

THE NEW OLYMPIAN AND ITS “SACRED DEVICES”

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze how high-level athletes deal with their sport-self construction. Using a multi-method approach, where visual and textual data are employed in a hermeneutical analysis, we conducted a research with athletes from different sports who competed at least at the Pan-American Games level. Preliminary findings show that athletes often have a magical or rational world-view, and this influences the relationships between the athlete and their sport apparel. Beyond this result, it is also seen that the athletes possess a fragmented self, with one identity in their sport-work time, and another identity in their personal-leisure time.

Keywords: Athletes, Social Behavior and sport-self construction

Introduction

Our contemporary society is arguably facing new contexts, characterized by the post-modern conditions of fragmentation of the self, reversal of production and consumption, juxtaposition of opposites, decentralization of the subject (Firat & Schultz, 1997), and hyper-reality (Baudrillard, 1994; 1996; Firat & Schultz, 1997), as well as experiencing a retro movement (Brown, 1999).

In the post-modern society, sport and leisure are gaining space in the subjects' lives (Jarvie & Maguire, 1994; Maffesoli, 1990), being present as everyday activities, characterizing what Maffesoli (1988) calls as a Dionysian Society, a *theatricalization* and *leisurefication* of the everyday life. Therefore, modern sport was characterized by Guttmann (2004) as being secularized, equalized, bureaucratized, specialized, rationalized, quantified, and obsessed with records, all characteristics similar to the ones present in the Enlightenment project and in the positivism. While sport events, and in

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particular the Olympic Games, have already been analyzed through the lens of post-modernity, showing characteristics from the pre-modern games (a retro movement), as for example the ritualization of the opening and closing ceremonies, the vegetation crop or laurel leaves for the victorious athletes on the medal rostrum (Slowikowski, 1991; Jarvie & Maguire, 1994). Little or nothing has been done to understand the *new Olympian* in the post-modern context.

Starting from the understanding that we are what we have, and we have what we are (Belk, 1988; Sartre, 1943), the relationship between possessed goods and the owners becomes important to be analyzed if we want to understand who we are or who we want to be. In PoMo [Post-Modernity], the self is constructed through having (Sartre, 1943) or appearing to have (Debord, 1995; Maffesoli, 1988) the *possessed* goods (Castilhos *et al.*, 2006), which, then, become important issues to be studied if we want to understand who the *new Olympian* is. Hence, this paper will analyze the consumption stories told by athletes about their sports apparel (the ones that they use in competition), to understand who is their *Olympian self*, how it is constructed, and what meanings are attached to these possessions. The paper will be organized as follows: first the terms extended-self and self are defined; then, the method and the sampling will be explained; after this the categories that emerged from the interviews will be presented; and finally, some conclusions will be drawn.

Method

If we regard lived experiences that we are trying to understand and construct with the informants as multi-dimensional, it becomes important, and *necessary* to use a multi-method approach (Mason, 2006). Besides the multi-dimensionality of the lived experiences, they are also multi-sensory in their essence, they happen simultaneously through sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch. What this paper will try to do is use one more of these senses in the data gathering, besides verbal information. It will add the sight sense, using pictures for visual-elicitation (Heisley & Levy, 1991; Heisley, 2001).

Throughout its positivistic past, the consumer research has neglected the use of visual data (Heisley & Levy, 1991; Heisley, 2001), which has his roots in visual anthropology and visual sociology. Initially, the idea of using visual data was one of invading and doing a quick expedition into the culture of interest (Heisley, 2001), while the use in this work is related to the idea of eliciting stories. Through the informants' photographs, we can elicit consumption stories related to the objects (in this case, the sports apparel) that they use and possess. The main idea of the visual-elicitation is to let the informants express themselves and construct stories as a means of understanding the phenomenon with another lens. So, informants were asked to bring with them to the interview five recent pictures of themselves competing in their sport discipline.

With the pictures in hand, the visual-elicitation process began with justifications (e.g., why they have brought this picture; why they are using these apparels?). This verbal-phase is rooted in the narrative research stream, which bases its ideas in the fact that to understand the present, we construct narratives of the past with eyes in the future (Giddens, 1991). So, the verbal phase of this work will try to help the informants to express themselves, to verbalize their behavior through the creation of consumption stories, asking them, with the aid of the pictures, to construct cultural biographies of

their things (Kopytoff, 1986; Löfgren, 1990), which were analyzed in relation to their life history (story).

As presented earlier, to understand the present, we construct stories of the past with eyes in the future (Giddens, 1991), and this construction is normally related to the individual life project, which in turn is related to the whole life history (story). So, using a hermeneutical approach (Thompson, 1997; Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson, Pollio & Locander, 1994), the consumption stories told by the informants were read in relation to their whole life history (story), performing the hermeneutical cycle of coming and going through each sport apparel and life story. These cycles promote a fusion of horizons between my [pre-] understandings and the ones from the informants, which are the basis of the categorization process.

Sampling

Using a theoretical sample (MacNaghten & Myers, 2004), athletes who have competed, or will compete, at least at the Pan-American Games level were contacted, asking them to participate in this research. The athletes were asked to bring five pictures of themselves competing to the interview, as a way of eliciting stories of their sport apparel. The interviews occurred in different places, ranging from the athlete's house to the athlete's training place, and lasted on average one hour. The conversations dealt with their life story both as an individual and as an athlete including the sport apparels' stories and meanings.

Preliminary Findings

Being part of a bigger project, the results that are shown here are preliminary findings from the first interviews. For this reason, we preferred to present the results as Ahuvia (2005) did, choosing two interviewees that represent the two distinct world-views related to the sports apparels' meanings.

Andreia and her Magical World View

Andreia is a 26-year old female wrestler, competing at the <63Kg category. She started training in combat sports at the age of 21, with Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ), after training and playing in different sports at a regional level (from handball to ballet and gymnastics). While training BJJ (she placed third in the BJJ 2003 World Cup for blue belts), she watched a famous Brazilian talk show, where a Brazilian wrestler said that almost all female athletes came from Judo or Jiu-Jitsu background. She tried to contact this person, using the information that had been shown on the program, but without success. One day, in her BBJ academy, she had a wrestling training class with a former Olympic athlete and she received an invitation to participate in a regional selective tournament for the Brazilian Championship. Without any further training in wrestling (she only had three training sessions), she got second place in the Brazilian Championship, and, then, decided to start training and dreaming to participate at the Rio de Janeiro Pan-American Games (2007). Without any other female athlete to train with, or any other wrestling athletes, she had to train with BJJ or Judo male athletes for some time, even teaching them wrestling, so that she could train with them afterwards.

In relation to her magical world-view, she is what Tian & Belk (2006) called a deterministic person, believing in fate as a determiner of life events. One example of this vision is her knee ligament injury (a negative event) that happened one year ago and led to depression. This negative event allowed her to go back to her hometown and stay with her grandfather who was very sick (a positive event). Her knee injury helped her to see her grandfather just days before he died, and for her, this event was driven by fate and by a determined life plan, turning from negative into positive.

As a person who has a magical world-view (Tian & Belk, 2006), Andreia believes that her sports apparel has supernatural powers that could help her achieve her objectives. She received her new sports shoes from the Brazilian Government through a project for teaching wrestling in the university, and she started using it after qualifying for the Pan-Am Games in 2007. These shoes were *created* especially for the games. Before qualifying, she had old shoes that had her energy invested in them; they were thus cultivated (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981) during the qualifying process, and so they became *qualifying shoes*.

As a good Brazilian, I light candles to different saints, from Iemanjá [the sea goddess in Brazilian Candomblé] to Santo Antonio [a Catholic saint]. All my shoes I bring with me to the Nossa Senhora de Caravaggio Sanctuary [the larger sanctuary is in Farroupilha, a small town of Italian immigrants – her heritage also – near her hometown]. When I lost the Brazilian Championship, I did not go with my shoes there. So I had to go there with these new ones. And what about the clothes that you use? I burn some incense over them. (Andreia)

Brazilian religious syncretism (Da Matta, 1979), and even the syncretism that Candomblé has in itself (Maffesoli, 1990), can be recognized in this quotation, as well as a syncretism in believing that profane consumption objects could become sacred by using and cherishing them (Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989; Tian & Belk, 2006).

So, it can be seen that Andreia believes in the magical powers of these mundane objects can give to her. She has a determinist (partial-determinist in some moments) view of her life events (Tian & Belk, 2006). She believes that it was her greater will that made something happen. Each time she gives a reason (*not rational*) for the outcome of the events, sometimes stating that something happened because she was without a lucky charm (Tian & Belk, 2006), or because it was God's will. This magical world view is congruent with the ideas of the re-enchantment of the consumption experience (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), where profane objects become sacred and consuming becomes one of the major aspects of self construction (Belk, 1988).

Jaqueline and her Rational World View

Jaqueline is a 26-year old female sailor in the 470 Class. She started sailing at a summer camp in a club in her hometown at the age of 11. None of her family members had sailed before, and she started because she lived near the club. As with all sailors, she competed first in the Optimist Class, becoming State champion at the age of 15 and European champion at the same age. After changing to the 470 Class in 1996, she became ten times State Champion, three times South American Champion, three times South American Vice-Champion, 4th place in the 2006 World Champion, and represented Brazil in two Olympic Games (2000 and 2004). She considers herself as a professional athlete, having different sponsors, which helped her to hire a good trainer, a good physical trainer, and a new partner for her boat. She even states that she is not only an athlete, but also a manager of her *team*, looking for new sponsors, getting better trainers and partner, etc.

As for her rational world-view, Jaqueline does not have any consumption object (in her sport-work self) with metaphysical or supernatural power, nor does she rely on fate and destiny to explain her life events.

Before competition the old aunts and grandmothers always come with these saints' images, saying: that's to protect you. I just grab them and say ok. And what do you do with them? Nothing, I just bring them with me. Just one time, as a joke, I have tied it to the mast of my boat. (Jaqueline)

Superstition means nothing to me. We [she and her partner] joke some time: Ohhh, with this object everything has gone well, so we should use it everyday now. It's more of a joke; there is no superstition of using anything. (Jaqueline)

This rational world view is something that Jaqueline had developed through the years of competition and her professional athletic life. This non-superstitious aspect is related to all her sports apparel, from her wetsuits, to her boat, sail, and partner, but these relationships were not like that before she became a professional, when she had a hotter relationship with her objects. This hot cathexis (Ahuvia, 2005) is one of the premises of the understanding that the object is part of one's self (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988; Tian & Belk, 2005). When she was an amateur, she had to buy everything, had to choose what to buy, when to buy, what color, what size, not only for her clothes, but also for her boat. This is similar to her personal self, where she has some superstition, as her car license plates have the number 177, as well as her boat, and as seen in a certain necklace that she used to wear in competition. After turning pro, she now has different sponsors that give her clothes, glasses, parts of the boat, and even the Brazilian Sailing Confederation has a boat for her in Europe, so she can compete without traveling with her own boat from Brazil. Even “having” two boats, she doesn't differentiate one from another, they are treated equally and cautiously, such that they do not break and do not make her loose time in competitions.

Conclusions

The construction of this *new Olympian* departs from the two distinct world-views, gaining influences from science and quantification as well as from magic and metaphysical power. It is one more fragment that the post-modern subject can incorporate.

For Jaqueline and Andreia, their sports self is different from their personal self. Where the former overlaps the latter they are seen as demarcating two different fragments of self. This is different from the demarcating aspect presented by Ahuvia (2005) where the subject chooses one identity and neglects the other one. What we found is that both identities have their moments in the whole life project. These is congruent with the multiphrenic self, as defined by Firat & Schultz (2001), Brown (working paper) and Thompson & Hirschman (1998), where the different selves co-exist and know when they need to be performed and presented. These selves could even be different in their core assumptions, as they are for Jaqueline, who has a rational and cold relationship with her sports objects (clothes, boats, old trophies, etc.), but in her personal life she has a hot relation with her goods and does not even dispose of anything that she has.

Following, the *new Olympian* has a syncretism in his (or her) beliefs, trusting not only in science, but also in religion, in magical and metaphysical power, bringing

myths from the past and the modern (Kniazeva & Belk, 2007). If modern sport is characterized as rationalized and quantified (Guttman, 2004), characteristics that are related to science, the same could not be said about the contemporaneous athlete who also believes in religion and magic. Post-modernity allows the syncretism of beliefs for athletes, and also allows that elite sports have magical and metaphysical aspects, not only secular and scientific ones, bringing back some aspects (in a retro movement) from the ancient Olympic Games.

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