

#BodyIssue: An Analysis of the Conversation Surrounding the 2016 and 2017 ESPN's Body Issue Men Athletes on Instagram

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Purpose: This study examined the conversation surrounding ESPN's 2016 and 2017 Body Issue men athletes on Instagram (i.e., posts tagged #BodyIssue) to determine if the conversation was reinforcing or subverting traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity. **Methods:** For 7 days following the release of each issue, #BodyIssue posts were collected using Netlytic. Text and content category analyses were conducted on all records (i.e., comments), with 13,920 captured. **Results:** More records were categorized as 'hegemonic masculinity'

compared to 'non-hegemonic masculinity', with variability between athletes reported. **Conclusions:** The online conversation, as demonstrated by the expressed thoughts and opinions of Instagram users, generally aligned with the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, even in cases where athletes fell outside of that concept due to their race, gender, or status.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity, body issue, men athletes, Instagram, comments

Sport, in all aspects, has historically been the preserve of men and the masculine physique has been central to that prominence (Anderson & Travers, 2017). Sport often includes a masculinizing process that teaches young boys, transitioning to adulthood, *manly* values and behaviors. Further, through the sport environment, boys and men learn toughness and conform to dominant forms of masculinity (e.g., hegemonic; Drummond, 2002). Based on Gramsci's (1971) understanding of class relations in Western society, Connell (1987) proposed the theory of hegemonic masculinity that classifies masculinity into four categories: hegemony, subordinated, marginalized, and complicit. Moreover, concepts such as race, class, sexuality, and ability influence how men are grouped. In Connell's (1987) theory of hegemonic masculinity, sport is an institution that serves to construct gender, class, and race inequalities. Hegemonic masculinity (i.e., definition of masculinity is culturally

ascendant and constructed in relation to subordinated masculinities and femininities) is at the top of Connell's (1987) hierarchy and has become, in athletics (among other social aspects), the standard against which the other three forms of masculinity (i.e., subordinated, marginalized, and complicit) are measured. White, middle/upper-class, heterosexual men are central to hegemonic masculinity and the absence of those key aspects results in relegation (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmitt, 2005).

Within this context, men have participated in violent, aggressive team sports, such as American football or rugby, to demonstrate their masculine credentials (Anderson & Travers, 2017). Playing and excelling at physically violent sports allows men's bodies to appear superior to those that refrain from contact sports (Messner, 1992). Thus, the lean, muscular, and toned physiques of men in sport may represent assumed masculine qualities such as aggressiveness and autonomy (Greenleaf & Petrie, 2013; Pope et al., 2000).

Related, subordinated masculinity refers to those that lack one or more qualities and also display qualities opposite to hegemonic masculinity (e.g., homosexuality or men that engage in feminine behaviors; MacDonald, 2014). Connell (1987) contended that regardless of body mass, age, or sporting accomplishments, openly gay men are at the bottom of the masculinity hierarchy. In turn, because homosexuality is related to femininity and weakness (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmitt, 2005), very few gay men athletes disclose their sexuality (Butterworth, 2006), particularly since their heterosexuality is assumed by virtue of their athleticism (Jarvis, 2006).

The third category includes marginalized masculinity, referring to those that lack one or more hegemonic characteristics, such as being non-Caucasian, non-able-bodied individuals, and/or of low socioeconomic status (Connell, 1987). For example, in a sporting context, where, white leadership and class privilege have been normalized (Anderson & Travers, 2017), an African American man that is a parasport athlete would be categorized as marginalized masculinity. Finally, complicit masculinity refers to those that may lack one or more forms of hegemonic masculinity, yet do not challenge dominant forms of masculinity (e.g., avoiding subordination from society).

The media has perpetuated hegemonic masculinity in sport through its traditional depictions of athletes (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). Through media, the athletic sphere

is heavily influenced by stereotypical beliefs about gender and gender roles (i.e., characteristics and traits believed to differentiate men and women and judgments about which behaviors are socially accepted and desirable; Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). However, men athletes in the modern age can challenge sport's traditions and norms through social networking sites that offer athletes more control over how they want to be perceived and the choice of what behaviors they deem to be gender appropriate. Specifically, athletes are increasingly leveraging social networking sites for career and public image development (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2019). Thus, social networking profiles can be constructed as a counter narrative to gender and gender roles by reframing how information and images are presented and should be studied to better understand the extent to which the gender-based narratives and the embodiment of masculinity in men athletes are being challenged.

ESPN's: *The Magazine's* Body Issue and Past Research

From 2009 to 2019, in both print and digital forms, ESPN (i.e., popular sport-media network) released ESPN: *The Magazine's* Body Issue (the Body Issue), a special edition of their magazine with the aim of featuring athletes posing naked in strong, powerful, athletic poses in order to celebrate athletic bodies. Past research of the Body Issue focused on the objectification of Paralympic athletes (Weaving & Sampson, 2018), the sexualization of women's bodies featured (Smallwood et al., 2014), the self-presentation of featured women athletes on social networking sites (Santarossa, Coyne, Greenham, et al., 2019), and social networking site promotions that disproportionately feature men athletes (Santarossa, Coyne, Woodruff, et al., 2019), however, no research has specifically investigated how audiences react to the various forms of masculinity displayed within the issues.

The Body Issue has been marketed to consumers as a celebration of the athletic form. ESPN contends that the emphasis of its images is on the athleticism, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, age, race, body size, or ability (Smallwood et al., 2014). The Body Issue has challenged normative beliefs and societal roles by featuring a variety of athletes in their issues. In 2016, the Body Issue made advancements (compared to its 2009 inaugural issue; Komar, 2016) by showcasing men athletes that defied traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity that are prevalent in sport (e.g., non-toned physique of Vince

Wilfork, transgender athlete Chris Mosier), and continued this diverse representation in the 2017 Body Issue (e.g., openly gay athlete Gus Kenworthy). Moreover, ESPN is recognized as a leader in sport-media (e.g., traditional and social networking sites) and the way it markets and distributes the representation and celebration of the athletic body is influential (Banister, 2017). Therefore, ESPN's efforts could potentially encourage progressive social change that is more inclusive and goes beyond the traditional concepts celebrated by hegemonic masculinity (Carroll, 2019).

Athletes, Social Networking Sites, and the Audience

Many athletes utilize social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) for self-promotion/presentation. Online platforms can attract a wide audience and result in participation, collaboration, and community (Meraz, 2009). Instagram, an online, media-sharing social networking site (Instagram, 2020) with more than 1 billion users (Baker & Walsh, 2018), provides users with a platform for visual communication and the opportunity to experiment with their public personas (Baker & Walsh, 2018). Specifically, Instagram allows athletes to share their personal lives to an extent far beyond what is offered by traditional media (e.g., magazines, newspapers, television and radio; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). As a particularly popular and effective social networking site among athletes and athletic departments alike (Bowles, 2016; Watkins & Lee, 2016), Instagram has the advantage of an engagement rate (i.e., ability to track frequency of likes/comments measured by a percentage of following/follower ratio) of 0.83% of all audiences, compared to Twitter (0.05%), and Facebook (0.13%; Cucu, 2022).

Although social networking sites allow athletes to portray themselves in personal ways and curate content according to their objectives, these platforms may also foster derogatory judgments (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Sport fans often use social networking site hashtags to express positivity towards athletes and teams, but these hashtags can also be vehicles for hateful and degrading messages (Kassing & Sanderson, 2015). For example, Sanderson (2011) found that online news stories about athletes and/or team management often resulted in fans challenging others about their athlete/team identity using demeaning, homophobic, and feminine references.

Social networking sites can also be used as platforms for engaging audiences on large scale social movements and present a snapshot of the public's opinion at any given

time (Pegoraro et al., 2018). For example, a recent study investigated audience tweets to better understand how two men athletes may have reduced eating disorder stigmatization by sharing their own struggles (Mitchell et al., 2018). Examining the thoughts and conversations (i.e., reaction from audiences) among users about a particular athlete (e.g., comments on their personal posts) or their sport can help to reveal or reflect the dominant cultural narratives around gender and sport as society moves into emerging forums for sport coverage and discussion, like those of social networking sites.

Purpose. With a hegemonic masculinity focus, this study examines the online conversation around the 2016 and 2017 Body Issue (i.e., posts tagged with *#BodyIssue*) men athletes on Instagram. The following research question (RQ) received particular emphasis: Is the online conversation reinforcing or subverting traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity in men athletes?

METHODS

Data Collection

Using Netlytic (Gruzd, 2016), an open-sourced software, all publicly available media tagged with the *#BodyIssue* hashtag on Instagram were downloaded in real time (i.e., when the post was tagged, not necessarily when it was posted) for both the 2016 and 2017 ESPN Body Issues. The download began on the day before the editions' online release dates and captured all posts every hour for seven days (i.e., July 5th - July 12th, 2016 and July 5th - 12th, 2017). At the time of data collection, Netlytic (Gruzd, 2016) provided users with a choice of collecting real-time Instagram data for 1, 3, 7, 14, or 31 days. Similar to Pegoraro et al. (2018), this study chose a narrow collection window (i.e., seven days) that corresponded with the relevancy of the event.

An output file (i.e., excel file) created by Netlytic (Gruzd, 2016) was downloaded and contained the following information: link to the images (tagged with *#BodyIssue*), publication date, author of the comment (i.e., the user who commented on the image), the record (i.e., the actual comment left by the author on the post), and to whom the comment was directed towards. The downloaded records in the 2016 data set ($N = 21,712$) were sorted and list wise deletions ($n = 4,343$ deleted) of duplicates, blanks, unrelated photos (photo links were examined), and no longer existent photo links occurred. Of the

remaining 17,369 records, 13,413 records were able to be categorized by specific athlete, while the remaining 3,956 records were linked to photos that did not focus on an athlete from the 2016 Body Issue (e.g., athletes from past/other issues) and, therefore, were not used in further analysis. Thus, the final data set of 2016 Body Issues records used for analysis was 13,413.

Similar to the 2016 data, downloaded records from the 2017 Body Issue ($N = 14,202$) were sorted and cleaned (i.e., listwise deletions of duplicates, blanks, unrelated photos and no longer existent photos were conducted), resulting in 6,291 deletions. Additionally, as the data were to be categorized by athlete, the records from the U.S. Woman's National Hockey Team ($n = 361$), did not meet inclusion criteria (i.e., pictures were taken as a group and not individually) and were removed. Similarly, the records of Julie and Zach Ertz ($n = 361$), and Brent Burns and Joe Thornton ($n = 65$) did not meet inclusion criteria (i.e., pictures were taken in pairs and not individually) and were thus also removed. Thus, the final data set of 2017 Body Issues records used for analysis was 7,124.

The remaining records for both the 2016 and 2017 Body Issue dataset ($n = 20,537$) were then categorized by individual athletes in separate excel files. However, for the purpose of this study, only the records ($N = 13,920$) of the men athletes ($N = 16$ athletes) from both editions were re-uploaded into the Netlytic program (Gruzd, 2016) for further analysis.

Text Analysis

For this study, Netlytic (Gruzd, 2016) was used to analyze each athlete's online conversation in the *#BodyIssue* dataset, as measured by content category analysis of the records. Netlytic (Gruzd, 2016) calculates the frequency of popular words associated with tagged media and organizes similar words into categories. For this study, content category analysis was conducted to identify themes within the discussion. Netlytic (Gruzd, 2016) creates categories of words and phrases to represent broader categories (e.g., positive vs. negative words) and then, based on synonyms, automatically determines which entries in the data set belong to each pre-determined category. Although Netlytic (Gruzd, 2016) generates and uses pre-determined categories (and synonyms), additional content categories and corresponding synonyms were manually generated by the authors. As a reflection of Connell's (1987) hierarchy of masculinities, two content categories were

created (see the full list of corresponding synonyms used in Table 1): *hegemonic masculinity* (e.g., strong, power, good, ideal, muscular) and *non-hegemonic masculinity* (e.g., weak, gay, obese, old, trans), with all synonyms recognized as laymen’s terms for the purposes of the current study.

Table 1
Content categories and corresponding synonyms use in text analysis on Netlytic

Hegemonic Masculinity	Non-Hegemonic Masculinity
Good	Ashamed
Ideal	Black
Muscular	Disabled
Nice	Fat
Power***	Gay
Rich	Gross
Sexy	Obese
Straight	Old
Strong	Skinny
White	Trans***
Young	Weak

Note. ***accounts for different variations of the word

The *non-hegemonic masculinity* category is a representation of subordinated, marginalized, and complicit masculinities from the hierarchy (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmitt, 2005) as all three tiers are defiant of hegemonic masculinity in sport. To select the synonyms to be used for these manually created content categories, the authors examined the top 100 most frequently appearing words for the men athletes in the *#BodyIssue* dataset. This list was then supplemented with other appropriate synonyms (i.e., commonly used words on social networking sites vs. other synonyms). In a few instances, some synonyms in the content categories included the root of the word (e.g., trans) and then had “***” added to the end of the word to indicate to Netlytic (Gruzd, 2016) to account for different variations of the word (e.g., trans***; transgender, transsexual, etc.) in the analysis.

RESULTS

A total of 13,920 records across 16 men athletes (see Table 2) were uploaded to Netlytic, (Gruzd, 2016).

Table 2

Men athletes in ESPN's 2016 and 2017 Body Issue editions and corresponding Instagram records

Athlete	Sport	Race	Nationality	Age	Total Records (N = 13,920)	Issue Year	Records Categorized as Hegemonic Masculinity (N = 481)	Records Categorized as Non-Hegemonic Masculinity (N = 372)
Nathan Adrian	Swimming	Chinese/ Caucasian	American	27	70	2016	n/a	n/a
Jake Arrieta	Baseball	Caucasian	American	30	557	2016	20	1
Javier Baez	Baseball	Puerto Rican	American	26	260	2017	11	3
Antonio Brown	Football	African American	American	28	585	2016	11	20
Ryan Dungey	Motocross	Caucasian	American	26	2,594	2016	58	51
Julian Edelman	Football	Caucasian	American	33	83	2017	n/a	n/a
Ezekiel Elliott	Football	African American	American	23	254	2017	11	13
Malakai Fekitoa	Rugby	Tongan	New Zealand	27	568	2017	16	2
Gus Kenworthy	Skiing	Caucasian	American	27	1,869	2017	75	21
Greg Louganis	Diving	Caucasian	American	56	132	2016	5	1
Conor McGregor	MMA Fighting	Caucasian	Irish	28	1,199	2016	38	30
Von Miller	Football	African American	American	27	1,415	2016	43	67
Chris Mosier	Triathlete	Caucasian	American	35	94	2016	3	18
Isaiah Thomas	Basketball	African American	American	30	409	2017	10	17
Dwayne Wade	Basketball	African American	American	34	1,672	2016	63	46
Vince Wilfork	Football	African American	American	34	2,159	2016	117	82

Note. Records refers to the actual comment left by the author on the post, linked to the #BodyIssue image

Two athletes (i.e., Nathan Adrian and Julian Edelman) were removed from the content category analysis due to a lack of data, leaving 14 athletes. Overall, slightly more records were categorized as '*hegemonic masculinity*' ($n = 481$; 3.5%) compared to '*non-hegemonic masculinity*' ($n = 372$; 2.7%), with the remaining records ($n = 13,067$; 93.9%) excluded as they were not related to masculinity at all (e.g., tagging another user in the comments). Findings of the content category analysis varied by athlete (see Table 2),

however, *hegemonic masculinity* was the most referenced (i.e., most frequently mentioned synonyms within records) category for nine (64.3%) of the athletes. Within the *hegemonic masculinity* category, the most frequently cited word within the records was ‘good’ ($n = 7$ athletes). Exceptions included ‘sexy’ for Vince Wilfork ($n = 38$ records; 32.5%) and Javier Baez ($n = 5$; 62.5%), and ‘nice’ for Von Miller ($n = 16$; 37.2%), Jake Arrieta ($n = 9$; 45.0%), Gus Kenworthy ($n = 35$; 46.7%), and Isaiah Thomas ($n = 5$; 50.0%). Notably, Chris Mosier had 3 records that fell under the *hegemonic masculinity* category with the words ‘nice’, ‘power***’, and ‘sexy’ cited a single time each. For the *non-hegemonic masculinity* category, the most frequently cited word within the records was ‘gay’ ($n = 9$ athletes). Exceptions included ‘fat’ for Vince Wilfork ($n = 8$; 42.7%), ‘black’ for Greg Louganis ($n = 1$; 100%), ‘trans’ for Chris Mosier ($n = 16$; 88.9%), and ‘gross’ for Jake Arrieta ($n = 1$; 100%). Notably, Malakai Fekitoa had 2 records that fell under the *non-hegemonic masculinity* category with the words ‘black’ and ‘gay’ cited a single time each.

DISCUSSION

This study’s purpose is to examine the online thoughts and conversation around the 2016 and 2017 Body Issues’ (i.e., posts tagged with #BodyIssue) men athletes on Instagram and determine whether traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity were being reinforced or subverted. The comparison of expressed thoughts and opinions that involved the men featured in the 2016 and 2017 Body Issues, the discussions appear to slightly reinforce the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, compared to non-hegemonic masculinity. Yet, based on Connell’s (1987) definition of hegemonic masculinity, only four of ESPN’s Body Issue 2016 and 2017 sportsmen (i.e., Jake Arrieta, Ryan Dungey, Julian Edelman, and Conor McGregor) can be categorized as exemplifying hegemonic masculinity given what is known about their identified race, sexual orientation, and social status, as all four of the athletes are white, heterosexual men of middle/upper-class. This could suggest that even though ESPN is trying to push the boundaries and normalize non-hegemonic masculinity for sporting athletes, Instagram users are still more engaged with hegemonic masculinity-related characteristics, even in sporting men that do not exemplify all aspects of hegemonic masculinity. Of the nine athletes that were reported to have more records categorized as hegemonic masculinity

compared to non-hegemonic masculinity, three men did not fit the traditional definition of hegemonic masculinity because of their race (i.e., Javier Baez, Dwayne Wade, and Vince Wilfork), whereas two other men did not exemplify hegemonic masculinity due to their sexual orientation (i.e., Gus Kenworthy and Greg Louganis). This finding may provide further evidence that Instagram users are potentially overlooking the non-hegemonic characteristics of these athletes in favor of the identifying and reinforcing their hegemonic characteristics. However, although the definition of hegemonic masculinity typically places those of Caucasian race above those of non-Caucasian races, the sports Javier Baez, Dwayne Wade, and Vince Wilfork play may provide an ulterior explanation for to why these men received more records categorized as hegemonic masculinity than as non-hegemonic. Specifically, Javier Baez (from Puerto Rico) is a baseball player and almost one-third of Major League Baseball players are Latinos (Lapchick, 2017). Similarly, Dwayne Wade and Vince Wilfork, both of whom are African American, play professional basketball and football, where the majority of players are African American (Lapchick, 2017, 2019).

Despite 'gay' being the most frequently cited word within the non-hegemonic masculinity category for all four athletes (Antonio Brown, Ezekiel Elliot, Von Miller, and Isiah Thomas; all subvert hegemonic masculinity because of their race) that received more records categorized as non-hegemonic masculinity than hegemonic masculinity, none of the four athletes have identified publicly as being homosexual. However, as Lalor and Rendle-Short (2008) suggested, the word 'gay' may have different usages. Namely, it can be used as a synonym for 'homosexual' (with or without a derogatory connotation) but it is often inappropriately used as a synonym for 'stupid', 'lame', or 'boring' (Lalor & Rendle-Short, 2008). Thus, although none of the above-mentioned for athletes identify publicly as homosexual, Instagram users may be loosely using the word 'gay' as a catch-all derogatory term with a negative connotation.

Additionally, research surrounding homosexuality and homophobia within the sport world suggests that men athletes are generally assumed to be heterosexual and, therefore, being a gay athlete violates the image that men athletes are strong, competitive, and tough (Jarvis, 2006). Yet, despite Greg Louganis and Gus Kenworthy both openly identifying as gay athletes during the time their *Body Issues*' were published, both

received more records categorized as hegemonic than non-hegemonic masculinity, with the word ‘gay’ not even making the top 10 words used in discussion surrounding Greg Louganis. This finding may suggest that ESPN’s the Body Issue has made small steps to subvert hegemonic masculinity norms and assumptions and/or that Instagram users are being respectful to the athletes or looking beyond matters of sexuality.

Lastly, media representations of transgender individuals are rare, and will often highlight the negative challenges that they face as a minority group (e.g., social stigma, violence, and oppression; Gillig et al., 2017; Solomon & Kurtz-Costes, 2017). Particularly in the sport context, transgender men athletes challenge the traditional characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. However, the Body Issue challenged normative discourses by featuring Chris Mosier in 2016. Mosier, was not only the first transgender athlete to appear in the printed magazine, but also the first transgender athlete to compete on a US National team (Steele, 2016). Within the current study, Mosier’s results suggest that he provoked conversation surrounding transgender individuals. As the Internet, in particular, is an outlet for Trans activism and education (Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016), the conversation relating to Mosier’s #BodyIssue posts may contribute to a broader community of relevance for trans athletes.

Limitations

The present study is not without limitations. This study examined the traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity in only two editions of the Body Issue. Future studies, using more than two editions, could further conceptualize traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity on social networking sites in response to the Body Issue, particularly in a longitudinal manner. Additionally, controlling for gender or sexual orientation of commentors was not accounted for as the authors did not want to make assumptions based on user profiles. Furthermore, #BodyIssue was only examined on a singular social networking site platform (i.e., Instagram). Future studies could compare and contrast #BodyIssue across various social networking site platforms such as, Twitter and/or Facebook to expand the scope of user-generated content used in analysis. Lastly, due to the nature of the data collection software used and the size of the current dataset, the sentiment, valence, nuance, and context within which individual records were used (which could only be capture via hand-coding) was not examined. Thus, although content

categories for both hegemonic or non-hegemonic masculinity were created, the manner in which these records were used cannot be accounted for and the nature and tone (i.e., positive versus negative) of the conversations using these terms was not recorded.

Conclusion

The online conversation surrounding the men athletes in the 2016 and 2017 Body Issue generally supported the traditional characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. Instagram users appeared to prioritize and focus on identifying the hegemonic masculinity characteristics of the featured athletes, even when some athletes subvert hegemonic masculinity norms because of their race, gender, or status. However, ESPN the Body Issue 2016's featuring of the first transgender athlete in print, created some diversity and supported ESPN Body Issue's claim to celebrate all bodies in the issue.

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