plays badminton or something.

Interviewer: Why do you think that?

Max: He's quite skinny

Aiden: A matchstick, too thin

Max: No, I wouldn't think this guy is athletic

Aiden: He's not fat, but he's not athletic either.

Some participants constructed a causal relationship between physical activity practices and the type of body they produce. They assume dance and badminton will make a person slender, soft, and smooth, whereas soccer, basketball, and martial arts will make someone muscular, strong and hard. Furthermore, in their discursive construction of athleticism our participants normatively evaluate bodies/others. People who practice gender inappropriate sports – here symbolized by the Female Boxer and the Male Dancer – are marginalized because they are perceived to question desirable masculinity.

Images of 'unhealthy' and 'non-athletic' bodies

The Fatty

Our participants discursively constructed the non-athletic body consistently as a fat body. It started with some students refusing our suggestion of taking photographs of people they thought looked non-athletic. When asked about their reservations in the group interview Alicia, Mary, and Leila communicated their unease as follows:

Alicia: It's rude to tell someone 'Hi, can I take your picture, because I think you look non-athletic' meaning fat.

Mary: And when you look non-athletic, or when you're fat and someone wants to take your picture, you'll know that it's about your fatness [...] It's an insult.

Leila: In all honesty, when you told us to find a photo of someone who looks non-athletic, I thought I had to find a fat person.

Like Leila, many students instantly equated a non-athletic appearance with fat, leading them to assume that we wanted to discuss photos of fat people. However, in the introduction of the assignment, we were very careful not to mention anything about 'fatness' or health.

For most of our participants, however, fatness was the most important sign of a non-athletic body. Similar to Burrows (2008) and Rail (2009) we found that in their discursive constructions of the non-athletic body many of the teenagers participating in our study reproduced dominant notions from a neo-liberal health discourse that focuses on overweight and obesity. According to Nathan, Gillian, and Valery fat people are non-athletic because fatness makes it difficult to practice sports or physical activities:

Nathan: I searched the internet and I used a lot of different search terms. Then I typed McDonalds [laughter] and I found a photo of two women who were huge and feeding each other hamburgers. But I didn't think that was appropriate, so I continued and then I found this photo. I think it's funny because this boy is practicing sports – he's in a gym – but he does not look athletic at all. He's quite chubby.

Gillian: He's simply obese

Valery: It looks like he's having difficulties

Isabel: Yeah, like it takes a lot of effort for him to lift his leg

Gillian: That's also because, when you think about being athletic, you think being athletic is being slender. But it's also true that when you're that heavy, you're less mobile. And you need mobility in sport.

Interviewer: And do you immediately think he's unhealthy too?

All: Yes.

Since these dominant images about the non-athletic body centered on fatness, we use the visual metaphor of the Fatty to symbolize the non-athletic body. Our participants used words like pale; lazy; sluggish; unkempt; uninterested; unhappy; unhealthy; cheap; stupid; and having bad posture, to construct the non-athletic body. Thus, the Fatty represents moral failure as well as failure to comply with dominant norms of appearance. Chelsea and Jasmin, for example, said:

Chelsea: In this picture there is a non-athletic boy who I think looks kind of lazy. His expression is sluggish and he's also a bit chubby.

Interviewer: A sluggish expression?

Chelsea: Yes, he just looks lazy, not really athletic. His clothes are also worn out. He doesn't look like he is very active, more like he sits down all day playing video games.

Jasmin: I think it's really disgusting

Interviewer: What is it exactly that you find disgusting?

Jasmin: Well, all that fat. I really cannot understand how you can let yourself get this fat and not think 'Gee, let me go out for a run every day and do some sit-ups'. That you can look like that and still continue eating is beyond me.

This expression of disgust for fat bodies, points to the intersection of discursive constructions of the non-athletic body and notions of sexuality. Fat bodies are considered undesirable and deviant. Also, Jasmin's words illustrate the panoptic power effects of the neo-liberal health discourse. She thinks people should monitor their body size and exert self-discipline when they transgress the norm for a slender appearance. Consequently she reproduces the notion of individual and moral responsibility as it is incorporated in this discourse (e.g., Rail 2009; Wright 2009). By observing and judging the bodies around them, Jasmin and the other students become part of the power dynamic (that also includes media, schools, etc.) that produces the dominant standards for appearance and enforces them through disciplinary actions. This illustrates how people are simultaneously object and subject of power.

The Synopticon does not only provide youth with knowledge about what a desirable, successful body looks like (Azzarito 2009) but also with knowledge about its counterpart, the undesirable, unsuccessful body. Our participants not only measured themselves against the ideal image of what a successful body looks like but also measured themselves and others against the unsuccessful body, the Fatty. They often associated the non-athletic Fatty with fast-food and McDonalds. Some of them mentioned television shows and movies where they learned about the health risks of

becoming fat (cf. Evans *et al.* 2008). The narrative that follows shows how notions about social class intersect with discursive constructions of the non-athletic, fat body:

- Fiona: This is a girl who I think does nothing but smoke and send text messages all day
 Ian: McDonaldsing
 Britt: McDonaldsing and mobile phoning. I think that if she would get up and run five meters she'd flop down in her chair all flushed.
 Fiona: And you'd be able to see that through all that make-up.
 Interviewer: Why do you associate her with McDonalds?
 Ian: Her face looks fat
 Britt: I think she also has fat arms and a fat stomach
 Ian: She looks cheap.
 Isabel: Yeah
 Ian: And then you'll soon end up in McDonalds.
 Fiona: It's an aura. It's difficult to describe why it's not athletic, but it still is.
 Interviewer: Is it related to social class you think?
 Ian: Yeah, I think so. If you don't have much money it's more likely that you'll go to a fast-food place or eat unhealthy. The lower social classes go to the snack bar more often than people from a higher class.
 Ally: Definitely.

The previous interview excerpts show that even though a lot of the discussions about non-athletic bodies revolved around fatness, the discursive constructions of these bodies are not reducible to fatness but are more complex. Discourses about health intersect with notions about social class and sexuality.

The Sumo Wrestler and the Computer Nerd

Together, our participants tried to make sense of images of (non-)athletic bodies. The discussion between Kirsten, Damian, Sophie, and Anna shows how – in their struggle to explain the relationship between fatness and athleticism – they quickly switch from resistance to dominant ideas around fatness to reproduction of those same ideas:

- Kirsten: I don't know if fat people are always non-athletic. There are some chubby girls in my team too. But it's often the case that chubby people aren't very athletic
 Damian: I don't know. I guess you can be a little bit fat and athletic, but if you get really fat . . .
 Kirsten: Not always. At my club there's this boy and he's really fat and he wants to lose weight. But he's definitely athletic. He comes to training every time and likes it a lot. So I don't think that you're necessarily non-athletic when you're fat. It's often associated with it of course, which makes sense . . .
 Damian: People who are fat also get hot faster
 Kirsten: Yeah, and they get tired quicker too
 Sophie: They're unfit
 Kirsten: I think their body would hurt sooner, knees and such
 Anna: Yeah, the joints

According to some participants, like Kirsten, being fat does not necessarily mean that someone is non-athletic. In an attempt to explain this idea that challenges dominant notions about athleticism, the participants often mentioned the Sumo Wrestler. As the following narrative shows, these youth had difficulties aligning the Sumo Wrestler with their ideas about health and physical activity:

Paul: Sumo wrestlers could very well be athletic but I think they're kind of weird.

Penny: I think sumo wrestlers are an exception. I do believe they are athletic because they are very physically active, but I also think they eat enormous amounts.

Paul: I doubt whether they're healthy

Thus, the Sumo Wrestler is considered an anomaly: fat and athletic. The participants constructed the Sumo Wrestler as an exception to the rule, which points to their reproduction of dominant discourses about the body. Yet, the recurring talk about the Sumo Wrestler can also be considered a point of resistance to the dominant idea that all fat people are non-athletic. However, the potential of this resistance to produce a shift in knowledge/power that constructs the fat body as strong and skillful seemed to be limited by their construction of the Sumo Wrestler as an anomaly.

Another way in which our participants challenged the dominant idea that non-athletic equals fat, was by pointing out that not all non-athletic people are fat. After mentioning that she thought she was supposed to bring a photo of a fat person for this research project Leila continues her narrative by explaining how she – upon reflection – chose to select a picture that was different. She resisted the idea that non-athleticism is all about fatness by focusing on posture, complexion, and clothes in her discursive construction of the non-athletic body:

Leila: I don't think this guy looks athletic. He's pale and his clothes are all wrong. And he's standing there like a sack of potatoes, slumped.

Darren: He's a typical computer nerd.

The image of the Computer Nerd emerged more often in the discussions about non-athletic bodies. The Computer Nerd is characterized as clumsy, pale, thin, and a bad dresser:

Steve: I think this one looks non-athletic. He just sits behind the computer. He's skinny and very pale. He mostly sits inside doing stuff with computers and he does not have many social contacts. He looks clumsy too. I don't think people like that are athletic. It's also his clothes. His pants are way too short and look weird.

Thus, the Sumo Wrestler (athletic and fat) and the Computer Nerd (non-athletic and not fat) are visual metaphors that represent points of resistance in the discursive constructions of these youth to the dominant neo-liberal health discourse that centers on fatness.

Discussion

The results from this study show that body imagery is a powerful pedagogy that informs the discursive constructions of the body used by these youth (cf. Evans *et al.* 2008; Rail 2009; Wright 2009). Through interaction with each other and with visual media such as Internet and television, our participants constructed a diverse set of body images in relation to sport and physical activities. This process illustrates the workings of the Synopticon, and explains how some body images, such as the Male Soccer Player and the Female Field Hockey Player, become dominant while others, such as the Fatty, are marginalized. This is intricately connected to the workings of the Panopticon. Specifically, the visible nature of the body (seeing and being seen)

was crucial to how our participants disciplined their own and others' bodies to fit the norms for a desirable body that were (re)produced by both the discourse of health and that of appearance. Our results illustrate the conflation of these two discourses. Our participants discursively constructed athletic bodies as healthy, happy and desirable, while they constructed non-athletic bodies as unhealthy, unhappy and undesirable. Future research on the physically (in)active body, should take this conflation into account and focus attention on the implicit messages about appearance that are part of the dominant discourse about health.

Furthermore, the narratives of our participants show how their reproduction of dominant discourses about health and appearance intersect with notions about gender, sexuality, social class, and race and how these are partly based on their interaction with visual media. This reflects Mathiesen's (1997) idea that the Synopticon makes it difficult for youth to distinguish real from unreal. Yet, as Foucault (1987) conceptualized, reproduction of dominant discourses and points of resistance to these discourses occurred simultaneously. Sometimes, our participants reflected critically on and challenged dominant discourses, while at other times, they unquestioningly reproduced dominant ideas and images. Points of resistance seemed to originate from their everyday experiences and their encounters with real flesh and blood bodies/others. Leila's resistance to ideas about gender and sexual inappropriateness emerged from her experience with a boy who dances but who "is not gay." Similarly, Penny resisted the construction of basketball as a masculine sport by referring to her own past involvement in the sport and that of the many girls and women she knows. Kirsten's narrative on the relation between fatness and sport showed shifts in her subject position in the interview. On the one hand, she challenged the dominant health discourse by referring to "chubby" girls on her team and a boy in her sport club who she considers to be both athletic and fat. Yet, she also acknowledged the authoritative voice of the biomedical health discourse by constructing the fat body as "often" non-athletic because it "makes sense."

The points of resistance that occurred in relation to the gendered and sexualized appearance of physically active bodies exemplify how subtle shifts in power relations can take place. The emergence of the visual metaphor of the Field Hockey Girl shows a new desirable femininity that constructs women as strong, confident and successful in a competitive sport, quite contrary to traditional ideas about desirable passive femininity. The points of resistance to the dominant discourse about health, however, did not seem to create much space for alternative ideas and meanings to take shape. Our participants framed their experiences with real life others that embodied contradictions as exceptions. This consolidated existing power relations based on the dominant discourse about health, rather than that it produced shifts in these power relations. The dominant discourse about health seemed to hold more 'truth value' for our participants than their own everyday experiences with others/bodies. This may be due to the lack of critique of dominant discourses about health in the Netherlands, which makes resistance to the authoritative voice of biomedical professionals who (re)produce this discourse more difficult. In contrast, the discourse about gendered and sexualized norms for appearance *is* currently a topic of public critique, especially the representation of women's bodies in popular media (e.g., Strien 2010).

Moreover, our participants did not unquestioningly accept the norms that are produced by visual media. The reproduction of dominant discourses mainly occurred

when our participants talked in general terms about bodies of others. They seem to apply the norms less strictly when it comes to people they know or interactions they have experienced with real flesh and blood others/bodies. Also, these youth corrected each other and adjusted their opinions in and through the group discussions. This finding suggests that the principle of panoptic power may not be totally adequate in explaining the discourses that these youth draw upon. Foucault's theory of panoptic power effects does not take peer interaction into account since prisoners were conceptualized as living in isolation in separate cells. Research that explores the panoptic and synoptic power effects should, however, also take the daily interactions and experiences of the participants into account and pay attention to virtual as well as real life bodies.

In conclusion, we argue that youths' construction of athleticism, their interaction with each other and with media imagery are part of processes that discipline the body. This results in a hierarchy of body images that may create marginalization and exclusion in (access to) physical activities. Previous research has paid attention to marginalization of girls (van Daalen 2005), racial minorities (Azzarito 2009) and those framed as fat (Wright 2009) in physical activity settings, but not to those whose bodies do not conform to other dominant norms mentioned by youth in this study. As our use of the auto-driven photo elicitation method has shown, a discussion of body imagery can help youth develop their reflexivity and be critical of the exclusionary nature of popular imagery. The power of imagery should not be underestimated, for a picture is worth a thousand words.

Notes

1. See for example, a discussion (including pictures) on a Dutch 'hot babes' forum about ladies from the Dutch National hockey team <http://forum.mokkels.nl/5-nederlandse-mokkels/1055-nederlandse-hockeydames.html>
2. See for example, the webpage of Fatima Moreira de Melo <http://www.fatimamoreirademelo.com/home/> and

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