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Representations of women’s active embodiment and men’s ritualized visibility in sport

Jan Brace-Govan
Monash University, Australia

Abstract
The embodied woman is central to much marketing communication imagery and, in contemporary discourses the physically active body is portrayed as the healthy role model in much social marketing. From a periodization of women’s access to physical activities, three significant shifts in perception and representation are proposed: the Restricted body, the Malleable body and the Viewed body. Women activists and advertisers connected the freedom to engage in physical activity with social freedoms. A closer examination of second wave feminism reveals the inadequacies of sex role theory, and the limitations of liberal feminist dualisms. In contemporary culture, the interconnected nature of media representations, marketing communications and postfeminism becomes evident. The mobilization of bias through ritualized visibility is introduced to explain the unabated valorization of hegemonic masculinity through images of men’s active embodiment. Further, it is asserted that the inequalities of the neo-liberal identity project are obscured by ‘new traditionalism’. The paper concludes that marketing’s theorization of women would benefit from further consumer research into both the portrayal of physically active women and their experience of active embodiment.

Keywords
active embodiment, bodies, feminist activism, gender, ritualized visibility

Visual representations of physical activity are key to marketing communications in several industries, not only sports and sportswear, but also cosmetics and fashion. These images are a cultural resource that presents the active body to be viewed and understood by consumers in general, whether or not they engage in physical activities. The sports industry is omnipresent, not only in Western culture, through sports pages in print media and online, tv programmes and...
channels and specialty magazines. Some sports events are global in scope such as the Olympics, soccer, tennis, cricket and motor racing, attracting substantial audiences and committed fans. High performance athletes are celebrities and can earn significant income from product endorsement, while sportswear companies are international businesses with high levels of brand recognition (cf. Adidas, Nike).

In short, sport is an advertising and marketing industry worth billions of dollars but it is also a carrier of significant cultural ideals and representations of physically active embodiment (Jackson et al., 2005). The ideals sport represents, particularly in Western culture, include effortful work and team spirit, which are embodied in competitions where the ‘man-of-action script plays out time and again’ (Holt and Thompson, 2004: 429). Furthermore, the aesthetics of the physically active body are deeply entrenched. In contemporary culture the shape and appearance of the body ‘an aesthetic outer body (with good shape and appearance) is the moral equivalent of a good person’ (Joy and Venkatesh, 1994: 349; cf. Featherstone, 1982; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995: 150) and a valuable personal attribute (Schouten, 1991: 412). Such cultural ideologies are pervasive imperatives that underpin the valorization of the trim, taut and terrific body achieved through physically active recreation or sport.

Advancements in marketing theory rely on superior conceptualizations of the consumer for effectiveness and hence the enduring fascination with consumer behaviour and, more recently, consumer culture. Thus, marketing and consumer research has much to gain through a deep understanding of consumers and representations of consumers (Maclaran et al., 2010a). Consumer research has examined the cultural meanings of fashion (Thompson and Haytko, 1997), cosmetic surgery (Schouten, 1991) and the sensorial body (Joy and Sherry, Jr, 2003), drawing our attention to the role of consumption activities as they intersect with ideology and discourses of bodily aesthetics (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995), as well as the role of the media and advertising, and the importance of the historical contextualization of meanings (Kates and Shaw-Garlock, 1999; Schroeder and Borgerson, 1998). Recently, the discussion has extended to representations of masculinity (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004), the audience for men in magazines (Patterson and Elliott, 2002), masculine playful engagement with spectacular retail (Kozinets et al., 2004) and the ideology of heroic masculinity (Holt and Thompson, 2004).

However, it is useful to marketing and consumer research also to consider the specificities of women’s experience (Martin et al., 2006; Silverstein and Sayre, 2009) and their experience of active embodiment is quite different. Often such propositions rely on conceptualizing the body as a solely natural phenomenon. This is not the case here where an important impetus is to challenge any assumed naturalness of the body and instead point to the extent to which active embodiment is a sociocultural phenomenon. A valuable means to achieve a challenge to ‘naturalness’ is through an historical approach which can expose changes in perceptions and ideals that then undermine absolute positions. Therefore the intention of this paper is to trace the history of two distinct strands of scholarship and offer an interpretation of their intersection as this bears on contemporary advertising and marketing communications (see Table 1). The first aim of this paper is to offer a contextualizing periodization (Witkowski and Jones, 2006: 77) that frames the profound shifts in physical activity for women. This history reflects on the body images and practices available to Western women over the last 130 years. The physically active female body emerges from these culturally negotiated discourses of feminine embodiment, and its representation in the media, to have enduring effects on the prevailing aesthetic for women’s bodies, women’s clothing and female embodiment.

Theories of representation and the body have been the focus of gender in marketing and consumer research for some time (Bettany et al., 2010), raising issues of gender differentiation and
essentialism. Adopting a gender research perspective implies a social and political agenda for change often associated with critical marketing (Firat and Tadajewski, 2010), where the intention is to assess marketing theory for ‘socially progressive purposes’ (Scott, 2007: 4). Recently, some marketers have argued for a move away from ‘postmodern paralysis’ to a position where a collectivist critique of cultural forms can be asserted (Catterall et al., 2005: 494). This requires that the individualism of the neoliberal project is challenged, while the interconnectedness of media representations, postfeminism and self-reflexive identity are retained. To begin to grasp the often subaltern challenge from women aiming to change the gender order, this paper will also offer an interpretation of women’s political activism and, drawing from social theory, retrace feminist discussions of women and physical activity.

A history of women’s physical activity, a history of women’s political activism and their implications for contemporary marketing communications responds to Layton’s (2010) call to better understand the intertwining of marketing with broader social systems and also Hirschman’s (2010) call for research that investigates the interactive role of marketing in the evolution of cultural forms. The full extent of this far-reaching project warrants attention but would require more space than is permitted here. Thus, although the heterogeneity of women is acknowledged, the ensuing discussion is necessarily restricted in its focus to eliciting the broad shifts that demonstrate changes to social ideals for Western femininity. Although high profile athleticism is discussed as part of the cultural landscape, it is not the intention to focus on the exemplar, successful sportswomen of different eras, of which there are many. Rather the more general uptake of physically active leisure and locally competitive sports by everyday women is the concern here, along with how that interfaced with changes in the aesthetics of body ideals and clothing styles. The intersection of these cultural discourses have an effect on women as a group, whether or not they are engaged in sport or physically active leisure pursuits, through the creation of ideal, or aspirational, kinds of femininity which can be viewed and imagined by all women (Hirschman and Stern, 2000). Moreover, these elements are the symbols utilized by advertisers and marketing communications (Catterall et al., 2005; Goldman, 1992; Schroeder, 2002) when addressing women, sometimes to connect them to physical activities and the consumption of attendant accoutrements, and other times simply to get their attention.

For clarity, the discussions have been separated to allow a focus on the key concepts prior to the concluding discussion. Part of the rationale for this is that the historical, social shifts that facilitated women’s access to physical activity, and the necessary clothing that allowed freer movement, were

<table>
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<td>Malleable bodies</td>
<td>Second wave Liberal Socialist (Marxist) Radical</td>
<td>Equivalence of labour Biological essentialism</td>
<td>Commodity feminism Physical activity to shape the body and for health</td>
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hard-won achievements of women activists. However, the political views of the activists were not necessarily those of the mainstream and began as subaltern, deviant discourses that challenged widely held beliefs. Therefore the divisions and diversity of views among women activists, while important to those involved, were not always engaged with by the broader community of women. Nonetheless, some aspects found their way into advertising (Catterall et al., 2005; Hammond, 1996; Kates and Shaw-Garlock, 1999: 34; Sandikci, 1996) to sediment particular facets of these debates into the wider cultural sphere. It has been argued that feminism is a useful view to cast over the experiences of women because this counters dominant conceptions and offers fertile directions for consumer research (Bettany et al., 2010; Bristor and Fischer, 1993; Catterall et al., 2000, 2005; Fischer and Bristor, 1994; Joy and Venkatesh, 1994; Martin et al., 2006; Penaloza, 1994; Scott, 2000). Importantly, it is not the intention of this paper to rehearse material about feminism and marketing covered in more depth elsewhere (cf. Bristor and Fischer, 1993; Catterall et al., 2000, 2005; Fischer and Bristor, 1994; Penaloza, 1994, 2000; Scott, 2000, 2005; Stern, 2000). Here a quite specific lens is cast over feminist theorization of gender differences pertinent to the contemporary situation and active embodiment with the intention of extending prior discussions in marketing through the introduction of the concept of active embodiment and the role of ritualized visibility to mobilize bias around what is valued.

An assumption that underpins this paper is the role and significance of the physically active body to embodied subjectivity and thus to marketing’s theorization of the consumer. Moving beyond discussions of appearance and conceptualizations of beauty, the physically active woman is increasingly a role model of desirable femininity, albeit not as visible as the male sports hero. Not only is physical activity a source of personal practice with implications for self-identity, it is also the basis for many promotions of health and well-being in social marketing. Views about the active female body and feminist views of social theory are brought together in a discussion of contemporary marketing communications where traces of discourses past and present are discussed. Importantly, the symbolism of equality represented through physical freedom obfuscates the diversity of women. The final section of the paper uses valuable hindsight, established in the first two sections, to consider the experience of physically active young women today and the theorization of third wave feminism.

From this viewpoint it is suggested that, despite the changes of the last century, there continue to be constraints around physical activity for women. Fundamental to all feminist theory is some kind of conceptualization of inequity. Therefore, an explanation for the continued valorization of male athleticism through ritualized visibility is offered as a useful explanatory starting point for the way forward. The paper concludes that there is a role for marketing communications but it began in history with the ‘New Woman’ and the bicycle.

**The restricted body: Women’s difficult and different relationship to sport begins**

Sport today derives from the sport of elite Victorian English boys’ boarding schools. The historical and social culmination of Victorian Empire, Social Darwinism and sport led the athlete, the sportsman, to exemplify everything that the Empire expected of young men of breeding: courage and daring; team spirit, or putting the collectivity or community before the individual; obeying the rules even when it was not to your advantage; and a morality of higher ideals (Clarke and Critcher, 1985; Dunning, 1986). The English sporting tradition and its associated style of masculinity were exported with enthusiasm through the late-19th and early-20th centuries, and are the recognized
precursors of sport in the USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia (Adair and Vamplew, 1997; Cahn, 1994; Crawford, R., 1987; Crawford, S., 1987; Stell, 1991) and the impetus for Coubertin’s re-ignition of the Olympic Games. Most importantly, it was a masculinity, a ‘muscular christianity’, constructed as an opposition to all things female and feminine. Sport was defined through its antithesis to femininity (MacKinnon, 1987).

In contrast to the march of the muscular Christian, the dominant figure of femininity was the eternally wounded woman (Vertinsky, 1990), expressed medically in the ‘limited energy theory’, or ‘vitalism’ (Cahn, 1994: 13). It was believed that there were finite amounts of energy available to each physical or mental activity. For women, energy was argued to be best reserved for her reproductive abilities or there would be dire consequences for her, and for her future children (Atkinson, 1987: 41–2; Lenskyj, 1986, 1987; Scraton, 1992; Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg, 1988). Needless to say, such a view precluded the kind of physical activity required for sport (McCrone, 1988) because it was believed that too much could undermine women’s fragile constitution (Cahn, 1994: 29). It is important to note that this expressed an ideal, or a set of expectations against which the lived realities of women were compared. These class specific concerns did not extend to working-class women who laboured long hours in factories, or in domestic service, nor to the women of colonized countries. There were other discourses to explain their lack of refinement, to dismiss their arduous lives and to defend the conspicuous consumption of the leisured classes (Veblen, 1899).

Women’s resistance to this ideal grew in the late-1800s and was expressed through overlapping political movements: the physical culture movement, the rational dress movement and the movement for the education of women (Burton Nelson, 1998; Canning, 2006; Heilmann, 2003; Stell, 1991). For first wave women’s activists, bicycles and bloomers were key to expressing visibly their demands for various freedoms and in diffusing access to physical activity for women (Burton Nelson, 1998) through the 1880s and 1890s (Cahn, 1994: 15). Advertisements have ‘sociocultural consequences and repercussions’ (Goldman, 1992: 2) as Petty’s (1995) commentary on early bicycle advertisements shows. Advertisements displayed different types of bicycle available for men and women, with special models developed to accommodate women’s skirts (Petty, 1995). Although primarily examining an early example of segmentation and the ‘first expensive, durable luxury item to be mass marketed’, Petty notes that bicycle advertisers were among the first to appeal to the ‘New Woman’ of the 1890s. This appeal to the emancipated woman presented her as active, independent and enjoying active recreation (Petty, 1995: 33) and on an ‘equal footing with men’ (Petty, 1995: 43).

Where the advertisements gave women access to active alternatives to the homemaker, the bicycle itself was released in several models depending on one’s level of athleticism (Petty, 1995: 42). Also important through this era in America were the ironic exploits of the Gibson Girl (Scott, 2005) and the enduring rail advertising icon Phoebe Snow (Young, 2006).

Gradually, women’s persistent resistance achieved some concessions, not only in voting rights and education, but also in physical activity (Cahn, 1994: 21–3). The links between physical activity and education were forged in schools, although class differences were maintained. Games were introduced to middle-class girls’ schools (Adair and Vamplew, 1997; Fletcher, 1987; Hargreaves, 1997; Scraton, 1992), while for working-class girls, physical education relied on routines of drill and callisthenics, and their access to more interesting sports and team games was severely limited (Stell, 1991: 28). In middle-class girls’ schools team games were for health, and cooperative team spirit with an emphasis on building a good character, but did not emphasize physical courage and daring in the way of boys’ sports. The girls’ games were most often conducted behind school walls where active women would not be visible to all. In an era of international
transference of ideas (Heilmann, 2003), the use of ideas from English girls’ schools was significant in the introduction of physical education for girls internationally around the turn of the 19th century (Crawford, R., 1987; Stell, 1991).

Through schools a second important component of change flourished from the early 1900s; the gym mistress (Cahn, 1994: 24; Fletcher, 1984, 1987; McCrone, 1988; Scraton, 1992). Women physical education teachers trained at specialist colleges (Hargreaves, 1994: 82–3; Scraton, 1992: 23), and a separate tradition of women’s sport was created and maintained by the gym mistress. These teachers advocated for girls’ and women’s right to be physically active, using arguments based on health. However, their arguments also deferred to the prevailing social definition of femininity and espoused the qualities of cooperation, grace and deportment. There was an underpinning commitment to moderation, particularly around physical contact and competition. Full-blooded physical activity was reserved for an active masculinity personified in the football hero, boxing champion and Olympic competitor.

Despite remarkable similarities across Western democracies and extensive exchange of information and views (Canning, 2006; Heilmann, 2003; Spender, 1983), there were of course regional differences. For example in rural Australia and New Zealand it is suggested that some upper and middle class women had access to a wider range of physical activities due to less rigid social expectations in frontier life (Crawford, S., 1987; Stell, 1991). Often activities had a localized functionality, such as horse riding and shooting, rather than competitive sport. In the USA, fears that competitive sport would create masculinized, or mannish, women were so intense that a campaign againts the inclusion of women in the Olympics was waged by the Women’s Division of the National Amateur Athletics Federation during the 1920s and 1930s (Cahn, 1994: 61). This resulted in restricting competition for schoolgirls and curbed intercollegiate level sport for American women until the late 1960s (Burton Nelson, 1998; Cahn, 1994) and highlights the role of competition in perceptions of suitable physical activity for women. It needs to be borne in mind that men and boys of the time were exhorted to play competitive sport and lauded for their exploits, and many of the richest sports prizes emanate from this period.

Nonetheless, important cultural perceptions of appropriate femininity shifted from the restricted body of the late 1800s to embrace physical activities and looser garments. The ‘New Woman’ emerged on bicycles in bloomers to become the convention-defying ‘flapper’ of the 1920s. Her hair was bobbed, the bandeau replaced the corset and dresses were shift style to the mid calf (Scott, 2005: 104 includes illustration). Body shape for women had changed dramatically from bosoms, corseted waists and bustles to a slender, less curvaceous ideal. In looser and lighter clothing, including pants (Luck, 1996; Schoeser, 1996), ‘La Garconne’ had access to a range of games such as golf, tennis, swimming, hockey and lacrosse, as well as exciting new dances like the Charleston and the Black Bottom (Scott, 2005). In 1928 the first women’s track and field events were included in the Olympics. A tiny programme of only five events, but when competitors in the 800 metres collapsed, the horrified administrators removed the event and it was not restored until 1960 (Dyer, 1982: 1).

Notable for the focus of this paper are the dramatic changes that reveal the socially determined nature of body styles derived from physical activity, clothing and body shape. New role models were available; the gym teacher educated and advocated for the new view of women. Thus the body is of nature through its biology but is far from natural. The excesses of the Roaring Twenties were followed by the Great Depression of the 1930s. Although there were permanent gains for women around looser attire and access to some vigorous physical activity, albeit with limitations on competition, there was a return to a more conservative social milieu (Rapp, 1987).
The malleable body emerges

By the 1930s, active leisure had become acceptable, especially for middle- and upper-class women, with two provisos. First, women’s physical activities were associated with relaxation and pleasure, and far less with competition. So Olympic competition continued to be controversial; but women golfers, tennis players and cyclists were encouraged (Bushby and Jobling, 1985; King, 1979). Second and most importantly, games should enhance attractiveness. Increasingly, women were shown enjoying physically active leisure. In cinema and Hollywood promotions, the swimsuit shot became *de rigeur*. Cosmetics played a significant role in challenging definitions of beauty (Scott, 2005) and advertising played its part in communicating the latest ideals of femininity (Hirschman and Stern, 2000), but this had less to do with actual physical activity in this historical period. With the increasing acceptability, close links with the fashion and cosmetic industries encouraged women to think about creating desirable bodies, but not muscles, of course (Matthews, 1987). It was the beginning of *the malleable body* on which women were duty bound to work hard (Matthews, 1987). The emerging view was that the body was no longer a static given but could, indeed should, be moulded and shaped by its owner (Tseelon, 1995: 4). The emphasis on a female body of this kind suited consumerism well, was bolstered by the images created by Hollywood and advertising (Featherstone, 1982), and offered another challenge to conceptualizing bodies as solely ‘natural’.

Throughout this phase, although women, like Babe Didrikson, were becoming more visible as athletes, some activities and types of embodiment continued to be perceived as too masculine, particularly through the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Evidence of this effect is available in the more limited range of Olympic level competition for women, and the media coverage of female athletes (Blue, 1987). In the 1930s, sports editors passed disparaging comments about women track and field athletes, calling their femininity and desirability as women into question (Bushby and Jobling, 1985: 83; Hart, 1981: 453; King, 1979). For the generality of women, ladylike pursuits did not include physical force, muscles and extreme exertions. Through the 1940s and 1950s, the Second World War had ambiguous impacts of encouraging independence while the war was underway and then returning women to the home and hearth in the aftermath. In the 1950s, women’s appearance returned to the ‘hour glass’ figure (Bushby and Jobling, 1985: 83). ‘Womanly’ figures were to be maintained by some enjoyable exercise, possibly games like golf or tennis. For example while Australian sportswomen dominated international swimming and athletics competitions through this period (for example, Shirley Strickland, Betty Cuthbert), sport was so separate from the generality of women’s lives that often they did not have the same access as spectators (King, 1979: 79). It was also commonplace for women to have separate playing days and times at golf courses and tennis courts.

However, through the 1960s political freedom and physical freedom were again connected and arguments for Equal Rights were extended, but this time beyond games to competitive sports. In education in the USA in 1972 this resulted in Title IX, (Duncan, 2006). This government intervention required that pupils were offered equivalent opportunities and was implemented around physical activity, as well as other areas of the curriculum (Thorne, 1994). Although women’s participation in physical activities rose through the 1970s, the segregated nature of children’s play remained intact (Thorne, 1994), as did segregation in adult competitive sport. To ensure segregation of the sexes at the highest level of competition, the Barr Sex Test was introduced to the Olympics in 1968 (Hart, 1981: 455), but only women were tested. It was presumed there would be no advantage to being a woman in a man’s event. Nonetheless, the burgeoning body maintenance culture (Featherstone, 1982) had secured wider acceptance of non-competitive, beauty enhancing
routinized physical pursuits such as aerobics (Hargreaves, 1994: 161; Scraton, 1992), echoing the advocacy of the first gym mistresses. Aerobics was often promoted by high-profile celebrities, such as Jane Fonda (Gimlin, 2002), mirroring the physically active celebrity from 1930s cinema as well as the drill movements of earlier gym classes. As is often the case for competing discourses, some elements endure through co-option and alteration.

Despite the apparently broad acceptance of physically active womanhood, there remained some deeply entrenched inequalities for sportswomen. In competitive sport, women were valorized as petite childlike gymnasts (e.g. Olga Korbut in 1972; Nadia Comaneci in 1976) with many thousands of supporters but faced very different responses for strength-based sports such as javelin or shot put (e.g. Mary Peters) (Blue, 1987: 113, 155; Cahn, 1994), reminiscent of the deprecation of ‘mannish’ women from the early-19th century. The differences were so acute that activities were labelled by sport sociologists as ‘sex appropriate’ (Fasting, 1987: 362) or referred to with a gendered classification (Dewar, 1987; Hargreaves, 1994: 109; Lenskyj, 1987: 365; Scraton, 1992). Kane and Snyder (1989) found that, not only were competitive sports sex-typed, but appropriate sports for women relied on perceptions of grace and flexibility, further echoing the norms of the ‘restricted’ phase. Tennis players, swimmers and track athletes were applauded but any inroads that women made into sports such as field athletics or weightlifting that relied on physical strength were viewed with suspicion (Blue, 1987: 137). ‘Throwing like a girl’ was not intended as a compliment (Young, 1989). It needs to be noted that through the 1960s and 1970s there was a resurgence of women’s activism around equality and access to resources. However, as we shall see in the next section, in a manner reminiscent of 1930s reporting, public commentary and the visual representation of women athletes remained curtailed by social attitudes towards women’s competitive sport.

A new advocate of healthful exercise joined the physical education teacher when a significant shift in the medical and public health discourse occurred through this period. By the end of the 1970s, preventative medicine sang the praises of a healthy body and identified the benefits of good looks too. In short, ‘body maintenance is [was] firmly established as a virtuous leisure time activity which will reap further lifestyle rewards resulting from an enhanced appearance’ ( Featherstone, 1982: 25). Physical exertion for weight control and health directed bodies towards the new trim, taut and terrific embodied aesthetic and encouraged women to ‘make the most of themselves’. A nascent social marketing joined advertising to promote specific body exertions as socially desirable for good health and this became a crucial part of government policy through the Ottowa Charter (O’Connor-Fleming and Parker, 2001: 28).

However, despite the fitness boom of the 1970s, government support and the exhortations of the medical profession, men were physically more active and more engaged in competitive sport (Dyer, 1982). Women’s lower participation rates in active recreation and competitive sport started in the teenage years (Thorne, 1994), continued throughout the life cycle and was a well documented phenomenon of all Western cultures (Adair and Vamplew, 1997; Hall, 1985; Hargreaves, 2004; Sallis and Owen, 1999). Nevertheless, women attended aerobics classes in significant numbers, walked, swam, and played tennis and golf. The gains of the previous era around access and clothing had continued, and compared to the 1800s there had been startling changes. Women could be physically active in public, in mixed company, and had access to games and to competitive sports. The limited extent to which this was taken up was partly an effect of access to resources, thus middle- and upper-class women were physically more active when compared to less affluent women (Sallis and Owen, 1999), and partly an effect of general social attitudes that remained (unhelpfully) focused on women’s appearance (Lenskyj, 1987).
The body viewed and the viewed body

The relationship of fashion and beauty to women’s participation in physical activity and the conjunction of these elements in images of socially acceptable and desirable female bodies had become key. The culmination of several social and cultural discourses had created a specific cultural milieu (Featherstone, 1982). By the 1980s, beautifying the body included physical activity, albeit through gender specific exercise. To create and maintain an attractive appearance, embodiment for women had swapped the restrictions of corsets to the constrictions of diet and exercise. Essentially, the reflexive identity project (Giddens, 1991) required a subject to project their self-identity through appearance, and cultural ideals were drawn upon, including representations in marketing communications (Goldman, 1992; Kates and Shaw-Garlock, 1999; Schroeder, 2002).

There are ramifications if the images on offer are restricted (Hirschman and Stern, 2000) and it is important that marketing communications around women and sport were, and to a great extent remain, limited (Buysse and Embser-Herbert, 2004). For instance, an Australian 1985 report showed that men’s sports graphics took up 93.9 per cent and that ‘in 1984 women’s sport averaged 1.3% of all space in newspapers’ (WGWS, 1985: 102). Bringing figures up to the present day in the USA, Messner (2007) asserts that ‘the silence surrounding women’s sports is stunning’ (2007: 157). From a longitudinal study of sports media begun in 1989 he finds that there is less trivialization of women’s sport (2007: 159), but, compared to men’s sport, ‘reports on women’s sports [were] far less frequent and less varied’ (2007: 161) and that the proportion of coverage from 1989 to 2004 was ‘absolutely flat’ (2007: 164) at a mere 6.5 per cent (2007: 159). Furthermore, recent analysis of representations of women’s college level sport found little variation from the popular press (Buysse and Embser-Herbert, 2004). The reasons for this imbalance rely on socio-cultural, historically developed, perceptions of what is appropriate for femininity, and what is not. As already noted, the negotiation, fluidity or rivalry, of discourses (Kates and Shaw-Garlock, 1999), retains elements from previous eras even as the new era evolves. Therefore, many sportswomen who had defied the odds to become outstanding athletes remained unrecognized due to the lack of media coverage (e.g. Beryl Crockford, Judy Oakes) (Blue, 1987: 176). Other successful sportswomen were earning significant sums of money but given questionable media coverage (e.g. Martina Navratilova) (Blue, 1987: 177). Throughout, the sportsman was heralded as the pinnacle of masculinity and rewarded as such with generous sport sponsorships and celebrity status; and his parenting abilities went unmentioned.

Moreover, representations of physically active women in women’s magazines were rare (Duquin, 1989). When women were pictured in physical activity there was little evidence of exertion and a heavy emphasis on sexuality. In other words, women’s bodies, even when supposed to be physically active, were directed towards being attractive to others and ‘heterosexual’ (Buysse and Embser-Herbert, 2004: 79; Lenskyj, 1987). The kinds of physical activities in which women were encouraged to participate and the image of feminine physicalities this portrayed were closely linked both historically and culturally with specific concepts of attractiveness. This ‘viewed’, symbolic body did not encourage women to take on large powerful muscles, nor the physical strength that these imply, nor the social power that they command. MacKinnon comments that women were ‘trained to be weak’ (1987: 120) and that ‘the physical self-respect and physical presence that women can get from sport is antithetical to femininity’ (1987: 121). Yet there had always been strong women (Blue, 1987: xi–xii, 192–201; Hargreaves, 1994: 43; 1997) and that they are rarely used as ideals is significant and indicative of the wider cultural perceptions of what is appropriate for femininity.
There is then a disjunction between the achievements of women with regard to access to physical activity, where some represent their country in astonishing displays of physical prowess through competitive sport, and the majority of women who would eschew the body shape and reputation that such physical strength would convey, preferring instead to focus on physical activity only as it contributes to their appearance (Black, 2004; Gimlin, 2002). It is a curious phenomenon that the physical freedom that flowed on from loosened clothing, a shift in the medical discourse, and the access to physical activity that was achieved did not inspire more women to pursue feats of strength and daring. Moreover, the cultural discourse about femininity that is made available to the generality of women through marketing communications and representations in popular media is important in disseminating values about feminine bodies. However, before we examine the relevance of this to the current role of marketing communications, the contesting discourse that brought women’s experience to light will be discussed.

Earlier, a rationale was presented for a separation of women’s activism and the gradual historical shifts in access to an active physicality (see Table 1). The rationale proposed that the majority of women were not politically activist and thus, following from Hirschman and Stern (2000), their engagement was at the level of spectator and the availability of role models, ideals and ideologies. This is not intended to suggest there was a single response, nor does this suggest that women were displeased with the changes. The three historical shifts identified from the last 130 years convey the changing possibilities for women in general with regard to physical activity, bearing in mind the high profile and valorization of men’s sport, the minority of women who did embrace physical prowess, and the resources required to take part. The changes to active embodiment were accompanied by changes in dress and some limited representations in the media, often accompanied by disparaging commentary. Concurrent to these identifiable periods of women’s active embodiment there were activist women who engaged in a diversity of social critiques, some of which were more strident than others (Aaron and Walby, 1991; Canning, 2006; Catterall et al., 2000, 2005; Jackson, 1993; Spongberg et al., 2005). The full extent of the diversity of these views is difficult to convey in a short space, therefore the concepts which had an enduring impact on the discourses of women’s active embodiment are the focus because these are most likely to have entered the vernacular and have an effect in marketing communications and advertising (Goldman, 1992; Kates and Shaw-Garlock, 1999).

Women’s sport: A feminist topic?

Feminist views have been argued to be of value to marketing and consumer culture theorists (Bettany et al., 2010; Catterall et al., 2000) on issues of the body (Joy and Venkatesh 1994) and social inequality (Penaloza 1994; Scott, 2007). Feminist philosophy’s contribution to the discussions of embodiment is hugely significant and wide ranging (Bordo, 1993; Butler, 1993; Joyce, 2006). Although this will be referred to briefly in another section, the broad philosophical debates of embodiment are not the focus here, nor are the feminist views of the debilitating effects of fashion and beauty, either historically (Scott, 2005) or in contemporary culture (Tseelon, 1995). In this argument the central pivot is the feminist social theory and investigation of physical activity for leisure and competitive sport, which has been surprisingly limited (Hargreaves, 2004). Nevertheless, sociologists were among the first to theorize and research the active body (Hargreaves and Vertinsky, 2007: 1) and then later to make some of the most substantial contributions to the field of gender, power and sexuality (Connell, 1987, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).
This section will base its periodization of activism for women’s rights in the sociological paradigm. Other disciplines use alternative periodicity. In addition to three waves of feminism there are also three distinct perspectives of feminist theorization and it was during the second wave that theories of embodiment developed most rapidly. The ‘three schools’ model ‘has been important for 30 years’ (Delamont, 2003: 7) in organizing theoretical debates within the paradigm of sociology. The ‘orthodoxy’ relies on the Liberal, Radical and Marxist (socialist) feminist perspectives (Delamont, 2003: 7) and is widely acknowledged (Edwards, 1988; Jackson, 1993; Thompson, 2002; van Krieken et al., 2000: 657–65). This is not to deny the significance of alternative feminist perspectives, such as feminists of sexuality, colour, and postcolonialism. Indeed these challenges are recognized as the roots of the emerging third wave feminism. Rather this framework helps to focus on key concepts that have been important for the sociological theorization of active women’s bodies (see Table 1) and, it should be noted, varies somewhat from the well known Bristol and Fischer (1993) characterization.

First wave feminism

Diverse in both demands and strategies, the first wave of women’s rights activists can be referred to as de jure feminism (Spender, 1983), although this was not a term that they themselves would have used. Depending on their level of extremism, activists were called suffragists or, the more militant, suffragettes. Occurring around the turn of the 19th century (1880s to 1920s), the first wave primarily aimed to change the voting, educational and employment rights of women (Stockett and Geller, 2006). Although often criticized for focusing on the privileged upper- and middle-class women and denying the input of lower-class women and women of colour (Scott, 2000, 2005; Stockett and Geller, 2006: 4), nevertheless the outcomes of first wave feminism were tangible in terms of access to the political system through the vote and political representation, access to education, reproductive rights and physical activities. The significance of the rights of citizenship should not be underplayed, and continues to elude many women today. But it is hard to understated that ‘one of the most potent symbols of female emancipation has been the adoption of trousers by women’ (Schoeser, 1996: 133), which began in this phase.

Second wave feminism

Second wave feminism developed out of the resurgence of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s (Jackson, 1993: 3), indicating that there was a perceived lull in activity. This lull is noted as beginning in the late 1920s (Rapp, 1987: 32–3). Friedan (1963) referred to the discontent of wives in the 1950s and 1960s suburbs as ‘the problem that has no name’. Firestone (1970) named the problem as a sex class system, and Millett (1970) called the exercise of power by men ‘Sexual Politics’. The upsurge of localized women’s groups in consciousness-raising was matched by the burgeoning feminist academic output. And while the development of socialist feminism is often attributed to the British through Mitchell (1975) and Barrett (1980), a most influential collection edited by Eisenstein came from the USA and included a ‘Black Feminist Statement’ (1979). Thus feminist social theory began from differing politicized positions of the perceived locus of women’s inequality and the ensuing search for theoretical and methodological insights that were commensurate forged academic and intellectual communities (Stockett and Geller, 2006: 5).

The outcome was many variations (Bristor and Fischer, 1993; Catterall et al., 2000; Fischer and Bristor, 1994; Joy and Venkatesh, 1994; Moore, 2006; Penaloza, 1994; Scott, 2005), but there were
three key perspectives (Delamont, 2003; van Krieken et al., 2000). It is important to recognize that, like cultural discourses, prevailing academic discourses are the result of negotiation and navigation across time. Understanding what feminist theory said about women and active embodiment is useful because these are the discourses that have moved into the wider social sphere and have become part of advertising rhetoric (Goldman, 1992; Hammond, 1996; Sandikci, 1996). Second wave feminism examined universal systems of power, control and domination (Edwards 1988) through ‘structuralist binary oppositions’ (Stockett and Geller, 2006: 5). Fundamental to these early debates was the public/private dichotomy discussed as access to equal pay or through the domestic labour debate. Ultimately, the analytical category of sex was held up to scrutiny and found wanting and through the 1980s gender as a category was accepted (Canning, 2006: 6–8; Catterall et al., 2005). In addition to the challenge mounted against the universalizing and essentialist views of women, second wave feminism was also criticized for its lack of consideration of women of colour, variations in sexuality and the experience of colonialism. Many of these issues sparked the development of third wave feminism which will be dealt with later in conjunction with contemporary marketing communications. In the next section the precursory second wave perspectives on women and physical activity will be briefly reviewed.

Second wave feminist views of women, leisure time and physical activity

Liberal feminism

During the 1970s, liberal feminists adopted the ‘equality of all beings’ (Bristor and Fischer, 1993: 519) in a gender egalitarianism approach. Their highly visible agenda was to achieve the same opportunities to succeed as men (Bristor and Fischer, 1993; Fischer and Bristor, 1994) and was aligned with politically activist organizations such as NOW (National Organisation for Women) in the USA (Stockett and Geller, 2006: 4) or WEL (Women’s Electoral Lobby) in Australia. Liberal feminists did not seek radical social change and made a case to work from within the system to ‘transform gender roles’ (van Krieken et al., 2000: 658) and stressed ‘the ultimate value of individuals’ (Bristor and Fischer, 1993: 519). Closely tied to structural functionalism (Edwards, 1988: 48), the liberal feminist view of ‘psychological differences’ (Bristor and Fischer, 1993: 519) led to a heavy reliance on sex role theory (Edwards, 1983, 1988: 48; van Krieken et al., 2000: 658). In terms of physical activity and sport they set out to demonstrate that women were as capable as men, including the challenge that sportswomen were physically and mentally as competent and deserving as men (Dyer, 1982; Hall, 1988: 332; Hart, 1981).

Sex role theory was used by liberal feminists to explain the less active or less aggressive physical pursuits adopted by women and concurrently to defend the right of all women to be athletic. For example Hart says: ‘the separation and alienation of women in sport is not the healthiest of situations. It is only through interaction that we can gain awareness and acceptance of differences’ (1981: 450). She asks ‘why has it been difficult for women to stay “woman” and be an athlete, especially in games emphasizing physical skill?’, and goes on to answer that ‘personal conflict and stress increase as it becomes necessary for her [the athlete] to assure others of her sexual identity, sometimes requiring evidence’ (1981: 451). Moreover, sporting competition success was likely to bring derisory comments about attractiveness from sports editors (Hart, 1981: 453). To explain the differential treatment of women in sport, as well as girls choosing to abandon games, it was proposed by liberal feminists that such physical activity and the female role were in

Tautologically, sex role theory aligned positive, socially empowering characteristics with maleness and gentler characteristics with femaleness (Edwards, 1983: 390), blurred behaviour with social norms and could not account for social power (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 831). Assertive characteristics found in female subjects were assigned to androgyny; the label given to a mixture of so-called masculine and feminine attributes. Connell, in his highly influential discussion of gender and power (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 831), found sex role theory socially conservative and lacking in explanatory value (Connell, 1987: 47–54), due to its inability to theorize power and social interest, its dependence on biological dichotomy ... and a systematic misrepresentation of resistance’ (Connell, 1987: 53–4). In other words the problems were twofold: first, why were men the benchmark of normality, success and physicality; and second, this was a descriptive rather than explanatory account.

**Socialist feminism**

Given the reported low participation rates (Hall, 1985; Hart, 1981), the question remained why women were less physically active than men. Another explanation was offered by socialist feminists3 whose focus revolved around elucidating the intersection of the public and private spheres through their examination of unpaid work in the domestic labour debate and the sexual division of labour (Barrett, 1980; Eisenstein, 1979; Hartmann, 1979; Mitchell, 1975). Deriving from Marxist theory and operationalizing the concept of patriarchy, they emphasized the ideological as well as the economic mechanisms of production and consumption (Edwards, 1988: 55). Thus they asserted that capitalist social and cultural structures limited women’s access to any kind of recreation or leisure, or physical activity. For example in 1975 leisure was described as an *Inappropriate Concept for Women* (Anderson, 1975). Women’s access to leisure was restricted due to a lack of personal free-time, limited resources, and the expectation that they facilitate the leisure of others (Deem, 1986; Green and Hebron, 1988; Green et al., 1987). These findings did not preclude women playing sport, but they did go some way towards explaining why physically active women were a minority, why some women might take a negative view of competitive sport and why working-class women were less active than middle-class women. This broadened the discussion to include social variables and recognized some differentials in access beyond the binary of sex. However, issues of diversity among women were subsumed to the focus on social structure.

**Radical feminism**

Beginning from the assertion that sex divided men and women into separate sex classes (Firestone, 1970; Millett, 1970; van Krieken et al., 2000: 658) and was the source of the universal dominance of men in all human societies (Edwards, 1988: 50), Radical feminists failed ‘to separate the different elements – gender identity, sexual practices, procreation’ (Barrett, 1980: 72). They were often (correctly) accused of separatism and essentialism in their theorizing, but their focus opened up discussion of women-centred language (Daly, 1978; Spender, 1980), experience and history (Spender, 1983). Challenging the social norms of heterosexuality (Edwards, 1988; van Krieken et al., 2000), radical feminists examined media portrayals of physically active women and identified media accusations of lesbianism as a marginalizing technique that undermined women’s sporting achievements. They also questioned the ‘apologetic’ (Felshin, 1981: 488) where an athlete’s femininity was emphasized through make up, hairstyling and jewellery (Cahn, 1994). They
asserted this viewable body perpetuated a focus on women’s looks and avoided recognizing her athletic abilities (Lenskyj, 1986, 1987). They also asserted that sporting competition was experienced more cooperatively by women (Birrell and Richter, 1987). But this gender essentialism denied the fiercely competitive nature of some highly feminized physical activities, such as gymnastics, where tiny differences in score separated Olympic champions. In contrast, powerful visible muscles encapsulated and embodied the social power of being physically able and are principally associated with maleness (Blue, 1987; Cahn, 1994). This is the physicality of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), and a highly significant cultural ideal (Goldman, 1992).

In sum, early second wave feminism only addressed women’s active embodiment, competitive and recreational, in a limited way, either through sex role theory, or the constraints of the sexual division of labour, or a separatist biologically based essentialism. There are echoes of first wave demands for access, as well as resistance to the ‘mannishness’ of some physical activities, and there are protests over the demands of certain social expectations, but there are problems with all these formulations. However, in spite of the theoretical problems, several of these strands of feminist thinking were remarkably resilient and, as a later section will discuss, they resurface in high-profile marketing communications. First, a brief recognition of the debate around embodiment, because it prompted the shift into the third wave and the symbolic significance of visual representation and the viewed body.

**Emerging third wave**

Second wave feminism variously asserted a number of related dichotomies around gender dualism (Catterall et al., 2005), but poststructuralist feminist philosophy challenged this most effectively in discussions of embodiment. Initially, using Merleau-Ponty, Gatens challenged the mind/body dualism, instead averring that the male and female bodies have quite different social value and significance (1983: 148) and that from this sexed position different social behaviours and understanding are learned (1983: 151). Grosz was unconvinced and argued that Meleau-Ponty’s conceptualization of the body was neither object nor subject and thus became ephemeral and only ‘defined by its relations’ (1994: 87). Grosz (1994) proposed instead the metaphor of the Mobius strip for embodiment, where the internal psychology crucially informs the external physical form, and vice versa, in a constantly shifting sociality. Key here was the shift away from the universalizing subject, the stability of identity and the biological essentialism that were central to second wave feminist theorization. Instead the performativity of Butler (1993) was widely adopted wherein identity is shaped and understood through the iteration of acts, gestures, behaviours and any ‘naturalness’ of the body is merely a product of the discourse about the body (Joyce, 2006). Moreover, identity relied on difference and diversity, and gender was not necessarily a defining, nor the sole, component. Race, ethnicity, geographical region, class, caste, age all have experiential input into the socially constituted and enacted identity (Stockett and Geller, 2006). Aspects of this theoretical perspective are present in the consumer research through liberatory postmodernity (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Joy and Venkatesh, 1994).

This led to more nuanced explorations of women’s engagement with physical activities. For example Wearing (1990) made use of the poststructuralist concepts of resistance and the dispersed nature of power as mooted by Foucault to argue that some first-time mothers used access to active leisure to resist dominant definitions of motherhood. These mothers drew instead on the discourse of human rights to create some space and time for themselves and to justify co-opting others,
especially fathers, to care for babies. Although resistance was only partial, it was a step out of the constraints of conventional motherhood (Deem, 1986; Green and Hebron, 1988). These mothers made use of the shift in attitudes about the appropriateness of physical activity to pursue health and beauty (Wearing, 1990). Other research revealed girls’ sport subcultures were also important sites of resistance and had empowering potential (Varpalotai, 1987: 415): simply by choosing sport a girl made herself different (Varpalotai, 1987: 417). Contrary to concurrent feminist work on the power of dominant discourses of beauty over the feminine body (Black, 2004; Chapkis, 1986; Coward, 1984; Gimlin, 2002; Wolf, 1990), these poststructuralist views suggested that women could and did evade such constraining discourses and gained much by going against social conventions by pursuing vigorous physical activity. Women, who took on the attributes assigned to hegemonic masculinity through sport, challenged the social power that derives from muscularity (Brace-Govan, 2004).

However, the media coverage of highly competitive sportswomen remained tied to dominant discourses that ridiculed women of exceptional strength, often questioning their sexuality or challenging women’s physical capabilities with accusations of steroid abuse (Blue, 1987; Cahn, 1994; Messner, 2007). Other representations simply neglected to show women as physically active, even when they were sportswomen (Buysse and Emsber-Herbert, 2004). The apparent fragmentation of the feminist debates across multiple and diverse constituencies, along with the resurgence of a powerful neoliberal political landscape that focused on individualism, led many to argue that not only had there been a feminist backlash, but also that postfeminism had arrived (Catterall et al., 2005; Goldman, 1992; Probyn, 1990; Rapp, 1987). Furthermore, several social phenomena were drawn together in the self-reflexive identity project of recent times (Giddens, 1991): the viewed and viewable body; the acceptance and promotion of physical activity as healthful; physical activity as a contributor to the desirable feminine body; the importance of individual endeavour demonstrated in the trim, taut and terrific body ideal; and the significant role of visual communications, particularly advertising, in the dissemination of cultural ideals for visual consumption. In short, all the elements discussed so far coalesce in contemporary ideals for active feminine embodiment.

**Marketing communications, advertising and postfeminism.** It is in the contemporary debate that the marketing discourse has been most directly co-opted and challenged. In global capitalism where many, if not all, aspects of life are commodified and hyperindividualization is the outcome of understanding ourselves as self-made and self-reliant (Giddens, 1991; Moore, 2006; Wensley, 2010), marketing communications have a fundamental cultural role to play. Advertising images are powerful in the constitution of the consuming subject and, importantly, this is acknowledged by both marketing scholars and feminists (Black, 2004; Catterall et al., 2000; Gimlin, 2002; Grow and Wolburg, 2006; McFall, 2007; O’Donohoe, 2000, 2002; Schroeder, 1998, 2002; Schroeder and Borgerson, 1998, 2005; Stern, 2000; Wolf, 1990). The relevance of advertising lies in its visual representations of women and, as Hirschman and Stern (2000: 164) note:

> women must pick and choose from the bounded collection of those images that are culturally available at a given point in time. Thus, women’s identities, and hence their goals, desires and motives, are determined by the representations accessible during particular historic periods.

This recognizes the significance of the dramatic changes to women’s dress and body shapes over the last century. Further, as Kates and Shaw-Garlock state:
(A)n accepted criticism is that advertising is an important and pervasive cultural institution that represents women in a problematic and unacceptable way ... (nor is it) ... particularly radical to argue that certain ads have co-opted feminist themes in order to market to women. (1999: 34)

Drawing from their perceptions of consumers, advertisers create and disseminate many of the images and narratives of femininity that circulate widely and become absorbed by the marketplace, such as the ‘housewife’ (Cronin, 2008). Research that focuses on the cultural impact of advertising and the extent to which advertising reflects and projects current social order (Hackley, 2010) intersects with research on the subjective aspects and experiences of consumption (Maclaran et al., 2010b) and is theorized as visual consumption (Schroeder, 2002), with implications for identity formation (O’Donohoe, 2000). As cultural artefacts, advertisements are the visible communication of a marketing strategy that brings goods or services into the marketplace. As such, advertisements also aim to communicate with the intended consumers.

Throughout the 1980s marketing communications came to recognize the elements of the feminist discourse that appealed to women (Catterall et al., 2005; Goldman, 1992; Kates and Shaw-Garlock, 1999; Schroeder and Borgerson, 1998). Marketers had good reason to respond swiftly to the challenge laid out by feminists in order to protect their markets (Catterall et al., 2005), either to ensure that they did not lose market share or to capitalize on potential new consumers (Hammond, 1996). ‘The ideological currency of (second wave) feminism’ was harnessed by advertisers principally through metaphors of control (Goldman, 1992: 108; Hammond, 1996). Women were addressed differently from the 1940s through to the 1970s (Goldman, 1992: 141), whereby women were assumed to be in the position to exercise individual choice. Furthermore, control after second wave feminism was directed at two key areas: women’s enhanced position in the workplace and going to ‘war with their recalcitrant bodies’ (Goldman, 1992: 111). Goldman argues that this shift in advertising rhetoric encouraged women to view themselves as creating ‘beauty assets’ through maximizing parts of their bodies. The objectifying techniques of showing only parts of bodies through close focus, cropping and sexualized posing (Schroeder and Borgerson, 1998) had the effect of generating the ‘commodity self’ (Goldman, 1992: 112). Goldman illustrates commodity feminism through several advertisements, such as the L’eggs brand of stockings, which made a play of one of the product attributes to state ‘Being in control never felt so good’ (Goldman, 1992: 108). Another featured advert addressed women’s body control issues with the headline ‘Woman: A New Definition’ above a headless woman’s torso in a swimsuit holding dumbbells (Goldman, 1992: 126), with text that suggested physical strength was the route to being in charge (Goldman, 1992: 125).

Alongside the cultural texts of commodity feminism in advertisements (Goldman, 1992; Goldman and Papson, 1996), postfeminism emerged towards the end of the 1980s (Catterall et al., 2005) as women took for granted the success of their predecessors and came to expect equality in the workplace and home (Rapp, 1987). The ideological force of feminism became re-presented as ‘choice’ for women (Probyn, 1990; Rapp, 1987; Sandikci, 1996) and as such was channelled through commodity choices (rather than political activism), so the backlash of ‘new traditionalism’ became apparent (Probyn, 1990). These new, and paradoxical, narratives of womanhood were represented in TV dramas (Probyn, 1990) and, importantly, in women’s magazines (Goldman, 1992). Advertising that spanned the gap between feminism and femininity was crucial and supported the many women’s magazines’ position that postfeminism was a (depoliticized) lifestyle choice of the ‘girl who wants it all’ (Goldman, 1992: 132–46). A key figure in these postfeminist advertising narratives was the well toned female body (Goldman, 1992: 133), which was available
to view ‘as evidence of achievement and self-worth’ (Goldman, 1992: 136). One of the boldest challenges that took up postfeminist framing came from Nike in the 1990s (Grow and Wolburg, 2006). Using themes of ‘empowerment’ and ‘entitlement’, Nike experienced significant resonance with women (cf. Grow and Wolburg, 2006). However, these campaigns also served as well recognized cultural artefacts for those who would critique the postfeminist perspective they represented, and advertising was often perceived to be the protagonist.

A leading example is Cole and Hribar’s (1995) analysis of Nike’s professed pro-woman stance. They assert that Nike’s reformulation of second wave liberal feminist ideals into Nike’s discourse of success through individual lifestyle choice was culpable in the emergence of a damaging post-feminism which they too called ‘commodity feminism’. Critics argued that the diverse political and social critiques of non-liberal second wave feminisms disappeared in the advertising rhetoric around individualized consumption (Cole and Hribar, 1995; McDonald, 2005). The underlying inference projected by Nike’s commodity feminism was that feminist activism was no longer necessary or relevant (Cole and Hribar, 1995; McDonald, 2005). Moreover, they asserted that commodity feminism created a false sense of sisterhood by suggesting women belonged to a single group, and that this group was inaccurately defined through the lens of white, affluent heterosexuality (McDonald, 2005). Nike’s advertisements, derived from the liberal feminist discourse, subsumed the reality of women’s differences. Heywood (2007) goes further to denounce the neo-liberalist use of ‘girlpower’ as falsely masking and denying the limits of social structure and using the image of athletic women to erroneously suggest that girls can ‘have it all’. This analysis of commodity feminism mirrors the critiques that Radical and Marxist feminism directed at liberal feminism (Hargreaves, 2004; Messner, 2007). In other words, there was no voice for the non-Western colonial Other (Brace-Govan and deBurgh-Woodman, 2008); there was homogenization of women; denial of the experience of ethnicities other than Anglo-Celts (Duke, 2002); the assumption of heterosexuality and the social–structural causes of discrimination were glossed over (Giardina and Metz, 2005: 75; Hargreaves, 2004: 199). Third wave feminism had responded to these critiques through the recognition of diversity and difference, sometimes celebrating the fragmentation of identity or its performativity. As noted earlier, the social phenomena of the viewed body and the self-identity project have flourished in concert with the burgeoning visuality of culture representation. The next section reviews a brand’s adoption of diversity in a particular campaign and then considers the effect of highly visible male active embodiment.

**Third wave diversity**

In contrast to second wave feminism, third wave feminism theorizes the social conditions of women (Aapola et al., 2004; Hargreaves, 2004) by taking account of diversity and difference and avoiding the essentializing effect of assuming gender to be the key driver of identity. A hugely successful communications campaign that represents an effort by advertising to once again engage with the most contemporary feminist discourse (this time third wave feminism of difference) is Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty. Dove responded directly to women’s protests about the portrayal of women and gathered their views through a survey of 4100 women across 13 countries to find that a majority of them thought the media set unrealistic standards (Dove, 2004: 1). The focus of Dove’s campaign is to broaden the stereotype of beauty, and everyday women were invited to volunteer for the advertisements. However, neither language nor visual representations are neutral (Schroeder, 2002). After huge success in the USA and Europe, in 2006 Dove launched its campaign in Australia by releasing a calendar through *Madison* magazine which also featured an article
that depicted and reported the process (Brace-Govan, 2008). Again, the images represented a depoliticized feminist position, albeit one that recognized diversity in age and ethnic origin, and did not subscribe to the very thin model shape for bodies. Nonetheless, posing in underwear is not without significance and rarely do people go about their daily business in only their underwear (Brace-Govan, 2008: 203). Being undressed while others are clothed is symbolic of subservience. Further, in spite of protestations of naturalness, the photoshoot captured through copy and images in the magazine showed quite clearly the management of their appearance; first by make-up artists, then presented in strange poses (especially in underwear), and accompanied by a text that proclaimed aspirations for motherhood and its special qualities (Brace-Govan, 2008: 203–4).

A comparison to an article about women bodybuilders in the same issue of Madison drew out the extent to which Dove was reinforcing the new traditionalist femininity (Probyn, 1990). The disparaging way that bodybuilding women were referred to as ‘muscly’ was not only identical to responses in the 1980s (Brace-Govan, 2008: 204), but was strikingly reminiscent of the ‘mannish’ accusations from the 1890s. Using Smith’s (1990) argument that women have a bifurcated relationship to their bodies, it was suggested that the panoptical mirrored gaze recuperated women’s efforts at independent identity construction and the dominant discourse is reasserted, thus absorbing resistance (Brace-Govan, 2002; Brace-Govan, 2008: 205). However, the key point for advertising and efforts at corporate brand activism was that in this complex social space Dove will ultimately fail to meet the brand promise. Dove will be unable to broaden the stereotype of beauty due to the complex social forces that are brought to bear on women, the mirrored gaze and subjectivity (Brace-Govan, 2008: 206).

The gaze is a widely utilized concept that is vital to the viewed (postfeminist) body which ‘connects what is looked at with who is doing the looking’ (Schroeder, 2002: 59) and thus the ‘subject takes herself as the object of the gaze, exercising surveillance over herself’ (Goldman and Papson, 1996: 98). Other research also points to the enduring contradictions within this interaction. Therefore, despite access to postfeminist choices, individualism, unrestricted clothing and physical activities, a recent study found that young women:

do not escape the critical gaze towards their appearance even when they concentrate on their own embodied performance and aim towards perfecting their skills in a particular sport rather than presenting themselves as attractive to the sport audience. (Aapola et al., 2004: 161)

The interiorization of the gaze was further reinforced by Thomsen and colleagues’ research where they asked successful young women volleyballers about body image and concluded that: ‘these athletes often struggle to balance their desire to be feminine and physically attractive with the size and strength demands of their sports’ (2004: 278).

Moreover, the young women asserted that media images continued to focus on women’s sexuality and sent confused messages to physically active women (Thomsen et al., 2004: 279). The reliance on appearance returns to very early strands of the sociocultural discourse of active embodiment for women, and the inequalities noted by first and second wave feminists, that a woman’s appearance is pivotal. Some competitive sports and body styles remain problematic for femininity. If Dove is to truly challenge the wider social discourses around physical activity perhaps their focus needs to shift away from beauty. A linked and important reflected discourse for these discussions is that of masculinity and physical activity, particularly as that appears as the social benchmark.
Visible men and ritual

There are many good reasons for contemporary culture’s investment in sport and physical activity not least of which are financial and audience engagement, but there are also cultural narratives of heroism, success and effortful work (Jackson et al., 2005: 10). The role of sport, advertising and media images in the politics of representation and identity formation is widely acknowledged (Jackson et al., 2005: 2). However, this is the physical activity that Connell (1987; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) suggested was the basis of boys learning to be adult men, and to be in possession of themselves. The significance of athletic prowess to Western cultural narratives of masculinity has been observed in consumer research (Kozinets et al., 2004; Patterson and Elliott, 2002; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). However, the visibility of men’s athleticism, particularly through the football codes, has provided ritual support and ‘mobilisation of bias’ in favour of men (Bryson, 1983: 421). Based on Lukes’s (1975) argument that regular public attention to particular public rituals reinforces social order, Bryson asserts that sport links ‘maleness with highly valued skills’ (1983: 421); this has a concomitant effect of inferiorization of female skills, and second, ‘links maleness with positively sanctioned use of aggression/force/violence’ (1983: 421). This conceptualization shifts theorization beyond that of ‘preferred meaning’ derived from Hall (1973) as discussed in O’Donohoe (2000: 88–9). Instead, ritualized visibility ensures that, through the regularity of viewing, and the social significance accorded to the ritual through respectful reverential attention, some active embodiments are not only socially more important, but also symbolically dominant. Lukes’s recognition of ritual’s role moves beyond the Althusserian position on ideology and absorbs the Barthesian point about readerly and writerly texts being differently understood.

Rituals of the sporting kind are explained to us, and our understanding is rehearsed and directed by multiple social institutions, of which advertising and marketing communications are a key facet. One only has to reflect briefly on the various codes of football and consider how often there is information and visual support to appreciate the veracity of this insight. Thus, widely and regularly viewed discourses are lodged in the ‘real’ and, significantly, are attached to other ideological frameworks (Probyn, 1990: 158). Furthermore, they contain the public language through which everyday men and women articulate meanings about themselves and their aspirational self (Probyn, 1990: 154). Therefore, Nike and Dove’s efforts may appeal to women in the short term, but in the longer term the ritualized visibility of men’s athletic prowess must prevail.

A way out of the impasse?

The impasse of the gender hierarchy of active embodiment and postfeminism cannot be attributed entirely to advertising, nor can it be solely addressed by the efforts of a single brand (see Table 1). Although some critics have found advertising to be culpable, this is a limited perspective on the intersection of cultural discourse and cultural artefacts, and the role of collective memory, or history. Advertising utilized and joined with the public discourse at every phase, such as the ‘New Woman’ and her bicycle, Nike and her sports gear, then Dove and her diversity. Drawing from the wider cultural discourse on femininity, each advertisement partially represented different strands of women’s activism on body issues. As history shifted across three different body forms (restricted, malleable, viewed), it is clear that women’s biological bodies are open to various cultural interpretations and that women’s activism and resistance was successful in achieving concessions and change. While it is widely accepted that discourses retain traces and echoes, with
both readerly and writerly consequences to past times, as well as being in a fluid relationship to the contesting and resistant discourses, there were consistencies across the phases for women’s active embodiment.

First the negative stance adopted towards women’s physical activities and physically active bodies worked to establish and maintain the discourse of ‘natural’ male–female differences. Moreover, these discourses undermined any challenge to the visibility of the gendered hierarchy that is ritually reinforced through the sport industry and its representations. Second, although interested in appearing ahead of the trends, advertising rarely adopts confrontational positions that lack wider appeal. Not only does this effect limit the potential for real challenge to reside here, but it also actively encourages the wider circulation of views that are ultimately quite conservative. Third, what is demonstrated here is that the memory work of history is especially valuable in exposing the pliability of even fundamental concepts such as ‘woman’ and ‘natural’ bodies. Moreover, history recognizes that preserving some narratives is culpable in displacing the lived experiences of others (Canning, 2006: 113) and so the diversity of views, theoretical and cultural, are absorbed into the current negotiated discourse.

Therefore, while the experience of physical activity and active embodiment for women is not equivalent to men, and clearly remains problematic, there have been remarkable changes for women’s bodies and for women’s activism. From the restricted bodies of the late-1800s, where first wave feminists strove for access to citizenship, education, physical activity and less constricting clothing, through the malleable body where womanly figures were worked on with healthy but not manly or excessively competitive activity, to the viewed body of today. With the resurgence of women’s rights in second wave feminism, increasingly women gained access to highly competitive sport, as divergent as synchronized swimming and weightlifting. However, most women, if they were active at all, took up less competitive physical activities such as aerobics.

Despite those positive changes, the negative media coverage of physically active women is noteworthy throughout all phases and, it has been argued, had the effect of minimizing the visibility of women’s active embodiment. At the same time, advertising was quick to take up alternative role models for women. In First wave feminist activism, bicycles and trousers represented access. Second wave feminism challenged the status of women from varying perspectives, but it was only a depoliticized neoliberal feminist view of personal choice that was taken up through the Nike campaigns. The advent of Third wave feminism profiled the difference and diversity among women, and forms the underlying strategy of the Dove campaign. But, puzzlingly, after significant initial gains, active embodiment for women retains many of the original issues and inequities. Active embodiment thus remains central to theorizing women’s experience (Joy and Venkatesh, 1994).

Further research in both consumer culture and marketing communications is required to move beyond the postmodern impasse (Catterall et al., 2005) and engage more meaningfully with the experience of women, the ‘largest market opportunity in the world’ (Silverstein and Sayre, 2009: 48). These investigations would benefit from designs that allow the widest diversity and broadest range of identity-forming resources to be heard (Hogg et al., 2000). In the first instance it would be helpful to adopt a critical marketing approach in order that the status quo can be challenged and the role of marketing, especially marketing communications, be investigated (Firat and Tadajewski, 2010: 141). The ritualized visibility of men’s sporting prowess that dominates cultural discourses of masculinity is a clear and enduring example of the insight that what gets valued is ‘significant in also indicating the heart of a society’ (Firat and Tadajewski, 2010: 129). Therefore, as this historical review has shown, until a critical stance is adopted, the fluidity of negotiating discourses can only perpetuate what is constantly the most visible, albeit with the co-optation of selected subaltern
views. A challenge to the (fragmented) individualism of the neoliberal project requires a collectivist stance (Catterall et al., 2005).

Furthermore, in this era where visual consumption has pervasive and profound consequences (Schroeder, 2002), the aesthetic of body ideals is an important topic for marketers to consider in order to better theorize the consumer. The sociocultural phenomenon that is feminine active embodiment, identified here as socially constructed and historically changing, has far reaching consequences and, as Dove and Nike demonstrate, is of deep significance to understanding women and their consumption preferences. While the discourse of postfeminism, the ‘new traditionalism’ and the popular press suggest women have ‘got it all’, others argue cogently that this is far from a reality. Moreover, England (2010) makes the point that, while liberal individualism promotes gender egalitarianism, it does nothing to challenge the devaluation of female spheres, such as unpaid domestic work; unpaid, or low paid, care of children; and (poorly) paid work that is predominantly carried out by women. Despite progress made by educated, middle-class women in employment there are still deep inequalities. The search for one’s ‘true self’ obscures the deeply (conservative) gendered lines along which this identity project is conducted, including self-expression through physical activity (England, 2010). Therefore, England (2010) asserts, the gender revolution is both uneven and in some instances stalled. If the gender hierarchy is to be challenged, and the role of advertising as a powerful voice in the public discourse investigated, then a cogent starting point would be women’s active embodiment. It is clear that more nuanced theorizing about women and the gender order would be invaluable at this juncture for accurate communications with and about women and their identity projects.

**Conclusion**

The separate and different rationales for women’s active embodiment began in the 19th century and continue to influence what is viewed uncritically as feminine. The cultural shift to viewing the body as a key resource in one’s identity project is recognized within the consumer culture literature but women’s active embodiment remains under-explored. One contribution this paper makes is to organize the significant, historically resistant strands of the discourse of physically active femininity into three phases, along with the subaltern resistant discourses of women’s activism. Visual images are important and powerful in the contemporary cultural discourse of subjectivity and identity because they offer aspirational ideals and indicate the range of socially desirable possibilities (Hirschman and Stern, 2000; Schroeder and Borgerson, 1998). A second contribution is to identify the highly symbolic and ritualized visibility of men’s sport and the lack of coverage of women’s athleticism. Public representations of physically active women remain limited and heterosexist. Androgyny and equivalence to men is a hollow argument that subsumes structural inequalities of access to individual responsibility, denies the voice of diversity and contextualized experience, and betrays women with a faithless and counterfeit sisterhood. If active embodiment is a key resource for women (Brace-Govan, 2004), then it is deserving of much closer attention from advertising and consumer research. The periodization suggested here not only identifies distinct shifts in discourses around women’s embodiment, it also notes the intersecting influences of social structure, cultural representations, and gender. Finally, the ‘mobilisation of bias’ through ritualized visibility is introduced to explain the enduring dominance of male physical activity and sporting prowess as lauded and superior, through all eras. Taken together this creates a clear rationalization for a deeper theoretical investigation of active embodiment and the consequences of its representation for women, and thus the role of marketing communications.
Notes

1. For example, the dates Delamont (2003: 2) uses for first, second and third wave feminism are different from those of most feminist sociologists but similar to the anthropologist Visweswaran (1997: 594), who also finds four waves. This is explained when Delamont later declares ‘anthropology is where my own roots lie’ (2003: 7).

2. It is difficult to convey in a short space the enormous contribution to social theory that second wave feminism made. A brief but comprehensive overview of second wave feminist theory is Jackson (1993), which covers the spectrum of social theories offered through what became Women Studies but was fragmented through several disciplines in the 1970s and early 1980s including sociology, cultural studies, philosophy and history. It also reflects the debates of the time. Canning’s (2006) history of bodies, class and citizenship makes an interesting comparison because of the assumed significance of the category ‘gender’ and the profound shift in thinking that this brought about. Aaron and Walby (1991) discuss the development of Women’s Studies in the UK through the 1970s and 1980s and the fears that Women’s Studies would lose its ‘grass-roots origins’ (1991: 3) and the ‘self-betraying myth of “postfeminism”’, not least of which derived from the ‘proliferation of feminisms’ in the 1980s (1991: 5); another interesting contrast.

3. This is a point of significant departure from the Bristor and Fischer’s (1993) taxonomy of feminism. The conflation of Marxism and psychoanalysis is labelled women’s voice/experience feminism (Bristor and Fischer, 1993: 520). The standpoint feminism of Dorothy Smith (1990) has been allocated to this section and is later than the historical point in time that is the focus of the discussion at this point. While I would concur that some theorists draw the inferences of a class-based analysis (Marxist) with a focus on the ‘preconscious psychic development’, particularly of children (cf. Juliet Mitchell (1975) Psychoanalysis and Feminism). Nevertheless it has been more usual in sociology to separate these perspectives (cf. Delamont, 2003; van Krieken et al., 2000), especially in their earlier stages. Most of what Bristor and Fischer discuss in this section comprises the Radical feminist writers’ perspective (Brownmiller, Daly and Gilligan; cf. Edwards, 1988: 53), thus the Marxist perspective is absent. Chodorow (1978) is more often categorized as a feminist anthropologist and, while ‘cross-fertilization’ is part of the feminist tradition (see note 1 above), for the purposes of focusing this paper I have not included these works, although they had relevance (cf. Stockett and Geller, 2006).

References


Jan Brace-Govan is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Marketing at Monash University, Australia, where she teaches nonprofit and social marketing. Her research interests include sociocultural aspects of the body, consumption rituals and alternative consumer behaviours. Recently, she has published on brand activism, visuality and moral consumption. Address: Department of Marketing, Faculty of Business and Economics, Monash University, Caulfield Campus, PO Box 197, Caulfield East, VIC, 3145, Australia. [email: Jan.Brace-Govan@buseco.monash.edu.au]