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## ORIGINAL

### WOMEN AND SPORT IN FILMS IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY (2000-2009)

### LA MUJER Y EL DEPORTE EN EL CINE DEL SIGLO XXI (2000-2009)

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the roles and qualities of women in sport films from the first decade of the twenty-first century, which is an unusual subject of study in the field of film research. For this purpose we analysed a sample of 74 films that were selected through a non-probability quota sampling and using a descriptive investigation model. The sample was determined by way of content analysis. The results showed that the films reflected the current sports model, as well as the modern female stereotypes. This should help to question the current model shown in these types of films.

**KEYWORDS:** sport, cinema, women; sex roles

## RESUMEN

Este documento profundiza en el rol y cualidades asociadas a la mujer en el cine deportivo de la primera década del siglo XXI, objeto de estudio poco habitual en el campo de la investigación cinematográfica. Para ello, se determinó una muestra compuesta por 74 películas, seleccionadas a través de un muestreo no probabilístico por cuotas y mediante un diseño de investigación de tipo descriptivo, siendo el análisis de contenido el instrumento elegido para llevarlo a cabo. Los resultados mostraron que se reflejaba con fidelidad el modelo deportivo imperante en la actualidad, así como el canon moderno que se atribuye al sexo femenino, lo cual debería cuestionar el modelo que se muestra y perpetúa en este tipo de producciones.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** deporte, cine, mujer, roles de género

## INTRODUCTION

Since the beginnings of the feminist movements in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there have been scientific researches around the roles of women in society. These studies have taken a major role in the socialization of global culture thanks to the development of mass media in the previous century (Bandura, 1986). One of the most researched areas has been the stereotype of women in the media, and many of these researches have shown that women continue to be negatively stereotyped in Western society because an unrealistic image of them is portrayed (Bishop, 2003; King, 2007; Rowe, 2004). The stereotype of female beauty as a slender, very thin, with narrow hips and extremely attractive woman only corresponds with 5% of the actual adult women population (Neuendorf, Gore, Dalessandro, Janstova & Snyder-Suhy 2010).

Within the global society in which we live all films produced by Western cinema are exported to the rest of the world, which is why the large film companies have a role in the making of society. The roles portrayed by male and female characters in films are observed and in many cases understood as normal by the audience. Therefore, the practice of sports by women in films becomes a role model for girls, influencing the girls' choice of sport and the amount of their practice.

Sport films represent, within Western society, one more source of communication about the existing women body canons and stereotypes (Pearson, Curtis, Haney & Zhang, 2003), understanding as gender stereotypes systems of beliefs about men and women in general or about their masculine and feminine characteristics. These beliefs are strongly rooted in consciousness and they escape reason (Martín Casares, 2006).

Even though there are studies about the role of a female character in specific sports film (Caudwell, 2008), there are only few researches within the more commercial and more widespread film sector in the Western cinemas that study

body image and social roles of women in the sports genre films of recent decades. Pearson (2001) analysed the salient similarities and differences between the depictions of women in sport theme feature American films from 1930-1999. During the last decade, major social changes have happened in Western culture. In view of this, the aim of this research is to explore female characters in sport films of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, considering whether the films show the current body canons and social stereotypes of women in Western society.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The portrayal of women and other minorities in the modern cinema of the past century is an indication of the impact of both civil rights and feminist movements. According to Pearson et al. (2003), the Title IX law in North America, which prohibits gender discrimination in institutions that receive government funds, has fostered an increase of sport films with female characters. However, Hollywood sport films generally focus on the male body (Cook, 1982 cited in Guttman, 1996).

As Kuhn states (1982, cited in Duncan and Hasbrook, 2002), films usually have a function of repression of the feminine in patriarchal societies. According to Neuendorf et al. (2010) and Huggins (2007), the roles of women in films can be divided in three types. The first type is the “subversive heroine”, who is a strong and courageous woman who transgresses the feminine and society canons and who is usually sexually active. The second type is the “villain or femme fatale”, who is a strong woman, manipulative and corrupting at times, who may have a man under her command, and who is sexually active. The third type is the one described by Clemente (2007) as “Cinderella”, who is a kind and sweet woman who cares for others and who normally needs the help of her lover, and who is passive and sexually “pure”. Azzarito (2009) calls them “normal” girls.

According to Gilpatric’s (2010) and Guttman’s (1996) studies, stereotypes of men and women in films represent men as dominant, aggressive, competitive, hyper-muscled, independent, ambitious, decisive and adventurous; whereas women are shown as affective, docile, emotional, pleasant, kind and communicative.

Body image plays an important part in the making of a person’s of self-concept (Garrett, 2004), especially in the case of women. That is why the unrealistic image of the female body that is shown in films can lead some women to experience problems of identity and even to suffer from anorexia or bulimia.

In his analysis of gender in American sport films, Baker (2006) affirms that, except for a few occasions, women are usually shown in roles of weak cheerleaders and players in team sports. In the majority of films in which a woman practices a sport transgressing the heterosexual canons of patriarchal society, the story ends when the woman leaves her sports career and marries her lover, thus returning to the logical patriarchal equilibrium of American society. In most of these films we can see the fear of sports women of being

seen as manly. This fear results from the unacceptability in Western society of characteristics different from those of the classical male-female duality.

In recent years many sports film have been produced in which the central plot is carried out by a female character (Boyle, Millington & Vertinsky, 2006; Caudwell, 2008). The British researcher Caudwell (2008) states for instance about *Girlfight* (2000) that the activity and the body of the female character can be read as transgressive. As Pearson et al. (2003) affirm, the social conditions present at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have an impact on occidental society and its representation in films, especially in sports films. These films produce a particular type of women's images and stories. This representation shows few possibilities for femininity in women and portrays a particular version of feminine sexuality (Caudwell, 2008). Teenage girls are influenced by a social culture of femininity (Hendley & Bielby, 2011), which is in turn strongly influenced by the commercialization of the female body (Hargreaves, 1994).

Throughout its history, sports have been a centre of sexist stereotypes about women (Pfister, 2010). In recent times women have been able to participate in sports which are typically considered male-dominated, without being called manly – sports such as boxing, wrestling, football, and triathlon. The practice of these sports by women has risen significantly in the last decades, reaching and in some cases even exceeding the practice of the same sports by men. However, in regards to leisure sports, men and women have different interests. Women are motivated by health and aesthetical reasons (Garret, 2004), whereas men mainly want to fun and compete (Pfister, 2010). Besides, we also need to highlight that while women participate in men sports, men do not participate in women sports in an equal measure.

In the same manner, there has also been a general increase in the number of programmes and films that contain aesthetically pleasing images directed to a female audience. Female athletes who radiate an aura of eroticism in male sports seem to have a special attraction to both mass media and male sports audience. Thus, nowadays footballer women are considered particularly attractive and even sexy (Pfister, 2010). The eroticism of the female body with commercialization purposes is clear in sports (Messner, 2002). Many women athletes use their sports clothing to make them desirable and thus communicating the ambiguous message that sports women are sensual women (Hargreaves, 1994).

According to Messner (2002), sports women are discriminated by mass media in four different ways. These forms of discrimination can be applied to sport films: "silence" (there is no presence, or very little, of women in this kind of films), "humorous sexualisation" (frivolous practices and activities of female sports are shown to convey a frivolous portray and a sexist use of the female body), "backlash against women's sports" (highlighting negative aspects and behaviours of women through misogynous and homophobic stances) and "selective incorporation of standout women athletes" (using female characters for political and social interests).

Women in sports have to balance their sports abilities with their femininity in order to be accepted (Huggins, 2007) and be happy (Wright, 2004). Otherwise they are quickly classified as not very feminine, since they move away from the female stereotype and towards the masculine stereotype. The historical legacy and the strong common-sense assumptions result in the institutionalization of norms, priorities and specific practices for each gender (Scraton, 1992). According to Schneider (2000), Blández, Fernández and Sierra (2007), Crawford and Unger (2004), the gender practices and norms in sport for women are: rhythm, expression, elasticity, flexibility, and beauty. The sports stereotypes for male are: strength, resistance, activity, aggression and risk.

## **SAMPLE**

The data of this research is composed by the sports films produced between 2000 and 2009. Due to the large amount of films that met this criterion, we needed to define a sample, which we understand as a representative sub-group of the total data. In order to ensure the validity of the sample we used the data of 74 films that were selected through the non-probability quota sample method (Bogan, 2007).

In order to choose the sample we initially considered the film revenue rankings according to the websites of *Box Office Mojo*, *FilmAffinity* and *Internet Movie Database*.

The arguments for using as a reference the rankings of these websites to determine the final sample were to choose films with more commercial distribution in Western society, discarding those with low coverage. This criterion was established not only in order to choose movies that had been seen by a large public, but also because, as stated by Guarinos (2007), cinema is the pioneer media in absorption and projection of elements of our society, especially evident in commercial films.

## **PROCEDURE**

The design of this descriptive study is defined by three phases:

1) Pretesting: Starting from a deep review of the bibliography of previous studies, it was determined that the best technique of investigation for this research was content analysis, with the purpose of obtaining the data in the relevant sources. As Neuendorf (2002) states, content analysis is used to decode apparent and hidden messages in different type of media: press, personal documents, radio, television, and films. Therefore different signs can be analysed: verbal and non-verbal, auditive and visual.

Furthermore, we proceeded to define the descriptive categories of the subject of this research, according to the proposals given in previous studies by Huggins (2007), Gilpatric (2010), Baker (2006), Pearson et al. (2003) and Caudwell (2008) and Ramírez (2011). The creation of the category system is the most

important phase of content analysis, because it shows directly the purpose of the researcher and the underlying theory of the research.

The methodology was referred to three experts for assessment and correction which were chosen due to their prestige and studies in the same field. Using their feedback, the system of descriptive categories was redefined more accurately. Data was collected for nationality, year, genre and awards for each movie, as well as the characters, main and secondary actors, in relation to gender, ethnicity, age, body structure and sexual orientation. Specifically in relation to female characters clothing, the behavioural characteristics and type of physical activity practiced in the film were assessed. Additionally, an anecdotal record for issues that could provide additional information to that already recorded in the reflected categories was included.

Subsequently, the researchers undertook a process of preparation as encoders, which was composed of two phases: presentation of the research method and of the descriptive categories, deepening in the understanding of the categories, and training in the form of presentation and individual codification of several sport films (10 films). Later on, the researchers discussed their findings. This training had the purpose of obtaining the necessary reliability, and continued until a correlation index of 0.8 or higher was reached.

Once after the research method and the descriptive categories were defined, and the encoders were prepared, we run a test on a sample of 10 sport films, with the goal of evaluating both the research method and the descriptive categories. Subsequently, the descriptive categories were redefined to clarify items, which were confusing in practice. Finally, three new experts were consulted in regards to the validity of the proposed methodology, especially in relation to the system of descriptive categories.

2) Coding: The previously defined research method was applied to the sample. Each researcher individually coded each of the films from the sample. Later on, in the same manner as in the preparation phase, the researchers compared results. We observed that the mean correlation index among researchers was 0.83.

3) Analysis: Once the data from the sample was obtained, and with the purpose of deepening in their meaning, a descriptive analysis of frequencies was performed.

## **RESULTS**

The descriptive analysis of frequencies showed the following results. Firstly, there is a predominance of US sports films (59.46%), which clearly separates them from the European films (17.57%) and Asian films (9.46%). The number of mixed releases (12.16%, mostly American releases in association with other countries) should also be highlighted.

Despite the fact that sport films are not the most valued films by critics, we have noticed a high number of film awards given to them. We found that 311 film awards have been given to the films in the sample; 112 awards (36.01%) came from international festivals.

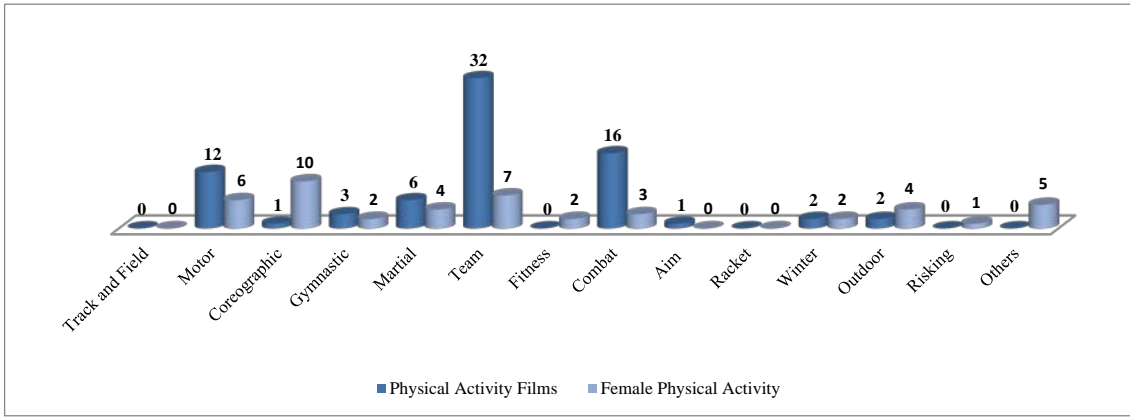
The main genres of these films are drama (55.41%), action (18.92%), and comedy (17.57%), showing clearly that most of the films make use of the dramatic aspect of sports. For instance, there are many films in which there are great-unexpected victories in the last moments, bringing joy and pride to the athletes and their families, friends and followers.

It has already been mentioned that the selected sample consisted of sports films, but what was the sport or sports featured in these films? Mainly team sports (42.67%), 16% of them corresponded to football and 13.33% of them to American football, were represented. Such a high percentage for a specific US sport is possibly due to the fact that the films were mostly American. In second place fight sports are found (21.33%), with boxing (14.67%) as a clear example. In third place motor sports (16%) are represented, being racing the most important within this category (12%). Other relevant although minor groups of sports are martial arts (8%), gymnastics (4%), and winter sports and outdoor sports (2.67% each).

Closely related to the previous category is the category of “physical activity performed by the female characters”. From the sample, 46 films show a female character performing some type of physical activity. The most representative type is choreographic activities (21.74%), among which are found cheerleading and dancing (8.70% each). In second place team sports are found (15.22%), being football the most important discipline (6.52%). In third place motor sports (13.04%), exclusively car racing can be seen. Other sport activities performed by female characters are those related to outdoor sports and martial arts (8.70% each), and winter sports, fitness and gymnastics (4.35% each).

From these sport activities performed by female characters, 58.06% have a competitive purpose, whereas the rest is performed for recreation (32.26%) or for other reasons (9.68%).

As shown in Figure 1, it is very noticeable the gap between the category of physical exercise of the film and the actual activities performed by female characters. This gap is especially striking in the case of team sports and in the case of fighting sports. On the opposite pole we find films about choreographic activities, in which there is only one case, in contrast with the number of films in which women perform these activities (a total of 10 films).



**Figure 1:** Comparison of the categories “Physical activity films” and “Female Physical Activity”

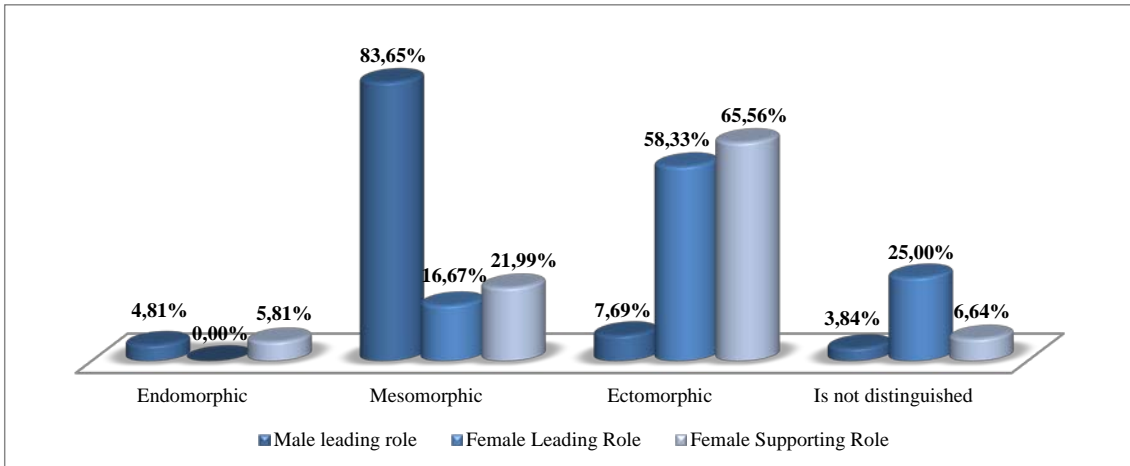
With regard to the characters, there were 830 characters in the sample, out of which 564 were men (67.95%) and 263 were women (31.68%). In the case of main characters, 104 were men (80.62%), whereas only 24 were women (18.60%). In the case of the secondary characters, out of the total of 701 characters 460 of them were men (65.62%), 239 women (34.09%) and only two characters were classified as “other” (0.29%).

In regards to ethnic origin, the main male characters are Caucasians (61.90%), while the rest of the ethnicities are considerably less represented – black race (20.98%) and Asian race (12.38%). The main female characters are also mostly Caucasians (54.17%), followed by other ethnic groups (29.17%) and Asian race (16.67%). It is important to highlight that no main black female character was found. In regards to the secondary female characters, again the prevailing ethnic group is Caucasians (68.46%), followed by Asian race (14.11%) and black race (12.03%).

In regards to age, the main male characters are predominantly young (71.43%) and adult (20%), and to a lesser degree adolescents (6.67%) and the elderly (1.90%). This data shows a tendency to associate sports and youth. However, the main female characters show an equal representation of teenagers (45.83%) and young women (41.67%), while the rest are adult women (12.50%). This data is clearly different than the data for male characters and it will be analysed in detail later, because it’s impossible to ignore that young women don’t have as much prominence in leading roles as their male counterparts, while they have more prominence as secondary characters (50.21% of women with a secondary role are young, while 29.05% are adult and 13.28% are adolescents; the rest of the values are less significant).

The last aspect to consider in relation to the characters is their body structure, for whose data (Figure 2) is very eloquent and the main male characters are mostly mesomorphs and ectomorphs.





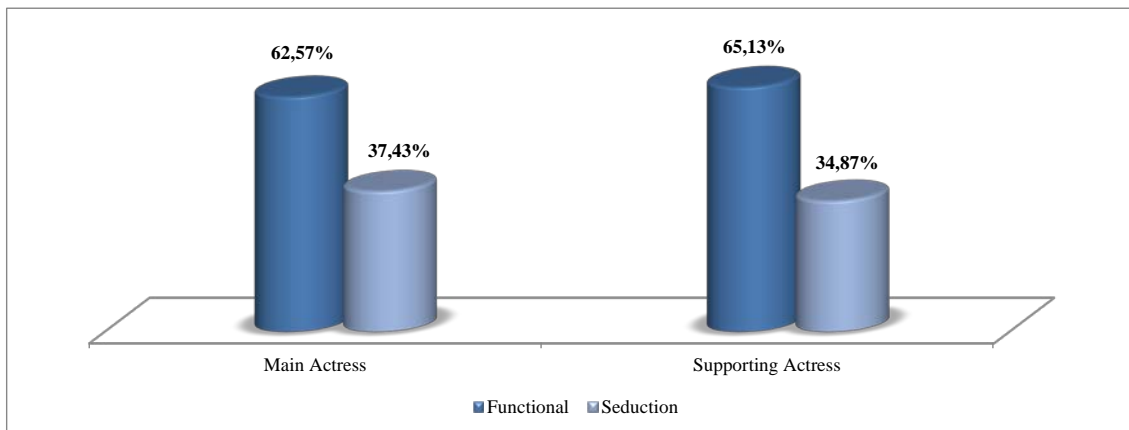
**Figure 2: Body structure**

In terms of the exclusively female characteristics of analysis and starting with the sexuality, we need to highlight that the main female characters are basically heterosexual (75%), the other value being “not noticeable” (25%), which shows that none of the main female characters are defined as homosexual. In regards to secondary female characters, again there is a high percentage of heterosexual characters (71.78%) followed by the category “not noticeable” (27.39%); in the same way as with the main female characters, none of the secondary characters were homosexual. This complete absence of homosexual female characters will be analysed later on, as we can question whether this is simply a coincidence or a reflection of the current society, in which homosexuality and specially lesbianism is still a taboo.

The clothing displayed by the main female characters is mostly smart (60.89%), followed by sportswear (23.27%). The rest of the categories show less significant percentages: evening wear (4.21%), working wear (3.22%), nudity (2.23%), or other (4.21%).

Secondary female characters show the same distribution, although there is a more pronounced difference between the first two categories, with smart clothing being at 74.47% and sportswear at 8.60%. Finally there are very small percentages for nudity (1.51%), underwear (1.38%) and swimwear (1.86%).

As shown in Figure 3, in the case of both the main and the secondary female characters, the clothing, regardless of its type, shows similar percentages in regards to its seductive power (37.43% for the main characters and 34.87% for the secondary characters) and its functionality (62.57% for the main characters and 65.13% for the secondary characters). This data is interesting, because it shows that females clothing has a seductive purpose, rather than the practical purpose that would be expected for its use in sports.



**Figure 3:** Feminine clothing characteristics

The data in regards to the positive and negative qualities displayed by female characters gives an idea of the qualities associated to the models of an ideal woman and of an evil one. The main female characters are characterized in a positive way with the qualities of passion and aesthetic beauty (16.13% each), courage (14.52%), tenacity and rebellion (11.29% each), aggressiveness (9.68%), competitiveness and independence (8.06% each), and tenderness (4.84%). On the other hand, negative characteristics are aggressiveness and manipulation (28.57% each), competitiveness, aesthetic beauty, and tenderness (14.29% each). It is interesting to note that aesthetic beauty, aggressiveness and tenderness can be both positive and negative qualities, while manipulation and competitiveness are clearly negative qualities.

The positive qualities of secondary female characters are tenderness (37%), followed by aesthetic beauty (19.67%) and motherhood (18.83%). Other positive characteristics but with little relevant percentages are passivity, having no interest in improvement, and tenacity (6.28% each), followed by fragility (5.44%), independence (5.02%), and passion (4.60%). Meanwhile, negative qualities show a more uniform distribution: manipulation (20.93%), passivity (16.28%), aggressiveness and competitiveness (11.63% each), having no interest in improvement (9.30%), fragility (6.98%), rebellion, toughness, coldness, and cunningness (4.65% each), and finally demands and aesthetic beauty (2.33%).

Lastly, the list of categories used for content analysis included an open category called “anecdotal record”. This category highlighted relevant aspects of the sample for this research that did not fall into any of the existing categories. In regards to this we need to notice two aspects. The first aspect is a use of the language as a vehicle for discrimination and allocation of feminine stereotypes, with sentences such as “...this is not a game for girls” (*Shaolin Soccer*), “...it will be very hard [...] that is why girls don’t play football” (*The Replacements*) or “...I never know who has it worst, whether them or us [women], we have to wait for them to sort everything out” (*Cinderella Man*). The second aspect is the constant and excessive use of the woman’s body as naked, flirtatious and sensual, in extra characters – in the form of dancers with little or no clothes, cheerleaders with short skirts or close-ups of breasts, bottoms, and so forth.

## DISCUSSION

From the data obtained in the research we can affirm that the image of women in sports films shows the following stereotype: a white woman with a secondary role, she is thin, young and heterosexual, with positively valued qualities such as motherhood, beauty and tenderness. These results coincide with data about girls and mass media in Azzarito's research (2009) and Pearson (2001). However, there are some films (*Million Dollar Baby*, *Bend It Like Beckham*, *Girlfight*, *Offside*) in which this traditional view is transgressed (Rowe, 2004), showing a type of woman not in accordance with the feminine 'ideal' (Williams et al., 1985) and against the biological assumptions of patriarchy (Richardson, 2008). These transgressive women, just like the first athlete women in films, bring hope for the change in perception of women in sports (Cashmore, 2000). This stance seems to be shared by film critics, as many of the awards won by sports films have been given to these films.

The required standards of beauty for women in Western society are reflected in the films of the sample. The need for women to stay beautiful, thin and young is shown in the presence of these qualities in the female characters (Cáceres & Díaz, 2008; Neuendorf et al., 2010), on the contrary to findings of McCullick et al. (2003) about Physical Education Teachers in the movies.

Just like men (which are shown in the films as having a predominant mesomorphic body structure) are required to keep toned to adjust to the male canon (Fanjul, 2008). The data regarding the age category for the female characters also seem to match the standards of current society, showing a gradual decline in the practice of sports by women as they age. This data matches the data obtained by studies regarding the abandonment of sports practice (Brown et al., 1991; Sarrazin, 2002 cited in Cecchini et al., 2005).

One of the characteristics of the patriarchal and heterosexual Western society is the rejection of homosexuality (Pronger, 2000; Messner, 2007). In the case of women this is worsened and creates a double discrimination, because of being a woman and being homosexual. Despite the fact that among the films analysed there are cases of breaking with traditional norms (see examples cited previously), the field of sexuality, especially female sexuality, is still full of prejudices and restrictions which are almost insurmountable in this kind of films. Thus all the female characters analysed show heterosexual characteristics, or at least not homosexual. The qualities assigned to women in these films match the current sexist stereotypes present in a patriarchal society (Gilpatric, 2010; Guttman, 1996): motherhood, sweet, beautiful, manipulative. There are few occasions in which these stereotypes are not associated with women.

The sports shown in the films' plots are traditionally considered as not suitable for the feminine ideal. The main sports featured in this gender of films are boxing, classified by Snyder and Spreitzer (1983, cited in Cashmore, 2000) as unacceptable for women, and sports like football or soccer, classified as generally unacceptable for women.

The sports played by women in these films are mainly choreographic activities (see also Baker, 2006) and mainly cheerleading, which in many cases is the solely feminine presence and practice. Therefore they adopt a role of support towards a male character, even becoming the prize for a successful male athlete (Messner, 2002). These findings reinforce the role of women as an inferior individual in sports films (Kuhn, 1982 cited in Duncan and Hasbrook, 2002).

However, it is to note that there is an important presence of women in films about risk activities and nature sports, because, according to Messner (2002), these sports are alternatives for women to the male-dominated sports.

Generally speaking, the characteristics shown in female characters in sports films lead us to categorize women within the “Cinderella” role: passive women who support the main male character. However, there are some cases in which this stereotype is broken, showing women in the role of “subversive heroine”.

We can observe the use of the woman’s body with few or inappropriate clothes and as a tool for flirtatious sexuality through the analysis of extra characters in the category “anecdotal record” (Messner, 2002; Pfister, 2010; McCullick et al., 2003). This is what the American sociologist Messner (2002) calls “humorous sexualisation” as a form of discrimination against women, and increasing in sport in the last years (Wanneberg, 2011).

Finally, we need to highlight another form of discrimination that is observed in this genre of films, called “silence”. The small presence of main female characters in these films leads to the non-existing image of women as a sports figure, which does not provide positive examples to follow for the female audience.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Through the results of this research and their analysis and comparison with previous researches, the following conclusions may be drawn. Firstly, in relation to the goal of this research, we have found that the female body canons and the social stereotypes of the current society are reflected in sports films of the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A predominance of males with mesomorph body structure and women with ectomorph body structure was found. Caucasian ethnicity was clearly predominant and the female sexuality was mostly heterosexual (without any case of homosexuality). The image of women as objects of desire dressed with seductive clothes regardless the activity performed was highlighted and the main sports activities for women were choreographic activities, in which cheerleading of male teams stands out.

Furthermore, it could be deduced from the results of the present research that these films usually portray values traditionally linked to men: virility, strength, honour, fight, pride. This is not a coincidence, and it is one more example of the current social order, highly hierarchical and male-dominated, in which the

imposed model of masculinity shows in many aspects of daily life. Women tend to feature as the tender, faithful and understanding companion, who has the role of mother or lover; in the cases in which she is a lover she also tends to be beautiful.

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