

Looks, Liveliness, and Laughter: Visual Representations in Commercial Sports for Children

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In contemporary society, visual information is influential, not least when businesses are communicating with potential customers. It represents and influences how people understand phenomena. In sports, much attention is directed toward how media represent elite sports and sport stars. Less attention is directed toward children's sports. The aim of this article is to explore and analyze visual representations of children on sport businesses' websites. The sample contained 697 images of sporting children, on which an interpretative content and discourse analysis was conducted. The study shows that the ideal customer emerging on these sites is a White, physically active, able, and slim boy or girl. Consumer culture seems to reproduce and preserve existing normative frameworks rather than producing alternative norms and ideas in children's sport. Moreover, dilemmatic images of children both as competent and as innocent develop, displaying a childhood that should be both joyful and active but also safeguarded.

Keywords: symbolic persons, gender, Whiteness, values, norms

Visual representations in sport are important. Such representations, or images, tell stories of who belongs in sport and what sport is supposed to be about, and therefore it matters which images are printed, published, and spread. Visual representations may, in other words, influence politics and policy, as well as how people think, feel, and act (Brookes, 2002; Hall, 1997; Jackson, 2012; Rowe, 2004; Wenner, 2008). Sport images are, in that sense, narratives with political and social implications as they produce and reproduce norms, values, and ideas (Rowe, 2004). Gender norms, for example, have an impact on how women's sport is valued in relation to men's sport. These values, in turn, influence how much media interest, for example, in the form of sport images, women's and men's sport receives. A vicious circle is created as representations in media impact on the reproduction of gender norms in sport and society (Braumüller et al., 2020; Cooky et al., 2013; Fraidenburg & Backstrom, 2021; Godoy-Pressland, 2014; Scott & Li, 2022).

How sport is visually represented in the media changes over time. Already two decades ago, Brookes (2002) argued that both globalization and commodification had transformed the way sport was represented in the media and that the media itself also played an important role in these processes. In addition, his work also pointed at the interrelated nature of sport, gender, race, and commodification, which could be seen in marketing strategies, for example, by Nike (see also McKay, 1995). This interrelation has been expanded on more recently by others who have shown a blend of representational characteristics (Gee, 2015; Ho & Tanaka, 2021; Home, 2006; Jackson & Andrews, 2005; MocarSKI & Billings, 2014; Toffoletti, 2017). For example, to reach a new female audience for the 2015 Cricket World Cup, advertisements were to promote an idea of cricket as inclusive and transnational, but instead, a particular idea of Australianness as White and male was conveyed. Toffoletti (2017) argued that representations of skin color, hair, facial features, and gender contributed to this idea,

together with old colonial logics of masculinity and White supremacy.

Although it is quite well known how visual representation in sport works in the globalized and commodified world of today, little attention has been given to visual representations of children or the form of commodification in different geographical locations. In this article, the focus is directed toward representations of children on websites of commercial sport companies in Sweden. Commercially organized sports for children and youth are a rather new, and until recently, not much explored, phenomenon (Carlsson & Hedenborg, 2013; Karlsson et al., 2021, 2022; Norberg & Redelius, 2012; Wagnsson & Augustsson, 2015). Child and youth sports are, as in other Scandinavian countries, such as Denmark and Norway, traditionally run by a nongovernmental organization that functions as an umbrella institution for all sport federations and local sport clubs (Bergsgard & Norberg, 2010). The Swedish sport organization is independent, but it receives state funding every year. The reason for this, according to the policy of the Swedish government, is that sport participation has much to offer in terms of factors such as a healthy lifestyle, the fostering of democratic values, and integration. The overall aim is to provide "sports for all" (Socialdepartementet, 2008). This model has been immensely successful as almost all children belong to a sport club at one time or another during their upbringing (Thedin Jakobsson, 2015).

Today, commercially organized sports activities for children and young people are offered on a large scale, and they are marketed on websites. These websites are full of images of children and sport. Schroeder (2002) argues that consumption is inherently visual, and this is clearly the case in this study, where businesses mainly communicate visually with potential customers to affect their notions of the service or product that is for sale. In that sense, they make an interesting case to study, not least because advertisements directed at children are not allowed.

The aim of this study is to explore and analyze the visual representations of children on sport businesses' websites. The question guiding the article is, "What norms, ideas and values about sport and sporting children do the businesses (re)produce

through their visual representations?" The study adds to the discussion about the commodification of childhood and the dialog on discourses of children in the field of childhood sociology. This discussion has implications for how we frame both children and sport. Locally, the study contributes with novel empirical findings about commercialization of children's sport in Sweden.

We begin this article by presenting how discursive representations of children saturate everyday life and inform commercial activities. Next, we describe the cultural context of the study to facilitate the understanding of the data. Then follows a methodology in which we describe the study design in more depth. In the "Results" section, the findings are presented along three analytical trajectories where the representations of children are played out: one where certain looks become important, another where interdependency and physical activity are indicative, and a third where happiness and innocence come to the fore. Finally, we discuss the findings and what they may imply.

Discursive Representations of Children

Previous research shows that there are two dominant discourses on how children are represented: the innocent child and the knowing or competent child (Cook, 2004, 2005, 2008; Gennaro, 2010; Higonet, 1998). Cook (2004, 2005, 2008) argued that these discourses are found in promotional material featuring children. The discourse of innocence relates to a perception of children's inherited guiltlessness, an idea that stems from the 18th century romantic ideal of children and childhood. Children were often depicted as innocent, cute, and sacred as this pleased an adult audience—an ideal that still prevails (Cook, 2004; Gennaro, 2010; Higonet, 1998). Today, this romantic discourse is noticeable in business advertisements that try to connect adult consumers with the nostalgic happiness associated with an imagined universal and carefree childhood experience (Gennaro, 2010). As argued by MacDougall (2006), innocence is, in fact, an amalgam of adults' perceived losses of sensitivity, beauty, and prospects presented as sentimentality and nostalgia.

Since the 1990s, the discourse on how children are represented has become more complex. Alongside the discourse of the innocent child, children are represented as competent and knowing. The competent and knowing child is endowed with psychological and physiological individuality, albeit a distinctively child-like individuality in relation to adults (Cook, 2004; Higonet, 1998; Mayall, 2015). The competent and knowing child is, for instance, present in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child from 1989. The convention underlines children's rights to be "participatory," "competent," and "independent" actors (Korsvold, 2012, p. 14). In other words, children's agency is stressed.

Accordingly, Cook (2005) demonstrated how the two discourses appear in the public debate about the commercialization of childhood. For instance, the innocent child relates to ideas about an exploitable child or exploitable childhood. These notions also appear when businesses promote their products as "healthy," "developmental," "educational," and so forth. The innocent child is represented as being in need of protection. The knowing child, on the other hand, is represented as an empowered child who, as an active human being, creates meaning out of every fragment of culture. The empowered child rises above all else. In what is referred to as "the new childhood sociology," the discourse of the knowing child often folds back into itself and reappears as the solution to the problem it poses (Spyrou et al., 2018). Undeniably, as Cook (2005) noted, the depiction of the knowing child saturates

many commercial idioms about children and childhood (see also Gram, 2011; Korsvold, 2012; Sjöberg, 2013). The explanation behind this is that it is an extremely beneficial construct that provides moral cover and justification for appealing directly to children (Cook, 2005).

Children have traditionally been understood, looked at, and treated as dependent, submissive, and incompetent, as "adults-in-the-making," as "becomings" rather than "beings" (Mayall, 2015; Spyrou et al., 2018). In contrast, Cook (2004) highlighted that markets and marketers have treated children as "beings" with their own desires for a long time. However, markets oriented toward children cannot ignore the parents as they are the ones who, in the end, allow their purchases or not. Therefore, children's markets produce specific (adult) gazes on children that encompass norms and preferred actions within this normative framework. Cook (2004, 2008) argued that children as social and cultural beings are intimately connected to the world of adults, particularly in relation to commercial activities. Products or services for children need to be appealing to both the child's parents and the child, which is why he labels this as "relational shopping." Moreover, he uses the concept *symbolic persons* to describe how marketers construct or forge their ideal customers through representations. In this study, we adopt Cook's idea of symbolic persons constructed to sell products or services both as a reflection of the existing culture and as something that *constructs cultures* and *produces meaning* (Brookes, 2002; Hall, 1997; Jackson, 2012). This conceptualization is highlighted by our use of the concept "(re)produce," which entails both the reproduction and the production of norms and values (cf. Wojahn, 2015). The two overarching discourses presented earlier have, to some extent, guided the way in which we have analyzed our data. We also use the concept symbolic person to analyze how the ideal customers of the business are visually (re) produced.

Contemporary and Contextually Constructed Representations

Sweden, as well as the rest of Scandinavia, is recognized for its equality and scores high in the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2022). Sweden prides itself as being a modern and progressive country (Habel 2012; Lundström & Hübinette, 2020). Since World War II, Sweden has been a country of immigration. Today, one third of Sweden's 10 million inhabitants have a foreign background, many from non-European countries (Statistics Sweden, 2022). These numbers indicate that the demography of the Swedish population is similar to other western countries, such as Great Britain, the Netherlands, France, Canada, and Australia.

Nevertheless, postcolonial researchers show that the public and political imagination is that the inhabitants of Sweden are White, and consequently, non-White people are often considered non-Swedish (Habel, 2012; Lundström & Hübinette, 2020). Sjöberg (2006, 2013) has also shown how notions of race, as well as notions of gender, are reproduced in commercial settings in Sweden. Her studies display how notions of race in various advertisements are manifested by the depiction of White children and families and that traditional gender and family norms are pervasive. In critical market research, it is argued that race plays an ideological role in markets worldwide, and racial dynamics are a central part of contemporary postcolonial marketplace practices, such as target marketing, advertising, marketing communications,

service delivery, and consumer profiling (Grier et al., 2019; Ho & Tanaka, 2021; MocarSKI & Billings, 2014; Poole, et al., 2021; Toffoletti, 2017). Using the notion of epidermal racial schema, Fanon described how human skin color communicates differently depending on which skin color a person has (Borgerson & Schroder, 2018; Fanon, 1967/2008). As claimed by postcolonial and critical race studies, exploring the visualization of human skin can illuminate how power relations are manifested through race relations (Borgerson & Schroder, 2018; Coleman, 2014; Fanon, 1967/2008; Lundström & Hübinette, 2020). Accordingly, when studying the visual representations of children on sport businesses' websites, both gender and skin color are important features to analyze.

Methodology

A discursive semiotics approach was used to explore and analyze the visual representations of children in the images displayed on sport businesses' websites in Sweden (Hall, 1997). This approach captures how meaning is constructed, produced, and reproduced in different forms of communicative situations. Such an approach has the potential to provide rich material regarding how images produce cultural meaning (e.g., Eriksson & Göthlund, 2012; Hall, 1997; Pollock 1992; Rose, 2016). Hall (1997) argued that the concept of discourse is not about whether things exist, are true, or are immoral but is about how meaning is produced. Consequently, the analytical focus is not to uncover the original meaning, decode what a representation intends to do, or determine whether a pictorial image is true to reality. Rather, the intention is to empirically show recurring representations, how children are (re)presented in the images, and which societal norms, ideals, and values become visible. Representations also involve a notion of shared culture for a sign or symbol to be meaningfully interpreted by others. Signs and symbols work dialogically between a speaker and a listener who is perceived to share the same culture (Hall, 1997; Holquist, 1990; Lazzarato, 2014). In contemporary consumer culture, images are key characteristics of the economy.

Data and Sampling

This study was part of a larger study about the commercialization of Swedish child and youth sport that drew on various empirical materials. For the substudy presented in this article, a selection of 33 different business websites selling sport services for children were chosen. Our theoretical purposive sampling procedure followed two main steps: first a strategic sampling and then a stratified sampling.

The first step was guided by Karlsson et al. (2021), who identified four different strands in the landscape of commercial children's sport. These four strands were all represented in this study, but businesses only oriented toward one gender were excluded. The reason for this exclusion was that the representations of children in such businesses would obviously either represent boys or girls as their ideal customers. The sample consisted of the following businesses:

- a. Nine businesses were selected from the first strand (businesses offering different forms of physical activities, e.g., gymnastics, football, and dance, on a weekly basis to children aged 2–8 years).
- b. Four businesses were selected from the second strand (businesses organizing sport camps for children aged 9–15 years in different sports, mainly during the school holidays).

- c. Seventeen businesses were selected from the third strand (businesses specializing in one sport and offering services mainly to children aged 9–18. The sports selected from this strand were seven tennis businesses, six football businesses, three ice hockey businesses, and one floorball business).
- d. Two businesses were selected from the fourth strand (businesses specializing in one sport, but instead of being open for all, as in the third strand, they also offered services to selected children. One tennis business and one floorball business were chosen).

Websites are normally updated on a regular basis, and our data exhibited images displayed between June 2018 and January 2020. As we were not interested in making statistical generalizations based on the sample but wanted to provide qualitative insights, images from all the different strands guided our first sampling strategy. In this sense, the sample was representative in that it included all the different strands and sport services highlighted by Karlsson et al. (2021). Together, these businesses were oriented toward children aged 2–17. For this manuscript, we employed a wide age span for what defines a child according to the UN Convention of the Right of the Child. In the text, we occasionally use the term child and youth sport to mark this wide age range and implicitly hint that those activities may vary according to age.

Our second sampling procedure, which Rose (2016) referred to as a stratified sample, meant that we sampled from the subgroups that already existed in the data set, that is, images representing children. Based on this stratified sample, we included all the unique images in which children were represented. A total of 697 unique images were included in the study. We did not consider where the images were published on the websites or the size of the images, although these aspects may have said something about the importance of the representations (cf. Waller, 2012). Instead, we were interested in acquiring a comprehensive sample from all 33 of the included businesses.

Analytical Procedures

As highlighted by Rose (2016), the sign is the most fundamental unit for semiotics. Signs stand for or represent concepts, ideas, and feelings that enable others to read their meaning (Hall, 1997). The sign consists of two parts: the *signified* and the *signifier*. The signified is a concept or an object, in our case, "a child." The signifier is the interpretation of the signified, in our case, the "symbolic person." The first step of a discursive semiotics analysis is to identify the basic building blocks of an image, its signs (Rose, 2016). When exploring and analyzing these basic building blocks of how children were represented in the images on the websites, we started to examine them for recurrent interpretative patterns (Edley, 2001).

Our analysis was guided, first and foremost, by our aim and analytical question and was, furthermore, informed by previous research. Because visual representations in sport images and in consumer culture narrate stories about who belongs, we initially focused on discerning which children, in terms of gender, age, and skin color, were represented on the businesses' websites. All social categories are interpreted in a relational way, that is, in relation to one another, and the procedure of analyzing gender and skin color followed a binary procedure informed by everyday ideas and previous research (see Eriksson & Göthlund, 2012; Fanon, 1967/2008; Garnier, 2014; Lundström & Hübinette, 2020; Pollock, 1992; Sjöberg, 2013). During the analytical procedure, we realized that it was not always easy to analyze gender in a binary

way, and the same was true for color. Therefore, we included a gender uncertain category, whereas the slightest non-White color was coded as non-White in relation to the White bodies. Age was analyzed by interpreting bodily maturation and signs of “childishness” (Garnier, 2014; Sjöberg, 2013). We acknowledge that the coding is simplified and risks obscuring the complexity of social background, yet the simplicity allows for an analysis where potential patterns become visible.

Inspired by earlier research on the notions of children (Cook 2004, 2005, 2008; Higonnet, 1998; Spyrou et al., 2018), we also looked at whether children were active or passive in the images. Physical movement was what guided this distinction. In the first part of the “Results” section, we present our findings in quantitative terms. By doing this, we follow the insights of Hardy et al. (2004) on how a discourse analysis can be complemented by an interpretative quantitative content analysis. These interpretations of the representations of the children in the images constitute what we refer to as the *looks* of the businesses’ symbolic persons.

In the next part of the analytical procedure, we used the insights from the quantitative part and focused on how meaning was produced based on how the children were represented beyond looks in the images. This analysis was guided by the analytical question about norms, ideas, values about sport, and sporting children. In the second part of the analysis, we paid particular attention to angle, proximity/distance, and gaze. Here, the angle of elevation is important because it produces different effects and is intimately interwoven with issues of power (Hall, 1997; Rose, 2016; Van Leeuwen, 2005). For instance, if the observer is at the same height as that which is being represented, it suggests that there is an equal relationship between the observer and the observed. Similarly, proximity and distance between the observer and the object are related to intimacy (Van Leeuwen, 2005). According to Rose (2016), the (male) gaze, as first developed by Mulvey (1975), has become a staple in certain feminist critique of the patriarchy. In this study, we employed gaze as an analytical tool to harness both the gendered relation between observer and object and the parent–child relation. Higonnet (1998) proposed the adult gaze as a way of describing the parent–child relation with expectations from the adults, for instance, on children’s inherited innocence and/or competence.

Ethics

Ethical considerations are important when working with images found on websites. According to the British Psychological Society’s *Ethics guidelines for internet-mediated research* (2021), “Where it is reasonable to argue that there is likely no perception and/or expectation of privacy (or where scientific/social value and/or research validity considerations are deemed to justify undisclosed observation nevertheless), use of research data without gaining valid consent may be justifiable” (p. 9). As these images are uploaded on commercial websites, we argue that there is little expectation of privacy. The Swedish Research Council (2017) has also highlighted that no consent is required if it is deemed impossible to gain or if it would require a disproportionate workload and if the research does not imply any risks. The association of researchers also emphasizes that there needs to be a context-based approach to ethics when researching information on the internet (Franzke et al., 2020). As we are interested in how the businesses represent children on their websites as part of the (re)production of their symbolic persons, rather than how individual children are represented on the website, the specific websites on which the

images appear are not revealed. We have also chosen to protect individual children’s confidentiality by blurring faces and other traceable signs. In this way, we have sought to protect the individual children that we use as examples of how they appear on the businesses’ websites.

Results

The results section is divided into three parts, each with analytical subheadings. The three parts differ in terms of analytical approach, depth, and breadth, but they all show how the symbolic persons on commercial sport businesses’ websites are discursively (re)produced through visual representations. The first section outlines how looks come to the fore. Here, we highlight three aspects of physical appearance: physical activity, gender, and skin color. This section depicts how the discourse is constructed in numbers inspired by insights of how interpretative quantitative content analysis can inform discourse analysis (Hardy et al., 2004). This section is informed by previous research and is predominately descriptive. The second and third sections consist of a more in-depth visual analysis of the discourse where we are particularly focusing on the compositionality and social modality of the images (Rose, 2016). We analyze the meanings of angle, proximity/distance, and gaze between the observer and the object and, in doing so, present two main themes, which also, in part, resemble the discourses presented earlier: the innocent child and the competent child (e.g., Cook, 2004; Higonnet, 1998; Korsvold, 2012). As our presentation shows, our themes overlap and intertwine, thus suggesting that the discourses are not as straightforward as they might first appear.

Looks in Numbers—Physically Active, Gender Neutral, but White

Bodies always carry information, particularly in a consumer culture in which bodies function as potent signs (cf. Borgerson & Schroder, 2018; Ho & Tanaka, 2021; Home, 2006; Mocarski & Billings, 2014; Toffoletti, 2017). In other words, the appearance of children in the analyzed images showed how gender, skin color, and physical activity came across to construct the businesses’ symbolic person. When focusing on sport, it did not come as a surprise that physical activity was crucial. In numbers, more than two thirds (70%) of the images showed children during an activity, whereas less than one third (30%) portrayed passive children. This dichotomy is further elaborated in Sections 2 and 3.

Gender was evenly distributed in the images. The images portrayed children either in homogenous gender clusters or as individuals. Just over one third (35%) of the images, thus, consisted of images of girls, with another one third (33%) consisting of images of boys. In one fifth of the images (20%), boys and girls were portrayed together. It is worth noting that in just over one tenth of the images (12%), it was impossible to discern the gender of the children. In the images, gender was mainly represented by different hairstyles and clothing and, among older children, by different body constitutions. However, as hairstyle and clothes do not always represent a certain gender, it may, therefore, be difficult to categorize the bodies into a binary gender system. This was especially the case with younger children, if wearing similar clothes, for example, a *t* shirt with the business logo on, or when appearing in heterogeneous photos. However, some sports, such as tennis, already have binary gender-marked clothes: shorts for boys and skirts for girls. The same goes for unitards in which

female gymnasts compete. In a similar vein, pink is gender marked in the Western consumer culture (Ambjörnsson, 2011; Sjöberg, 2006, 2013), and, in our data, pink was only worn by children with long hair. However, even if there is space for interpretations of the symbolic person outside the binary gender system, there are still more representations that follow the binary gender representational system. Sjöberg (2006, 2013) argued that businesses often (re)produce children as well as whole families within a traditional gender system, enabling parents to identify with traditional gender norms. This was mostly the case in this study as well, but some of the images opened up for other ways of interpreting the businesses' symbolic persons wherein the sport logic was more pervasive than gender norms, for instance, when sport gear was very prominent.

In contrast to gender, skin color was not evenly distributed. The vast majority of the images portrayed White children. Most (85%) of the images showed exclusively White children, whereas a few (11%) showed at least one non-White child together with White children. An even smaller number (4%) consisted of images in which non-White children were portrayed on their own. This meant that most of the images on the websites (re)produced the symbolic child as White through the exclusion of non-White skin colors. This distribution is noteworthy, not least because of our blunt way of counting. The findings are in line with previous research showing that advertisements containing children often represent the child as White in Sweden (Sjöberg, 2006, 2013), even though this does not concur with current demography (Statistics Sweden, 2022). Thus far, our analysis has shown that most of the symbolic persons on the websites were predominately (re)produced as White and active children who mostly followed a binary gender system.

Liveliness—Physically Active, Able, and Independent

Moving closer to the construction of symbolic persons, that is, the construction of the visual representations of children on Swedish commercial sports websites for children and youths, we will now illustrate the ways in which angle, proximity/distance, and gaze work in the data to (re)produce the symbolic person. We start by addressing the category that represents an independent, physically able, and active child. We argue that this category resembles what previous research has termed a competent and knowing child (Cook, 2004, 2005; Gram, 2011; Higonnet, 1998; Korsvold, 2012). Independence and ability were manifested in the images through several technical features described in more detail later. In the 697 analyzed images of children, 70% were represented in this way. In other words, a substantial proportion of the images told this tale.

The representation of a physically able child was (re)produced by portraying children in the middle of an activity. Indeed, many images literally placed the children center stage and framed in a sporting context. Notably, they were situated in a sporting milieu with the correct sporting equipment, such as tennis rackets, footballs, or hockey sticks. As such, they were contextualized as sport savvy, able, and active. Various sideways angles were also used but rarely an angle in which the child was facing the camera, that is, immediately in front of the photographer. Rather, the child was depicted in the middle of an ongoing sporting practice with the photographer/observer to the side of this activity. This made the child appear to be “in action” and “busy” while the photographer/observer supported the activity from the side. That way, the photographer/observer engaged in what happened but with a certain remoteness. Thus, the images were also examples of the

relative distance from the activity and the child or children. Two images are presented to illustrate this category. These images were chosen because they showed the physically able child as they were commonly (re)presented in the data, either on their own or together with others, that is, fully focused on the physical activity with seemingly little concern about the photographer/observer. Another sign of ableness was the absence of disabled children. Only one image out of all 697 could be said to represent “disability.” It showed a boy in a wheelchair on his way to a parasport camp.

When engaging in the sporting activities, the children's gazes were directed toward the prompts, such as the ball or other players. The children appeared to be focused on the activities and on their own physical performance. In the football image (Figure 1), the gaze was on the football behind the girl's legs, and her balanced body seemed ready to finish the dribble movement in which she was captured. In the floorball picture (Figure 2), a group of boys was involved in either moving toward the goalpost at the far end of the picture or defending it. In this image, the lack of sharpness on the foot, stick, and ball indicated speed. Both images were examples of documentary images (Rose, 2016; Van Leeuwen, 2005). In fact, most of the images on the websites followed this style, with only a few exceptions. According to Van Leeuwen (2005), documentary images are often regarded as depicting what is “real” and what is “actually going on.” As such, they communicate a trait of authenticity to the businesses by which they may gain acceptance as honest.

In this category of images, the presence of an adult was also either assumed by the observer/photographer or represented by a teaching, supporting, or cheering coach. The presumed adult presence was envisaged as an equal relation to the children, which



Figure 1 — Girl dribbling.



Figure 2 — Boys playing floorball.

was interpreted by the elevation of the look. The images portrayed the children and their activities from the same level, neither from above nor below, which indicated an equal power relation between the child and the assumed observer.

The angles, relative distance, elevation, and gazes in the pictures in relation to the observer/photographer supported the representation of a physically able and active child. Moreover, the players were deeply engaged in the activities to the extent that no confirmation was needed from the observer, who then became more of a voyeur from the side, someone the children did not seem to be aware of. In this way, the presence of an independent child was established. The construction of the symbolic person as physically able, active, and independent could be seen as part of what Cook (2004) described as a way of privileging children's view. He referred to this as *pediocularity*, which is an analogism to decenter the adult perspective on children. Taking the view of the child is also a perspective that is regarded as positive and a moral imperative among adults, at least by the Western, White, urban, and middle class. According to Cook (2004), these notions have to do with a belief that if it stems from "the child," it is assumed to be right and correct, and such a strategy is commonly adopted by marketers to children.

Another way of (re)producing the active child was through body composition. All the children represented in the images were slim (or lean and fit), and there were no images representing an overweight child. In the Western cultural industry, slenderness is the dominant cultural ideal (Bordo, 1993; Lupton, 2005, 2012) and the reference that men and women usually use when caring for their bodies (Hesse-Biber, 2007). In other words, the images on the businesses' websites represented a symbolic person that was White, physically active, able, and slim.

Laughter—Posing and Passive

In this section, we address the category that captures a cute, posing, and passive child. In our 697 analyzed images, around 30% of the children were portrayed in this way, and this category resembled what previous research has regarded as an innocent child (Cook, 2004; Higonet, 1998; Gram, 2011; Korsvold, 2012). Similar to the previous category, technical features in the images constructed these representations, as we show later. This category was more common among younger children than older ones. Besides age, gender differed in this category. Girls were more often than boys portrayed as posing and passive, that is, not physically active.

Angle, proximity/distance, and gaze also worked in these data, albeit in different ways. In stark contrast to the images in the previous category, most of the children depicted here were lined up and passively posing in front of a photographer/observer. They may have been situated in front of a tennis net on a tennis court (Figure 3) or in a specific sports milieu (Figure 4) but were not carrying out a sporting activity. Rather, they passively displayed a successful and completed performance, with diplomas in hand (Figure 3). With the right equipment and the right kind of shoes and clothes, the children were contextualized as "sporty." A noteworthy difference between the child in Figure 4, lying on the sporting mat, and the previous image of the girl with the football (Figure 1) was that the cute, posing, and passive girl had no need for a practical hairband but let her hair hang loose.

This category of images tended to portray children standing, sitting, or lying down but always making eye contact with the photographer/observer. According to theories of gaze, being able to look back is a way of appearing as a subject. The face (especially



Figure 3 — Children in front of net.



Figure 4 — Girl lying on mat.

the eyes) is seen as something that mirrors a person's whole. Denying someone the ability to look back is seen as a way of dehumanizing them. However, one cannot only focus on the gaze to tell whether a person is portrayed as a subject or not (Eriksson & Göthlund, 2012). In comparison with the representations of the active and independent children described earlier, the posing and passive children were represented as objects for observers to gaze at and enjoy. Holland (2004) proclaimed that younger children are often represented as happy and cute to please an adult gaze.

Apart from a straightforward angle and eye contact, proximity to the children produces a more intimate relation between the photographer/observer and the child. Closeness is a way of making the observer know the people portrayed in the images instead of regarding them as complete strangers (Eriksson & Göthlund, 2012). This way of (re)producing the symbolic person was seen in most of the images; for example, Figures 3 and 4 signal closeness. Moreover, it was possible to acknowledge pride going both ways—from the children toward the observer as self-esteem and confidence and from the observer to the children as confirmation. The gazes of the posing children sought validation for their accomplishments and received this back from the observer/

photographer. Looking at others to seek their opinion, or guidance, made children in this category stand out as dependent, in contrast to the more independent children in the previous category.

Although most of the children in this category were not performing any kind of sport in the pictures, they could be interpreted as enjoying physical activity due to their clothing style, equipment, smiles, and laughter. In this way, the (re)production of the symbolic person also aligned with what Higonnet (1998) and Holland (2004) identified as the romantic angelic child. This way of representing children in consumer culture (re)produces the meaning of them as valuable miracles. The subliminal loveliness of the innocent, angelic child touches on both passivity and vulnerability and, in turn, also lends its meaning to the products it represents.

The girl lying on a gym mattress (Figure 4) may exemplify the angelic child. She is both posing and passive, but she is represented in a different way than the children in front of the tennis net (Figure 3). In Figure 4, the girl is holding her head in her hand, she is smiling and looking directly into the camera. In this position, she does not seem ready to do any sport. Her way of looking at the observer seems to be more dreamlike (Eriksson & Göthlund, 2012). According to Walkerdine (1997), little girls are often portrayed in an alluring and seductive way that contributes to their innocence and the notion of their need for protection. She argued that this positions young girls within contradictory gazes, that is, as seductive and objectifying while, at the same time, as needing protection. We interpret the vulnerable child, be it in need of confirmation or protection, as the innocent child (Cook, 2004; Higonnet, 1998).

Discussion

In this article, we have explored and analyzed current representations of children on Swedish sport businesses' websites. The study illustrates in what ways sport businesses for children and youth in Sweden construct symbolic persons, that is, ideal "sporting-child-customers" and how visual representations (re)produce specific normative ideals and aspirational norms. In the discourse analysis informed by the quantitative interpretative content analysis (Hardy et al., 2004), we have highlighted how the representations primarily include physically active, able, slim, and White boys and girls. We will now discuss these results, starting with gender.

The images in our analyses are represented equally in terms of gender. Previous research on visual representations in sport has pointed at a discrepancy between representations of men and women, drawing from, but also contributing to, gender norms in sport and society (Braumüller et al., 2020; Cooky et al., 2013; Fraidenburg & Backstrom, 2021; Godoy-Pressland, 2014; Scott & Li, 2022). In this sense, it may seem surprising that both girls and boys are visible to the same extent in the homogeneous images and are situated together in the heterogeneous images. However, as equality is a strong norm in Swedish society, representing boys and girls equally in numbers could be seen as standard procedure and a way to promote the services as inclusive for both girls and boys.

Moreover, our analysis shows that children's bodies are represented predominately as White. The (re)production of the children as White follows the public and political image of Sweden as a nation of White people (Lundström & Hübinette, 2020), despite the population of Sweden being more diverse in terms of social background (Habel, 2012; Lundström & Hübinette, 2020; Statistics Sweden, 2022). However, this result is in line with what previous research has shown about advertisements in Sweden in which children are represented (Sjöberg, 2006, 2013). This (re)production of the symbolic person as White can also be understood

as a specific normative way of (re)producing notions of "Swedishness" and White nationalism in comparison with what Toffoletti (2017) showed in advertisement of sport in Australia. In Sweden, Whiteness is also often interlinked with notions of social class and economic resources wherein non-White people are considered poor and, consequently, White people the opposite (Lundström & Hübinette, 2020). Wagnsson and Augustsson (2015) also showed that it is mainly middle-class parents who consume these services. In this sense, the (re)production of the symbolic person as White seems to play an important ideological role in a marketplace, as critical marketplace scholars have already highlighted (Grier et al., 2019; Poole et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the analysis informed by the interpretative content analysis illustrates two main trajectories in these visualizations of the child: (a) not only as prominently a competent and independent person but also (b) as an innocent person in need of special care and support. The forging of the symbolic child as a competent and independent person resembles what previous research calls the competent and knowing child (Cook, 2004, 2008; Gram, 2011; Higonnet, 1998; Korsvold, 2012; Sjöberg, 2013). Cook (2004, 2008) illustrated that this is a common construction among businesses oriented toward children and that it has been a market strategy among child marketers since the last century. Treating children as individuals, with their own identifiable desires and concerns, is a way for businesses to gain moral cover for appealing directly toward children. In this way, the (re)production of symbolic persons as active and independent works dialogically to appeal to children (and their parents) who enjoy sport and are already physically active. This entails discursive expectations about sports development, as well as parental norms about children as developable subjects, and aspirations of maximizing the child's potential. Accordingly, we have shown that the symbolic persons are intimately intertwined with wider discourses about children and childhood and the social and cultural expectations that they encompass.

As previously emphasized by Jackson (2012) and Hall (1997), how people are represented will influence and affect not only the ways in which people think and feel but also how they act. Visual representations will, thus, appeal to the people they represent, but they will also represent aspirational ideals, such as joy of activity, physical ability, and skin color. Thus, these visual representations may influence how children feel about themselves in their everyday lives as well as in relation to sport. In relation to the overarching aim of traditional nonprofit Swedish sport organization to be open for all, the narrative that the businesses tell through their symbolic persons is different. Their symbolic persons are not, at least based on our analysis and interpretations, conveying a message that sport is for all children. These implications connect to the wider issue of commercialization of child and youth sport.

Conclusion

When child and youth sport is transformed into a profit-seeking business, the ideal customer emerges as a White, physically active, able, and slim boy or girl. One conclusion, then, is that when children's sport becomes commercialized, it also becomes normative. Consumer culture seems to reproduce and preserve existing normative frameworks rather than producing alternative norms and ideas in children's sport. The analysis also shows how the images reproduce dilemmatic images of children both as competent and as innocent (and, thus, worthy of protection).

Accordingly, childhood should not only be both joyful and active but also safeguarded. The discourses may, in other words, be described as intertwined and overlapping. In conclusion, we elucidate how this way of organizing sport commercially, which is new in Sweden, produces both specific eligible norms about children and desirable norms about childhood. It is important to understand the forces that form and transform notions of who belongs in sport and what sport is about.

The findings in this study allow for future research in several directions, both theoretical and empirical. Representations show norms and values on a discursive level, and therefore practice-based research in this context could contribute to further understanding of how norms and values are (re)produced.

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