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**Introduction**Basketball has grown from a regional pastime into a global cultural force, deeply embedded in the spheres of media, fashion, politics, and identity. The National Basketball Association (NBA), once regarded primarily as an American sports league, now commands global attention, with games broadcast in over 200 countries and a social media following in the hundreds of millions. Its players are no longer just athletes; they are global celebrities, activists, fashion icons, and commercial powerhouses. As the league has expanded, so too has its cultural impact, particularly through visual media that reinforces its narratives, ideals, and symbols. One of the most influential visual platforms chronicling this evolution is *SLAM* magazine. Established in 1994, *SLAM* emerged as a publication that merged street culture, music, and basketball into a unified visual and editorial language. It positioned itself not only as a sports magazine but as a cultural artefact that represented the voice of basketball youth culture. The covers of *SLAM* function as visual texts—crafted with deliberate aesthetic, symbolic, and cultural choices—that document the shifting landscape of the NBA and its players' public personas. This thesis explores the visual representation of NBA players on 50 *SLAM* magazine covers published between June 2016 and March 2023. This time frame is significant, not only because it reflects a period of stylistic and strategic innovation in sports media, but also because it coincides with major cultural and historical events that have shaped the NBA’s identity and influence. The dataset encompasses pivotal moments, such as: The tragic death of Kobe Bryant in January 2020, which triggered a global mourning and reflection on his legacy as both an athlete and a cultural icon.The rise of player activism, especially during the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement, with stars like LeBron James, Chris Paul, and others taking leading roles in addressing social justice, police violence, and systemic racism. The COVID-19 pandemic’s disruption of professional sports, including the unprecedented "NBA Bubble" tournament in 2020, which redefined player-fan engagement and media representation under isolation. The emergence of a new generation of stars—Luka Dončić, Ja Morant, Zion Williamson, and Jayson Tatum—who not only perform at elite levels but also shape contemporary youth culture through fashion, social media presence, and endorsements.LeBron James surpassing Kareem Abdul-Jabbar as the NBA’s all-time leading scorer in 2023, cementing his legacy while representing longevity, excellence, and media mastery in the digital era. Increasing collaborations between NBA athletes and figures from music, fashion, and entertainment—such as Travis Scott, Drake, and Virgil Abloh—highlighting the league’s deep integration with lifestyle and global consumer trends. These events reflect how the NBA is more than a sports organization; it functions as a cultural brand and a symbolic arena in which identities are performed, contested, and celebrated. In this context, *SLAM* magazine covers are rich sites for visual analysis, offering insight into how players are depicted, positioned, and framed in relation to the viewer. The analytical foundation of this study is grounded in the theory of visual social semiotics, drawing extensively on the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), who adapted Michael Halliday’s (1985) systemic functional linguistics to the analysis of visual images. Three core frameworks are employed: compositional meaning (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001), the Representation and Viewer Network (van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 141), and the Visual Social Actor Network (van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 147). These tools make it possible to systematically evaluate how images convey representational choices, relational dynamics, and ideological positions. By applying multimodal discourse analysis to these visual texts, the study aims to uncover how *SLAM* magazine constructs the NBA player as both an aspirational icon and a relatable figure. Particular attention is paid to gaze direction, shot distance, angle, salience, and framing—each of which shapes the viewer’s interpretation of the subject. The goal is to determine whether these visual representations reinforce the idea of the athlete as a heroic, untouchable celebrity, or whether they suggest proximity, accessibility, and shared cultural identity. This research fills a critical gap in academic literature on sports media, where visual social semiotic analysis has been widely applied to fashion and health publications but less frequently to sports magazines. By focusing on SLAM—a publication that uniquely bridges sport, culture, and urban identity—this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of how visual media participates in shaping the narratives surrounding athletic fame, identity politics, and the broader mythology of the NBA.

**Chapter 1: Context**

## **History of *SLAM* magazine**

SLAM magazine, established in 1994 by Dennis Page, emerged as a pioneering publication that seamlessly integrated basketball with the burgeoning hip-hop culture of the time. This fusion resonated with a diverse audience, particularly urban youth, offering a fresh perspective on sports journalism (SLAM, 2023). From its inception, SLAM distinguished itself by featuring prominent basketball figures on its covers, starting with Larry Johnson of the Charlotte Hornets in its debut issue. The magazine's content extended beyond traditional sports reporting, encompassing high school, college, and professional basketball, while also highlighting sneakers and athletic apparel. This comprehensive approach positioned SLAM as a personality-driven publication that celebrated the sport in its entirety (SLAM, 2023). Over the years, SLAM's ownership transitioned through various entities, including Petersen Publishing, EMAP, Primedia, and Source Interlink. In August 2017, an investment group led by founder Dennis Page and executive publisher David Schnur acquired the magazine, establishing SLAM Media Inc. in New York City (SLAM, 2023). The magazine's advertising strategy has consistently targeted basketball enthusiasts, featuring products related to the sport, streetwear clothing, and hip-hop music. This focus has contributed to the marketing and proliferation of hip-hop culture alongside basketball (SLAM, 2023). SLAM’s editorial style is characterized by recurring features such as "Trash Talk," where readers' letters are showcased; "SLAMADAMONTH," highlighting notable slam dunks; and "NOYZ," offering commentary on recent basketball events. These sections have fostered a community-oriented atmosphere, engaging readers and providing a platform for fan interaction (SLAM, 2023). SLAM magazine has played a pivotal role in chronicling basketball culture, blending sports journalism with elements of hip-hop and street culture. Its unique editorial approach and commitment to showcasing various facets of the basketball world have solidified its position as an influential publication within the sports media landscape.

## **Growth of popularity in basketball in the US**

The NBA has experienced significant growth in popularity, expanding its global reach through strategic broadcasting and digital innovations. The league has successfully increased its audience by distributing games both domestically and internationally, leveraging traditional cable networks and online streaming platforms such as NBA League Pass and YouTube. These advancements have allowed fans worldwide to access live games, reducing geographical barriers to viewership (Kawashiri, 2020). The availability of streaming services has been instrumental in attracting a broader audience, particularly among younger demographics who consume sports content through digital platforms. According to Singer (2017), NBA viewership increased by 32% across major networks such as ESPN, TNT, and NBA TV during the 2017–2018 season. This growth reflects the league’s ability to adapt to evolving media consumption trends, ensuring accessibility and engagement across diverse markets. By embracing digital transformation and global expansion, the NBA has solidified its status as one of the most influential sports leagues in the world. The NBA’s global popularity has expanded significantly due to its increasing international player representation and media outreach. As of 2012, 20% of NBA players originated from countries outside the United States, demonstrating the league’s ability to attract elite talent from diverse backgrounds (Jessop, 2012). This international presence has contributed to heightened global media coverage, particularly during major events such as the NBA Finals. In 2012, 90 international television, radio, and online outlets broadcasted the Finals, with 12.6% of all official media coverage attributed to international sources, involving 227 journalists from 34 different countries (Jessop, 2012). The league’s strategic expansion into international markets has facilitated greater fan engagement worldwide, strengthening its status as a premier global sports entity. Through media accessibility and player diversity, the NBA has successfully positioned itself as a dominant force in international sports culture. The NBA’s increasing global popularity can be largely attributed to its strategic use of social media, which has enabled the league to engage with international audiences more effectively. As of 2012, the NBA, its teams, and players amassed 226 million followers across platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, with approximately 50% of these followers being from outside the United States (Jessop, 2012). This international digital presence underscores the league’s ability to foster a broad and diverse fan base. Additionally, the NBA has emerged as the most followed sports league on social media in China, further solidifying its position as a dominant global sports entity (Jessop, 2012). By leveraging social media as a key communication tool, the NBA has expanded its reach beyond traditional markets, enhancing fan engagement and reinforcing its status as a globally recognized brand. The National Basketball Association (NBA) has witnessed significant global expansion over the past decades, evolving from a national sports organization into an influential cultural institution with deep-rooted presence across diverse communities. This chapter explores the increasing popularity of the NBA, focusing particularly on its cultural resonance at the grassroots level in the United States. By drawing on autobiographical insights from NBA legend Kevin Garnett (*KG: A to Z*, 2021), this chapter argues that the NBA’s rise in popularity is closely tied to its embeddedness in the lives of youth, its influence on local sports identities, and its reach through organized amateur basketball systems. Kevin Garnett’s personal narrative offers a compelling lens through which to examine the NBA’s cultural impact. In recounting his early years in Mauldin, South Carolina, Garnett emphasizes how basketball became an integral part of his identity from the moment he entered high school. He notes that upon arriving at Mauldin High School, his height and skill immediately secured him a place on the school basketball team, reinforcing the sport’s significance within educational and social settings (Garnett, 2021, p. 101). Garnett's aspiration to wear the jersey number of an NBA player he admired—Malik Sealy—demonstrates how young athletes model themselves after NBA figures, illustrating the league’s symbolic influence on individual and collective identity formation. The sport's presence within school culture is further illustrated through Garnett’s discussion of high school tournaments, such as the Beach Ball Classic held in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Garnett describes these tournaments as major social and sporting events that attracted large audiences and competitive teams from across the country. Participation in such tournaments was not only an athletic milestone but also a form of social recognition and local prestige (Garnett, 2021, p. 102). The narrative reveals how amateur basketball provided a platform for young players to showcase talent while simultaneously emulating the spectacle and professionalism of the NBA. This connection between local sports culture and the professional league serves as evidence of the NBA’s deep cultural penetration, especially in regions like the American South. Garnett’s reflections also highlight the ways in which the NBA indirectly shaped local basketball development. He references the influence of notable coaches, such as Mike D’Antoni—who would later become a respected NBA coach—indicating the strong links between high school basketball networks and the professional league (Garnett, 2021, p. 102). This intersection of talent development and mentorship at the grassroots level underlines how the NBA functions as both a destination and a cultural framework for aspiring athletes. It also emphasizes how professional basketball is not experienced solely through media consumption but is enacted daily in gyms, school courts, and community tournaments across the country. The emotional intensity and cultural importance of high school basketball—echoing the values of teamwork, excellence, and resilience promoted by the NBA—are evident in Garnett’s account of a memorable loss in the state finals, despite his team’s strong performance. The detail of scoring 101 points in a high-stakes match underscores the elevated level of competition and the personal investment that mirrors professional play (Garnett, 2021, p. 102). Such narratives suggest that the NBA's appeal extends beyond its entertainment value; it represents an aspirational structure that organizes the lives of young athletes and their communities. Additionally, Garnett’s autobiography reveals how the NBA serves as a point of connection between players and fans, past and present. The symbolic act of choosing jersey numbers to honour former players, and the awareness of team legacies such as those of the Hawks or St. John’s, show that the league’s historical continuity is an essential part of its popular appeal (Garnett, 2021, p. 101). In this way, the NBA acts not only as a sports league but as a cultural archive—a space where stories, achievements, and identities are preserved and re-enacted through youth participation. In his reflections, Garnett recounts his formative years playing in the Michigan League, a highly competitive and exclusive youth basketball program. He notes that entry into the league was restricted, accessible only to a select group of talented individuals, stating that “no one from outside could join” (Garnett, 2021, p. 142). This exclusivity underscored the cultural prestige of basketball, where participation in such leagues was seen not only as a sporting opportunity but also a form of social recognition. Garnett describes his own inclusion in a team called *Solid Gold*, reinforcing the sense of accomplishment, status, and belonging that accompanied competitive basketball. These experiences reflect how the values of the NBA—elite performance, access through merit, and identity-building—are replicated in the lived experiences of young athletes. Moreover, Garnett vividly portrays the atmosphere surrounding these games as energetic and socially immersive. He describes packed gymnasiums where people of all ages gathered to watch matches, transforming these events into major communal spectacles. The presence of loud music, chants, personal rivalries, and audience participation created a lively environment that paralleled the entertainment-focused model of professional basketball (Garnett, 2021, p. 143). This festive atmosphere contributed to the perception of basketball as more than just a sport—it became a lifestyle and a central cultural event for the surrounding community. The passion and ritual of these local games strongly echo the commercial and cultural presentation of NBA games, further indicating how grassroots basketball acts as a mirror to the professional league. Garnett’s recollection of the discipline and self-assurance instilled through basketball training also offers valuable insight into how the sport contributes to personal development. He emphasizes the role of routine, responsibility, and performance under pressure as key aspects of his athletic growth. The intense competition within the Michigan League required players to be mentally and physically prepared, much like professional athletes. Garnett’s early exposure to this environment fostered a mentality aligned with that of the NBA, reinforcing the notion that youth leagues are not only preparatory in function but also culturally aligned with the ethos of the professional game (Garnett, 2021, pp. 142–143). Perhaps most significantly, Garnett's narrative demonstrates that basketball served as a primary avenue for self-expression and aspiration among young people. The league's intensity, the stylization of play, and the visibility of standout performers suggest that basketball was a space where identity, recognition, and community were forged. This dynamic reflects broader societal patterns in which the NBA serves as a cultural ideal—representing success, visibility, and influence. The same principles of excellence and public engagement that define the NBA’s popularity at a global level are clearly present in Garnett’s recollections of his early sporting life. Garnett describes Chicago as a city where basketball was omnipresent—its culture interwoven with local identity, hierarchy, and opportunity. He recounts how neighbourhood courts were saturated with activity and how the quality of play in Chicago was determined not just by skill but by survival and social recognition. “Basketball in Chicago wasn’t just a game—it was a hierarchy,” he recalls, describing how courts were governed by a code of conduct enforced by both players and spectators (Garnett, 2021, p. 124). This insight highlights basketball's embeddedness in community life, where it functions not only as sport but as a regulated social practice that organizes time, space, and interaction. Garnett portrays basketball as one of the few viable pathways out of systemic inequality and violence. He recalls the difficulty of navigating neighbourhoods controlled by gang affiliations and how his identity as a basketball player often provided protection. In a city where one’s street address could define one’s safety and future, the act of playing basketball offered a way to cross boundaries and claim agency. Garnett notes, for instance, that wearing a basketball uniform could be enough to signal neutrality or gain respect from rival factions, reinforcing the idea that sport held cultural capital beyond its recreational function (Garnett, 2021, p. 125). The intense commitment required to succeed in this environment further demonstrates the seriousness with which urban youth approached the game. Garnett describes gruelling travel schedules, waking before dawn, and driving for hours to attend training or showcase games—sometimes crossing state lines to be seen by scouts. He recounts traveling at “300 kilometres per hour to reach an out-of-town tournament,” underlining the lengths to which players and families would go in pursuit of opportunity (Garnett, 2021, p. 124). This level of dedication reflects the aspirational pull of the NBA and underscores the infrastructure of amateur basketball as a feeder system into the professional league. The institutional support for youth basketball also mirrors the NBA's evolving visibility. Garnett’s mention of AAU circuits, summer leagues, and semi-professional tournaments illustrates how urban centres operate as incubators for future NBA talent. These systems are characterized by increasing formalization, visibility, and media exposure—elements traditionally associated with professional sports. As Garnett’s narrative suggests, the boundaries between grassroots and professional basketball are increasingly blurred, indicating that the NBA’s cultural influence begins long before a player ever reaches the league (Garnett, 2021, pp. 124–126). Garnett describes how basketball was closely tied to music, fashion, and local celebrity culture, reinforcing the NBA’s identity as part of a broader cultural movement. He recalls attending games where local rappers, DJs, and community leaders were regular spectators, blurring the line between sport and entertainment. This fusion is emblematic of the NBA’s brand, which increasingly integrates music, media, and lifestyle aesthetics into its promotional strategy. Garnett’s lived experience supports the claim that the NBA is not just consumed as a sport but experienced as a cultural phenomenon, particularly among young people in urban environments. Garnett's reflections provide a microcosmic view of the NBA’s cultural resonance. His early career was not only shaped by his talent but by the infrastructural ecosystem surrounding basketball: from Midnight League tournaments to dedicated coaches who recognized and nurtured his potential. The passage describes how Garnett’s mornings were dictated by the question, “Where will I play ball today?”—a rhetorical refrain that underscores basketball’s centrality in the routines and ambitions of many American youths (Garnett, 2021, p.148). This obsessive pursuit of the game, as Garnett narrates, functioned as both an anchor and a pathway—one that led him from local courts in Chicago to elite training environments, culminating in NBA stardom. The Midnight League itself, mentioned in Garnett’s recollection, is emblematic of the NBA's grassroots influence. These leagues, often organized to offer safe, structured environments for youth in urban areas, not only cultivate athletic talent but also embed basketball deeper into community life (Garnett, 2021, p.147). Garnett’s experiences within such frameworks reveal how basketball becomes more than a sport—it is a vehicle for socio-economic advancement, self-discipline, and personal development. The community-driven and highly competitive nature of these leagues foreshadows the intensity and public visibility of the NBA, drawing a line from local courts to global stages. Garnett also describes the overwhelming popularity and emotional energy surrounding these games. From the crowd’s engagement to the role of coaches, referees, and even DJs spinning music courtside, every detail reflects how basketball events resemble large-scale cultural gatherings (Garnett, 2021, p.147). These observations highlight the extent to which basketball is entrenched in daily life, not only as a form of entertainment but as a source of identity and community. This aligns with broader academic literature that positions sport as a platform for cultural expression and negotiation. Garnett's account illustrates that basketball was not merely an educational activity but a foundational structure around which his daily choices and long-term goals were organized (Garnett, 2021, p.147). The expectation of being seen, of being discovered by recruiters or coaches, and the drive to outperform peers, represents the kind of high-stakes social economy that the NBA cultivates beyond its televised games. Garnett’s life events serve as a powerful testament to how the NBA operates symbolically within the lives of young athletes, as a dream that informs behavior, motivates practice, and inspires life-altering decisions. Furthermore, Garnett’s transition from local fame to national recognition reflects the NBA’s broader cultural expansion, particularly its capacity to integrate local identities into a global sports economy. The structure of youth leagues, community support systems, and talent scouting in his narrative showcases the extensive network through which the NBA extends its influence (Garnett, 2021, p.147). The pathways described by Garnett are not isolated; they mirror those taken by countless athletes, particularly from underserved communities, who view the NBA as both aspiration and affirmation. Garnett describes a formative period in which his involvement with basketball gave him a sense of purpose and stability among uncertainty and pressure. Even during pivotal academic moments, such as preparing for college entry exams, Garnett admits being distracted-not by apathy, but by the mental pressure with the sport and its emotional pull. His persistent motivation to engage in the game, illustrated by spontaneous games with friends and the deep personal value he attributed to every opportunity to play, reflects how embedded basketball was in his daily reality (Garnett, 2021, p.166). Significantly, Garnett's recollections highlight how the NBA and its surrounding were not only aspirational but structurally integrated into the broader educational and social level. Mentors, coaches, and peers played crucial roles in order to make access to professional opportunities (Garnett, 2021, p.166). The excitement and anticipation connected with being scouted, invited to training camps, or included in amateur games with prominent players were not isolated events; rather, they constituted a cultural happening within the communities he navigated. The media and community engagement around basketball also amplified its cultural reach. Garnett details how players were watched closely, how news about high school games spread rapidly, and how being seen on the court was crucial to being seen in public life. His narrative positions basketball as a form of performative identity, where recognition, reputation, and respect are earned through visibility and talent (Garnett, 2021, p.166). These mechanisms, while local, were inherently linked to the globalized spectacle of the NBA, which served as the ultimate horizon of success. Moreover, Garnett's commentary shows how the NBA embodied more than fame and wealth; it represented a legitimate path to social mobility and personal empowerment. It was not merely about playing in the league, but about entering a network that promised security, belonging, and prestige. His reference to feeling "pulled through the basket" by older players and mentors speaks to a community-led pipeline into professional athletics, a phenomenon increasingly supported by high school and collegiate structures, and facilitated by NBA outreach programs, endorsements, and media presence (Garnett, 2021, p.167). Garnett recalls his emotional connection to the sport, identifying basketball as his first thought upon waking and his central motivation throughout the day. This emotional intensity reflects the depth of engagement that basketball fosters in youth culture, where it functions not merely as a pastime but as a foundational element of identity, purpose, and hope. The structured environments of teams like the Midnight League offered not only athletic opportunities but also stability, camaraderie, and a tangible dream of future success. Such leagues mirrored the professionalized structures of the NBA, offering young athletes a simulated environment of elite competition and further embedding the NBA’s cultural significance in everyday life (Garnett, 2021, p.257). Garnett's experiences gained in other teams and later his admiration for athletes like Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf reflect the broader hero-making role the NBA plays. The awe Garnett expresses when witnessing Abdul-Rauf’s scoring capabilities—30 points per game in college, illustrates how NBA figures function as both aspirational symbols and benchmarks of success (Garnett, 2021, p.258). This deep admiration is critical to understanding the NBA’s popular culture role, where athletes become symbols of achievement, perseverance, and resistance against adversity. Significantly, the narrative also describes a young man with Tourette’s syndrome who, despite societal prejudices and personal challenges, was drafted into the NBA (Garnett, 2021, p.258). Garnett highlights this athlete’s ability to silence critics through performance, further reinforcing the NBA as a site of inclusion, resilience, and legitimacy. These types of narratives serve as a strong argument against social marginalization, demonstrating the NBA’s function as a field where underrepresented voices find visibility and respect. The anecdote presented in Garnett’s (2021, p.277) autobiography, in which a spontaneous basketball encounter with President Barack Obama is recounted, offers a powerful reflection on the growing cultural significance and popularity of the NBA. This informal yet symbolically potent interaction occurred during a visit to a military base in Germany, where Garnett and his teammates encountered then-President Obama and engaged in a casual conversation about basketball. The reference to Obama’s awareness of NBA performance statistics, such as Garnett’s twelve blocks in a game, illustrates how deeply embedded the league has become within both popular consciousness and political discourse. That the President of the United States not only followed professional basketball but was also familiar with individual game achievements demonstrates the NBA’s broad cultural reach and legitimacy. Furthermore, Garnett’s astonishment at the encounter—describing it as surreal and previously unimaginable—emphasizes the league’s transformation from a sports enterprise into a key pillar of cultural identity and social capital. This exchange reflects the NBA’s symbolic power, transcending the boundaries of sport and establishing itself as a common cultural reference point across diverse sectors of society. It supports the thesis that the NBA’s influence has grown beyond the court, becoming a central element of national and even global social narratives. Garnett's commentary illustrates a broader reality: NBA athletes, as global figures, are continuously engaging with international cultures, both on and off the court. His experiences dining in various world cities—Bangkok, Sydney, Berlin, and others—highlight the transnational nature of modern basketball celebrity (Garnett, 2021, p.298). This global movement of players and their exposure to cross-cultural settings contribute to the NBA’s growing international appeal. The league is no longer confined to the boundaries of American sports but has evolved into a global cultural product, shaped by the multicultural experiences of its athletes. The emphasis on food, memory, and emotion also signals the NBA’s growing relevance in shaping identity narratives. Garnett's nostalgic attachment to peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, a staple in many American households and locker rooms, evokes themes of familiarity, comfort, and cultural continuity (Garnett, 2021, p.298). At the same time, his openness to culinary experimentation signifies a willingness to cross borders, to engage with difference, and to adapt—a trait that mirrors the NBA’s own expansion into international markets and its ability to resonate with audiences worldwide. These intimate accounts support the claim that the NBA is not merely a sports league, but a global cultural force. By occupying spaces in gastronomy, fashion, media, and memory, the league has embedded itself into multiple layers of global cultural life (Garnett, 2021, p.299). The lifestyle of athletes such as Garnett not only reflects personal success but also the infrastructural and symbolic power of the NBA in connecting diverse geographies and cultural identities. The seamless integration of the athlete's personal story with global mobility and cultural curiosity reflects the league’s successful evolution into a truly international institution.

# **Chapter 2: Literature review**

**2.1 Introduction** The representation of NBA players on SLAM magazine covers occupies a crucial role in the visual and cultural narrative of basketball. Since its beginning in 1994, *SLAM* has transcended traditional sports journalism, positioning itself in the branch of sports, fashion, and popular culture. Through striking cover designs and compelling images, *SLAM* has contributed to the construction of NBA players as cultural icons, shaping their public personas and influencing how basketball is perceived by fans worldwide.

This literature review examines the case studies of visual discourse analysis of magazine covers, with a particular focus on the social relationships created between the figures depicted and the viewer. The review explores existing studies in chronological order, highlighting the progression of research on visual representation and audience interaction. Although extensive research exists on political, health, and lifestyle magazine covers, a notable gap remains in the context of sports magazines, particularly regarding SLAM magazine and its portrayal of NBA players. Thanks to themes such as compositional meaning, gaze, and cultural representation, this review seeks to highlight the lack of academic attention to the social relationships established through visual elements on sports magazine covers, emphasizing the need for further investigation in this domain.

Despite the magazine’s significance, limited academic attention has been given to its covers as a site of visual and cultural analysis. This literature review seeks to fill this gap by exploring how *SLAM* magazine portrays NBA players and other famous stars through its visual language, representation, compositional and interactive meaning and emphasizing the intersection of sport, identity. By examining themes such as heroic imagery, racial identity, and the integration of fashion and music culture, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural narratives embedded in *SLAM’s* cover art and the social relation between the viewer and magazine covers in sports media.

## **2.2 Social relation between the image and the viewer in magazine covers**

Direct eye-contact between the figure in the image and the reader is an intentional process to create a relationship between the two. As Pernilla Janson (2014) states that the gaze and gesture of the figures in *Men’s Health* and *Women’s Health* magazine are to create a certain relationship with the viewer, whether its social affinity in *Women’s Health* magazine or its more of an inferior and superior relationship in *Men’s Health* magazine (p. 26). Frontal angle in magazine covers create a direct social relation and high level of involvement of the target audience, as Janson mentions that all of the models in *Men’s Health* and *Women’s Health*magazines have are depicted in frontal angle (p.27).

In one study commanded by Saeed Ghaniabadi (2015, p.25) the aim of the frontal angle and close distance is also used to create ‘demand’ from the viewer to spark up a relationship between the participant and the reader itself. The social relation between the image and the viewer in magazine covers is approached in various ways. According to Head all models depicted in fashion magazines are presented in the frontal view which creates a personal interaction between the viewer and the model (2023, p.31). On the contrary, if in the image an acute angle was to be used, it would create a social distance between the reader and the model (Head, 2023, p.25). A different study conducted by Merve Tosun which the cover photo of *The Times* magazine also analyses the social relation mentioned before. Tosun argues that the direct look of the participants at the viewer creates an imaginary *relationship* between the participants and the viewer (2023, p.66). The use of frontal angle and positioning the participants in the magazine covers provides suitable conditions to build a closer social relation with the receiver. Tosun argues that the frontal angle of the figures in the image portrays the reader in the same ‘universe’ with the participants on the magazine cover (2023, p.67).

## **2.3 How media construct meaning and shape audience perception**

A knowledge gap exists regarding how social relationships are established when a figure on a magazine cover does not make direct eye contact with the viewer. In a discourse analysis conducted by Pernilla Jansson (2014, p.23), it was observed that all figures featured on the analysed covers of *Men’s Health* and *Women’s Health* magazines maintained direct eye contact with the viewer. Jansson concluded that this direct gaze functions as a *demand*, inviting the viewer to engage and fostering a connection between the participant and the audience. However, the dynamics of this relationship remain unexplored when the figure avoids direct eye contact. Understanding how such visual choices influence audience perception warrants further investigation.

Despite extensive evidence on the impact of compositional meaning in shaping audience perception, there remains a notable gap in research regarding the social relationship created between the participant and the viewer. Tosun (2023, p. 69) examines two figures of doctors depicted on the cover of *The Times* magazine, highlighting their central positioning within the image. This placement signifies their prominence and directs the viewer’s full attention to them. Additionally, the integration of their positioning with the accompanying text, *The Vaccine Revolution*, underscores how the visual and textual elements work together to convey a cohesive message (Tosun, 2023, p. 69). Further research is clearly needed to explore how such compositional strategies construct and mediate the social relationship between participants in the image and their viewers.

Extensive research has explored the representational capacity of figures in sports media and their connection to cultural and social elements. Analysing factors such as attire, colour, and design can yield significant insights into these relationships. For example, Longhuan Xu et al. (2024, p.10) conducted a multimodal discourse analysis of the mascot for the 2024 Paris Olympics. Their study revealed that the mascot effectively reflected French traditions and customs through its design, particularly its characteristic features, such as a hat rooted in French cultural heritage. This visual representation not only conveyed elements of French culture but also established a connection to the globally recognized sporting event. The study underscores the importance of selecting appropriate visual attributes in fostering cultural representation and shaping social relationships in sports media.

Another significant way media shapes audience perception is by depicting figures in motion, which fosters viewer engagement and creates a sense of active participation. Longhuan Xu et al. (2024, p.8) highlight how the Paris Olympic Games Mascot, through its dynamic movements and gestures, established a connection between athletes and the audience. This sense of motion not only reinforced the association but also inspired greater interest in the sporting event. However, a knowledge gap remains regarding how *SLAM* basketball magazine connects with its audience by portraying basketball players in motion. Further research is needed to explore this aspect of visual representation within sports media.

One method for analysing images and the social relationship between the viewer and the participant is through compositional meaning. The placement of a figure—whether at the center, side, or bottom of an image—can significantly influence the relationship being conveyed. Longhuan Xu et al. (2024, p.8), in their multimodal analysis of the Paris Olympics Mascot, examined compositional meaning by focusing on the event's logo displayed on the mascot’s t-shirt. Positioned prominently at the center of the t-shirt, the logo directs the viewer's attention, effectively linking the mascot to the location of the sporting event. Similarly, applying visual discourse analysis through compositional meaning to *SLAM* magazine covers could yield valuable insights into how they construct relationships between basketball players and their audience.

The orientation of the figure on a magazine cover plays a significant role in shaping the reader's connection to the reality conveyed by the publication. According to Jansson's (2024, p.23) visual analysis, when the figure is slightly turned away from the reader, it suggests a sense of detachment, implying that the viewer is not fully integrated into the depicted world. This creates a perception of exclusion from the reality portrayed within the magazine. A broader examination of *Slam* magazine covers could further explore how the poses of NBA players and other globally recognized individuals influence the social dynamics and relationship between the subjects and the audience.

Nowadays, it is still not popular to present a racialised participant in the magazine cover. According to a research article published by Seyidoglu et al. (2021, p.659) approximately 20% of North American Jogging Magazine covers consists of racialized participants. Since *SLAM* magazine focuses on the National Basketball Association, its main characters which are depicted on the cover are people with a black skin colour. This proves that the popularity of racialised participants on sport magazine covers is growing, which will analysed later in the analysis of data.

The study carried out by Gu (2023, p. 735) presents a multimodal discourse analysis of the sport events icon display at the Opening Ceremony of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Given the evolving landscape of media communication, traditional discourse analysis is insufficient for fully capturing the complexity of contemporary texts. Guided by the multimodal discourse analysis framework, this research examines the discourse at three levels: visual, aural, and cultural. The analysis identifies the distinct features of each level and highlights their interrelatedness. The findings demonstrate how these three levels collectively construct the overall meaning of the event through layered semiotic interaction.

Previous research on media representations of Paralympic athletes has highlighted the role of language and imagery in shaping public perceptions of disability in sport. A study examining coverage of the 2012 London and 2016 Rio Paralympic Games inMalaysian English-language newspapers employed discourse analysis to investigate gendered descriptions and emotional portrayals of athletes with impairments (Ismail et al, 2022, p. 5). The analysis revealed that written reports often relied on medical terminology to describe impairments, especially in the lead paragraphs, and this language was applied similarly to both male and female athletes. Visual semiotic analysis showed a stronger emphasis on athletes’ facial expressions rather than their impairments, with many images depicting smiles and celebratory emotions at medal ceremonies. A corpus-assisted approach was also used to triangulate findings, confirming that emotional content formed a key component of the Paralympic news narrative. Notably, positive emotional language was more frequently associated with male athletes, though both genders were portrayed with overall positive facial affect. These findings suggest that while disability sport may not receive the same volume of media attention as non-disability sport, the emotional framing of Paralympic athletes plays a significant role in their representation and the public's engagement with disability narratives in sport.

A study examining the visual portrayal of Halima Aden—featured as the first model to wear modest swimwear in the 2019 *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue—demonstrates how visual semiotic resources are employed to construct broader cultural meanings (El Shazly, 2021, p.13). Using a visual social semiotic and cultural discourse framework, the research revealed that the images strategically utilized affordances such as clothing, posture, and gaze to challenge dominant ethnocentric representations. By positioning Aden as a visible and empowered cultural figure, the study highlights how visual texts can be used to express diversity, cultural reconciliation, and the inclusion of marginalized voices. These findings emphasize the capacity of visual social semiotics to deconstruct normative ideals and support the formation of alternative discourses that reflect cultural pluralism. Within the context of sports media and magazines, such approaches are particularly valuable in understanding how visual elements shape public perception, identity construction, and social meaning.

Scholars have highlighted persistent gender inequality in media portrayals of athletes, particularly in sports magazines, where women are often subject to reductive or stereotypical representations. One study grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis and Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996, 2006) framework of visual grammar applied vector analysis to examine the visual subjectivity and stereotyping of sportswomen in a major South African sports publication (Brandt, 2011, p.12). The research analysed how different vectors—lines of action and gaze—function in the visual construction of gendered identities and revealed their role in sustaining dominant ideologies. The study identified five distinct stereotype categories, including ‘athletic’ (positive) and ‘homosexual’, ‘loser’, ‘model’, and ‘sex object’ (negative), and concluded that female athletes were predominantly portrayed through negative framing. Importantly, the findings underscore the effectiveness of vector analysis within visual social semiotics as a heuristic tool for exposing embedded subjectivities and challenging ideologically charged visual codes. These insights contribute to a broader understanding of how visual structures in media reinforce or resist normative gender representations, aligning directly with the methodological tools applied in this thesis.

Media representation of athletes has undergone significant changes over time, particularly in relation to gender visibility within sports journalism. A study examining British newspaper coverage of male and female track and field athletes at the Olympic Games since 1948 employed content analysis to compare textual and visual portrayals in two national outlets: *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* (King, 2007, p. 13). The findings indicated a substantial increase in media attention to track and field events overall, yet female athletes remained underrepresented until the 2004 Athens Games. Despite some progress in achieving balanced coverage in recent years, the research noted that men continue to dominate the field of sports journalism. These insights reinforce broader critiques within visual social semiotics, which highlight how media texts not only reflect but actively reproduce gendered power relations through both verbal and visual forms. This aligns with the present study’s focus on evaluating visual constructions of athletes, where representational and compositional choices serve to maintain or disrupt traditional hierarchies in sport media discourse.

The relationship between gender representation and audience perception in sports media has been critically explored through experimental studies that highlight persistent stereotypes, particularly in masculinized domains. One study investigated the influence of athlete gender and the domain of media portrayal—professional versus extraprofessional—on credibility, merit attribution, and audience engagement (Herrera, 2024, p. 10). Findings indicated that when athletes were framed within a professional context, audiences perceived the coverage as more credible and attributed greater value to the athlete’s capabilities. Furthermore, results showed a gendered bias: male athletes portrayed in extraprofessional contexts were considered more competent and evoked a stronger intention among audiences to engage with future sports content. These insights underscore how visual and textual framing—central to visual social semiotics—plays a decisive role in shaping the cultural perception of athletes. They also affirm the importance of representational strategies in either reinforcing or challenging gender stereotypes across media platforms, supporting the present study’s aim to interrogate visual constructions of identity within sports publications like *SLAM* magazine.

Research carried out by Denham (2020, p. 45)| examining the visual representation of athletes on men’s magazine covers over a 40-year span (1980–2019) reveals persistent patterns of racial and gender-based disparity. Of the 264 analysed images, 81% depicted male athletes, with White males dominating individual sports coverage while African American and Latino males were largely confined to team sports. This disparity was reinforced through visual position stacking, where White athletes were placed in central roles perceived as decisive, whereas Black athletes were shown in peripheral or supporting roles. Among female athletes primarily White many were featured in contexts related to sports entertainment or individual disciplines such as tennis and swimming. These patterns of inclusion and placement reflect broader cultural discourses on race and gender, which are made visible through the semiotic resources employed in magazine imagery. Such findings are directly relevant to visual social semiotics, as they demonstrate how compositional and representational strategies in visual media can construct and reinforce ideologies of centrality, marginality, and symbolic value within sport.

A growing body of research has addressed how elite athletes with disabilities are visually represented in the media, highlighting the media’s influential role in shaping societal perceptions of disability and sport. A systematic review by Reece (2009, p. 32) analyzed 17 content-based studies published between 2001 and 2017, revealing persistent disparities in the visual and textual representation of disabled athletes. The review identified six dominant themes, including the limited frequency of coverage, gender imbalance, national bias, selective representation of disability types, and contrasting portrayals between Olympic and Paralympic athletes. Although some progress has been made in emphasizing athleticism, the representation remains shaped by medicalised imagery and reductive narratives, such as the *supercrip* stereotype. From a visual social semiotics perspective, these patterns suggest a reliance on compositional strategies that marginalize disabled athletes through underrepresentation, symbolic exclusion, and reliance on dominant cultural codes. This reinforces the need for visual discourse analysis in sport media to uncover how visual and semiotic choices construct meaning and shape public understandings of disability within elite athletic contexts.

Research has long acknowledged the marginalization of women in Western sports media, yet limited attention has been given to how sportswomen are represented in non-Western contexts. A comparative review by Xue et al. (2019, p. 23) examined the portrayal of female athletes in sports media across China, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea, revealing consistent disparities in coverage. The study highlights that East Asian sports media commonly prioritize male athletes, international competitions, and nationalist narratives, while relegating sportswomen to discussions of personal life, appearance, and idealized femininity. From a visual social semiotics perspective, such portrayals reinforce traditional gender ideologies through compositional choices and symbolic codes that position women as secondary to men in sporting contexts. Although slight national variations were observed in the frequency and narrative framing, the overarching patterns suggest a homogenized visual discourse that marginalizes female athletic identity. The study underscores the need for further research into how visual and semiotic strategies contribute to gendered representations, especially within culturally specific media systems, and calls for greater inclusion of social media and media autonomy in future analyses.

Representations of athlete identity in visual media often rely on recurring semiotic structures that reinforce dominant ideologies. A study by Kluch et al. (2023, p. 27) examines high school athletes in teen sports dramas such as *One Tree Hill*, *Friday Night Lights*, and *All American*, identifying four dominant identity scripts shaping the portrayal of male athletes: the social prestige attached to athletic status, the centrality of athletic identity, the interconnection between social and athletic roles, and emotional dynamics with peers. From a visual social semiotics perspective, these identity constructions are communicated through compositional features such as gaze, gesture, framing, and spatial arrangement, all of which contribute to reinforcing traditional masculinity. The study demonstrates how these televised texts utilize visual strategies to normalize specific masculine scripts, highlighting the need for alternative representations that subvert stereotypical portrayals and offer more diverse readings of athlete identity. This aligns with the current research’s focus on how visual discourse, particularly through cover imagery, maintains or disrupts cultural narratives around male athletes in sports media.

## **2.4 Gaps in the literature and the contribution of my analysis**

In the existing literature regarding visual discourse analysis, and the social relationship between the participant and the audience there is a significant gap in terms of the social relationship created between the figure in the *Slam* magazine cover and its reader. The study aiming at especially the sports industry, which is in this case NBA and its great cultural influence in USA, will show how NBA players depicted in *Slam* magazine covers are presented, and what kind of social relation they build with the viewer. There are studies discussing health magazines, political magazines or figures connected with the world Olympics. For example, visual representation of women and men in *Men’s Health* magazine or *Women’s Health* magazine where the author focuses on the pose, distance and framework of the figures presented on the cover. In addition to this, there are also studies focusing on the figure of the Paris Olympics Mascot which is the main representation of this sports event.

My research aims to address this gap by analysing the social relationship between the reader and the figures depicted on *Slam* magazine covers. Through a multimodal analysis, I will examine how the creators of *Slam* magazine establish and maintain connections with their regular readership. Furthermore, my study will explore how the visual and textual elements of these magazine covers influence and reflect the cultural significance of basketball in the United States.

**Chapter 3: Analytical tools**

Language plays a central role in shaping human experience and social relations. Michael Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics (SFL) framework provides a comprehensive theory of how language constructs meaning through three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. These metafunctions offer a powerful analytical tool in understanding not only verbal language but also visual representations, particularly within the scope of social semiotics and visual discourse.

The ideational metafunction allows individuals to construe the world around them by categorizing and representing experiences. It is concerned with the expression of content: the *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where* of language. This function enables the representation of processes, participants, and circumstances, thereby creating a structured model of human experience. For example, Halliday illustrates how various lexical items such as *houses*, *cottages*, and *garages* relate to the broader category of *building*, and how *walking* encompasses subtypes like *strolling*, *marching*, and *pacing* (Halliday, 2004, p.29). The grammatical structures that realize these categories not only differentiate experience but also allow them to be sequenced and connected within a clause or text.

In addition to construing experience, language also performs a social function through the interpersonal metafunction. This metafunction enacts social interactions and relationships by encoding attitudes, judgments, and interpersonal positioning. It includes the speaker’s stance and level of engagement with the audience, thus influencing how messages are received. Halliday conceptualizes this aspect of language as *language as action*, wherein the clause operates both as a proposition and a proposal (2004, p.29). Through mood structures, modality, and evaluative language, speakers express authority, politeness, empathy, or assertiveness. These elements are crucial in visual analysis as well, where gaze, angle, and positioning often serve interpersonal functions equivalent to tone and modality in spoken or written discourse.

The third metafunction, the textual, organizes the flow of information and establishes coherence within a text. It allows for the construction of cohesive discourse by structuring information according to relevance and thematic progression. Halliday (2004, p.30) describes this as *language as texture*, wherein meaning unfolds through a sequence of clauses that guide the reader or viewer in constructing significance. This function is particularly salient in visual social semiotics, where elements like framing, salience, and information value parallel the textual strategies found in language. For instance, the placement of a figure in the middle of a magazine cover, or its juxtaposition against text and background, contributes to the narrative and interpretive flow in a way similar to thematic organization in verbal texts.

The interaction of these three metafunctions demonstrates that language is not simply a tool for naming or describing but is actively involved in the creation, negotiation, and maintenance of meaning. The same can be said of visual communication. The application of Halliday’s metafunctions in visual discourse analysis has been instrumental in the work of scholars like Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), who adapt the metafunctions to visual grammar. In their model, the ideational metafunction corresponds to representational meaning, the interpersonal to interactive meaning, and the textual to compositional meaning. Together, these frameworks form a robust methodology for analyzing how meanings are constructed in multimodal texts, including magazine covers, advertisements, and media imagery.

**3.1 Social semiotic multimodality**

This chapter outlines the theoretical foundation underpinning the analysis of SLAM magazine covers, which relies on the principles of visual social semiotics as developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, p.137). Visual semiotics, as a methodological tool, allows for the dissection of how meaning is constructed and communicated through images. According to Jewitt (p.31, 2009), the field of multimodality can be broadly divided into three primary approaches: the social semiotic approach, the systemic functional grammar (SFG) approach, and the multimodal interactional analysis approach. Each of these frameworks brings a distinct perspective to the analysis of meaning. The social semiotic approach, rooted in the work of Halliday and developed further by Kress and van Leeuwen, serves as the central framework for this study. The SFG-based multimodal approach focuses on grammar-based analyses, while the interactional approach, aligned with the work of Scollon and Norris, emphasises micro-level interaction and the physical environment in which communication occurs (Jewitt, p.31 2009).

Social semiotic multimodality emerged from Halliday’s systemic functional theory of language, which conceptualises language as a social semiotic system through which meaning is constructed (Jewitt, 2009, p.32). As has already been discussed Halliday identified three metafunctions of language: the ideational, the interpersonal, and the textual. These metafunctions are realised not only through linguistic choices but also through visual resources, enabling analysts to examine images as complex semiotic systems (Halliday, 1978; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

In the context of verbal language, the ideational metafunction reflects how experience is represented and categorised. For example, concepts such as movement or space are configured visually through layout, perspective, or vectors. The interpersonal metafunction relates to the interaction between the viewer and the image, such as gaze, social distance, or angle. The textual metafunction refers to how visual elements are organised to produce coherence, salience, and flow (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). These metafunctions were extended by Kress and van Leeuwen in *Reading Images* (1996), where they developed a grammar of visual design capable of explaining how meaning is conveyed through images.

Kress and van Leeuwen’s social semiotic framework was instrumental in generating a range of semiotic network systems that demonstrate how resources such as framing, salience, composition, and modality contribute to meaning-making in visual communication. Their work illuminated how the visual resources available within a particular context can be mobilised to convey ideologies, construct identities, and communicate social values (Jewitt, 2009, p.32). When one looks at an image there are numerous points of perspective which can help receive the image in a certain way. Either by understanding what is directly found in the image, or by finding a deeper, hidden meaning through analysing the work as a whole. Reading an image involves looking beyond what is visible at first sight, to understand deeper messages or symbols embedded within it. Similar to interpreting text image reading requires us to consider both the visual elements - like colour composition - and the cultural or historical background that shapes the images meaning. By analysing these components, we can decode the artist’s intentions, the social messages, and even our own reactions to the image. This process turns viewing into a more active engagement, enabling us to grasp layers of significance and to appreciate the image not just as a visual object but as a narrative or commentary that invites interpretation. Whether in art, photography, advertising, or even social media, *reading* an image allows us to understand the broader story it tells.   
 One of the meanings in terms of which one can read an image is representational, which refers to the *participants* (people, places or things) which are to be found in the image (Oyama, p. 141, 2001). This suggests us that primarily we are forced to see the surface of the image, in order to find out the gist of it, which may be difficult without analysing it first. A question that needs to be asked, however, is thanks to which categorisations or tools are we able to find out how the image requests engagement from the viewer? Visual patterns can be divided in two different ways either as *narrative structure* or *conceptual structure* (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 141). This is worth noting as it defines the function of the characters, which may help us in interpreting the presence of the figure in the image.

According to Oyama and Jewitt images are prone to create a certain connection between the viewer and the reality found in the picture (p. 145, 2001). This calls attention to what the author wanted to convey. The three main factors which help define the interactive meaning are: *distance, contact* and *point of view* (Oyama, Jewitt, p. 145, 2001). By taking an exemplary work through the prism of the before mentioned elements one is able to debunk the social distance, relation and interaction between the viewer and the author. The so-called ‘interactive meaning’ will be the key tool in analysing the images found in the data set because of the fact that it will define for us the relation which is ought to be found between the author and the spectator. A different meaning of an image can be brought out through the compositional meaning which is based on *information value, framing*, *salience* and *modality* (Jewitt, p. 145, 2009) which are often used to create images for magazine pages and illustrated books. Jewitt argues that the information value of elements depend on its positioning (p.145, 2009). The function of framing is to either ‘connect’ or to ‘disconnect’ elements, as Oyama states that one is able to ‘disconnect’ elements, which can be illustrated by placing a thick line or empty space between the elements (p.150, 2001). Certainly, framing is an element which is often used in magazine covers because of the limited space available on the page, creating a challenge for the author to fit all the elements on one page. Salience, as outlined by Kress and van Leeuwen (p.150, 2006), refers to the way certain elements are designed to capture attention more effectively than others. This can be achieved through techniques such as variations in size, the use of contrasting colours (with some colours being inherently more striking), and tonal differences. In general, salience arises from any feature that distinguishes an element from its surroundings. The prominence of visual and textual components depends significantly on their placement, size, and overall emphasis within the composition.

Visual social semiotics, as a branch of social semiotics, provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing how images communicate meaning beyond their immediate visual content (Jewitt, p. 134, 2009). Rooted in broader semiotic theory, visual social semiotics examines how compositional, interactive, and representational meanings function as connected elements within a larger system of visual communication. Representational meaning focuses on the participants within an image and their categorization, while interactive meaning defines the relationship between the viewer and the subject through factors such as gaze, distance, and perspective. Compositional meaning, in turn, structures the visual hierarchy through elements like framing, salience, and information value. Together, these dimensions contribute to a cohesive theoretical model that explains how visual texts, including magazine covers, advertisements, and media images, construct social relations. By integrating these three dimensions, visual social semiotics extends the principles of social semiotics into the visual domain, emphasizing the role of cultural and social contexts in shaping interpretation. This study explores how these meanings operate within magazine imagery, demonstrating their role in shaping audience perception and engagement.

## **3.1.1 Representational meaning**

Representational meaning, as discussed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 141), is primarily established through the depiction of participants, whether abstract or concrete. This meaning functions as the visual equivalent of vocabulary, structured by the spatial relationships and arrangements within the semiotic space. In this context, visual social semiotics emphasizes the *syntax* of images, analysing the spatial organization and the relationships between elements in terms of their positioning, alignment, and interaction. This approach extends beyond the methods of traditional structural semiotics by focusing on how visual elements interact within a semiotic framework to produce meaning. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 141) further describe visual syntactic patterns as either narrative or conceptual. Narrative patterns represent participants in terms of actions, events, or processes, emphasizing dynamic interactions. In contrast, conceptual patterns focus on participants in terms of their attributes, roles, or classifications, highlighting more generalized or static aspects of meaning. The choice between these patterns plays a critical role in shaping the discourses that mediate visual representation, revealing the underlyingstructures and meanings in visual texts (Jewitt, p. 141, 2009).  
 Narrative structures in visual analysis are characterized by the presence of a vector, which is a directional line that connects participants within an image, indicating an action or relationship. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 143) describe the participants at whom the vector is directed as *goals*, while the participant initiating the vector is the *actor*. When both a goal and an actor are present, the picture is described as *transactive*, creating an interaction between two parties. Alternatively, a vector can exist with only an actor, establishing a non-transactive structure. The direction of the gaze in represented participants introduces another layer of meaning. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 143) identify this as a *reaction*, which can be transactional, involving a goal, or non-transactional, where the gaze does not engage with any other participant. Facial expressions and gestures further shape the nature of these reactions, adding depth to the interpretation of interactions. The analysis of narrative visual structures, showing actions, reactions, and transactional or non-transactional relationships, provides insights into the roles and dynamics represented within visual texts. This meaning highlights distinctions between those who act and those who are acted upon, revealing power dynamics and cultural assumptions. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 143) note that the shown of participants and their roles can reflect societal norms and values, particularly in contexts that address issues such as gender representation. This method highlights the importance of visual elements in constructing meaning and creating relationship between participants and       viewers.  
 Conceptual structures in visual representation are characterized by the absence of vectors and focus on defining, analysing, or classifying people, places, or objects, including abstract concepts. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 143), one type of conceptual structure is the classification structure, which organizes participants symmetrically within an image to indicate that they share a common attribute or belong to the same category. This arrangement emphasizes relationships of similarity or association among the elements depicted, creating a cohesive representation of a unified group or

class.  
 Symbolic structures, as discussed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 144), are used to establish the meaning or identity of a participant within visual representation. In symbolic attributive structures, the identity or meaning of one participant, referred to as the *carrier*, is defined by another participant, the *symbolic attribute*. These attributes are identified through characteristics such as prominence in the representation, unconventional placement, or association with culturally recognized symbolic values. The symbolic structure relies on iconography to analyse how visual elements are used to attribute meaning or significance to participants in a given composition (van Leeuwen, p. 144, 2009).  
 Analytical structures, as described by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 141), establish relationships between participants by organizing them into part-whole structures. These structures define a concept or entity by illustrating how it is composed of individual components. This structure emphasizes the hierarchical and compositional relationships within the represented elements, offering a clear framework for understanding and organization of parts within a whole.

**3.1.2 Interactive meaning**As mentioned before, the interactive meaning according to Kress’ and Van Leeuwen’s consists of three key elements: contact, distance and point of view. Images that depict individuals looking directly at the viewer establish an imaginary connection, described as *demand* (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, p. 145). Such images symbolically request engagement or response from the viewer, with facial expressions and gestures conveying the specific nature of this demand. In contrast, images in which individuals do not engage the viewer's gaze are categorized as *offer pictures*, where the subject is observed in a detached and impersonal manner, resembling a display object. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 145), such images provide an *offer of information* rather than demanding direct interaction. These concepts, derived from Halliday's (1985) framework on speech acts, highlight the distinction between demand (commands or direct interaction) and offer (provision of information) (Jewitt, p. 146, 2009). This distinction has been applied in media studies to analyse visual representations, revealing how gender roles influence the portrayal of subjects as either demanding or offering, depending on the context (Jewitt, p. 146, 2009).

The physical distance between people, places, and objects in visual media often reflects social norms related to personal space, with closely indicating greater familiarity and distance implying detachment. This concept translates into the *size of frame* in visual representations, which determines how individuals or objects are perceived in terms of their relationship to the viewer. However, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 146) argue that the individuals depicted are not necessarily representative of the viewer's social circle but are instead addressed as members of a broader social category or group. The terminology of film and television is often applied to these visual conventions, with close-up shots typically indicating a sense of intimacy, medium shots implying a general social connection, and long shots suggesting a more impersonal relationship. These framing choices, particularly in studies of visual media, have been shown to shape the perceived relational dynamics between the viewer and the represented individuals, as well as broader interpretations of social and cultural roles.  
 Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 147) highlight that the perspective from which individuals are presented reinforces specific social hierarchies and roles. Visual social semiotics examines how the structural elements of images contribute to the construction of masculinity and broader gender norms. This analysis extends beyond verbal communication to uncover the implicit meanings embedded within visual materials. It draws attention to the simplification of gender roles, the polarization of male and female identities, and the exclusion of more diverse emotional and social perspectives, particularly in contexts related to youth and gender. These findings emphasize the ideological stereotypes underlying media portrayals of gender.

## **3.1.3 Compositional meaning**

As mentioned before, the compositional meaning constitutes the following aspects: *Information value, framing, salience*and *modality*. Information value, as discussed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 147), is determined by the placement of elements within a composition. The significance and role of each element are influenced by its positioning, such as whether it appears on the left or right, in the center or the margins, or in the upper or lower parts of the visual space. These spatial arrangements influence the organization and meaning of the overall composition, highlighting the relational hierarchy and emphasis of the elements presented.   
 Framing, as explained by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 149), refers to the way elements within a composition are either separated to establish distinct identities or connected to represent unity. This is achieved through techniques such as the use of frame lines, contrasts in colour or form, spatial arrangements, or the absence of connecting elements. The presence or absence of framing influences the degree of discontinuity or continuity between elements, effectively determining whether they are perceived as distinct or as part of a cohesive whole. The choice of framing method shapes the meaning potential of the composition, which is further contextualized by the overall design and purpose of the visual representation.  
 The concept of salience, as defined by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 150), refers to the visual prominence of certain elements within a composition, making them more attention-grabbing than others. This prominence is achieved through various techniques, including variations in size, color and tonal contrast. Salience is used to emphasize specific elements within a composition by ensuring they stand out from their surroundings, contributing to the overall importance within the visual structure.  
 The concept of naturalistic modality, defined as *reality value*, determines visual reality based on the compatibility between what is observed in an image and what is seen under specific conditions. The greater the alignment between the two, the higher the modality of the image. This theory highlights how modality functions as a measure of the perceived authenticity and reality of visual representations. Photographs are often considered *images of the real,* capturing scenes as they might be perceived by the naked eye. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 151) discuss the contrast between photographs the distinction of naturalistic modality and scientific modality, which are seen as specific and concrete, and other visual forms, such as graphs and diagrams, which are viewed as abstract and objective. Despite their differences, both claim a sense of reality, though these claims are rooted in distinct definitions of reality.

**3.2 Van Leeuwen’s networks**  
This chapter outlines the theoretical foundation underpinning the analysis of SLAM magazine covers, which relies on the principles of visual social semiotics as developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p.137). Visual semiotics, as a methodological tool, allows for the dissection of how meaning is constructed and communicated through images. The frameworks employed in this study—the Representation and Viewer Network and the Visual Social Actor Network—offer a comprehensive lens to examine the relational, structural, and cultural dimensions of image-based media. These tools are particularly suitable for examining the portrayal of NBA athletes on magazine covers, where issues of identity, power, inclusion, and viewer engagement are actively negotiated.

The *Representation and Viewer Network* focuses on the visual strategies used to construct viewer engagement through distance, angle, and gaze. This model provides insight into how images create intimacy or detachment, equality or hierarchy, and connection or separation between the viewer and the represented subject. Complementing this, the *Visual Social Actor Network* addresses how individuals or groups are included, excluded, or categorised in an image. This involves assessing whether figures are portrayed as individuals or members of a group, whether they are shown acting or being acted upon, and how cultural or biological markers contribute to their visual identity.

Together, these frameworks enable an in-depth exploration of how visual representation in sports media constructs social meaning. They also reveal the mechanisms by which identity, status, and power are communicated through visual choices. In analysing SLAM magazine covers, this chapter uses these theoretical tools to uncover the underlying structures shaping the portrayal of athletes and their relationship with the viewer, situating them within broader discourses of media, sport, and culture.

## **3.2.1 Representation and Viewer Network**

Van Leeuwen (p. 138, 2009) mention three key dimensions of representation in visual communication: distance, relation, and interaction. Distance refers to the spatial presence between the viewer and the subject, where a close shot suggests intimacy and a long shot implies detachment. Relation is divided into involvement and power. Involvement is determined by the angle of the representation, with frontal angles indicating engagement and oblique angles signifying detachment. Power is defined by the vertical angle, where a high angle positions the viewer as dominant, a low angle establishes the dominance of the subject, and an eye-level angle suggests equality. Interaction is based on the gaze of the subject, where direct address, characterized by the subject looking at the viewer, creates a connection, while indirect address, where the subject does not engage with the viewer’s gaze, maintains a sense of separation. These dimensions demonstrate how visual strategies are used to structure relationships between subjects and viewers in visual media.

Figure REPRESENTATION AND VIEWER NETWORK DIAGRAM (VAN LEEUWEN, 2008, P.139)

**A diagram of a function

Description automatically generated**

## **3.2.2 Visual Social Actor Network**

Van Leeuwen's (p. 147, 2009) "Visual Social Actor Network" outlines the ways in which social actors are represented in visual compositions, emphasizing processes of categorization and inclusion. Social actors may be either excluded or included in an image, with inclusion further categorized into specific representational strategies. Actors can be depicted as agents, performing an action, or as patients, receiving an action. They may also be categorized generically, representing a broad group, or specifically, as unique individuals. Additionally, categorization can be based on cultural or biological attributes. Social actors are represented either as individuals or as part of a group, with group portrayals emphasizing either homogenization, where the group appears unified, or differentiation, where distinctions within the group are highlighted. This framework demonstrates how visual representations construct meaning by emphasizing or downplaying certain attributes of social actors, shaping the audience's interpretation of their roles and identities.

Figure VISUAL SOCIAL ACTOR NETWORK (VAN LEEUWEN, 2008, P.147)

A diagram of a group

Description automatically generated

# **Chapter 4: Aims and data**

## **4.1 Data set**

The selection of SLAM magazine covers from June 2016 to March 2023 (issues 198 to 246) provides a critical visual archive for analysing the evolving representation of NBA players within a significant period of basketball history. SLAM, a publication released every two months, is widely recognized for its unique synergy of basketball, culture, and media, making it a crucial source for examining the shifting portrayal of athletes in response to historical events, cultural trends, and the sport’s increasing global influence. This timeframe was chosen due to the monumental events that reshaped the NBA and its broader cultural relevance. The tragic death of Kobe Bryant on January 26, 2020, marked a defining moment in the league’s history, influencing how basketball legends are commemorated. Similarly, LeBron James' achievement as the NBA’s all-time leading scorer on February 7, 2023, was a world-wide occasion, reinforcing his enduring impact on the sport. Additionally, SLAM covers during this period reflected the NBA’s growing intersection with music and entertainment, exemplified by high-profile collaborations with musicians, such as those featured on May 11, 2021, with famous American rapper J.Cole who collaborated with the *SLAM magazine*. Furthermore, the NBA has experienced significant global expansion since 2018, with increasing social media engagement, international player influence, and rising viewership. The selected SLAM covers capture this transformation, illustrating how the league has positioned itself as a dominant force in sports and culture. By analyzing 50 magazine covers, this research provides an extensive visual discourse on the changing representation of NBA athletes, the integration of cultural narratives, and the media strategies employed to engage an expanding global audience. Thus, this dataset serves as a comprehensive lens through which the intersection of sports media, athlete representation, and cultural significance can be explored, offering insights into how SLAM magazine has both documented and shaped the NBA’s rising influence during a transformative period in basketball history.

## **4.2 Methodology**

Out of the multiple models of visual analysis, this thesis applies the frameworks of visual representation outlined by Theo van Leeuwen, particularly those presented in his work Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis (2008) and three meanings described by Jewitt and Oyama. (2001). The aim of the study is to investigate how SLAM magazine visually constructs the identity of NBA players through multimodal discourse analysis, using a set of clearly defined visual grammar tools. The analytical process is grounded in an interpretive approach to understanding how meaning is produced through images, with a focus on the interaction between representation, viewer interaction, and compositional structure. The patterns of analysis used in this study are based on four key tools from visual social semiotics, applied to a dataset of 50 SLAM magazine covers published between June 2016 and March 2023. Each cover was analysed in relation to the following visual structures:

* **Representational Meaning** (Jewitt, 2009, p. 141): This tool focuses on the depiction of participants within the image, categorizing them according to narrative and conceptual structures. Narrative representations highlight action and agency, while conceptual representations focus on classification, identity, and the symbolic significance of the subject.
* **Compositional Meaning** (Oyama, p. 145, 2001): This dimension analyses how the placement of elements within the visual field contributes to meaning-making. It includes information value (e.g., ideal–real and given–new structures), salience (the most visually prominent element), and framing (the degree of connection or separation between elements). These components allow for assessment of the image’s overall structure and its role in guiding the viewer’s attention.
* **Representation and Viewer Network** (van Leeuwen, 2009 p. 139): This framework explores the social distance, point of view, and interaction between the viewer and the depicted participant. It identifies whether the subject appears through a close or distant shot, a frontal or oblique angle, and whether the gaze is direct (demand) or indirect (offer), thereby indicating the level of involvement and relational positioning between viewer and image. The concept of point of view is significant in visual social semiotics, particularly in its role in shaping gender representation.
* **Visual Social Actor Network** (van Leeuwen,2009, p. 141): This tool categorizes the represented individuals by their social role and inclusion or exclusion from the visual frame. It also differentiates between individual and group representation, and between generic and specific depictions. This helps uncover deeper ideological patterns related to identity, power, and representation.

The rationale for applying these tools is to determine whether the visual portrayal of NBA players in SLAM magazine reveals consistent discursive patterns, particularly in relation to power, accessibility, and cultural significance. The analysis investigates both dominant and subtle visual choices in layout, posture, gaze, and framing to interpret how athletes are constructed in the intersection of sport and media. While the primary focus of this thesis remains on the visual dimension of SLAM magazine covers, brief attention is given to accompanying textual elements—such as headlines, captions, and taglines—when they enhance the meaning conveyed visually. This multimodal approach ensures a more comprehensive understanding of how SLAM contributes to the cultural positioning of NBA athletes. Through this methodology, the thesis aims to identify recurring visual strategies and assess their significance in shaping public perception, audience engagement, and the broader visual discourse within the domain of professional basketball.

## **4.3 Research questions**

This thesis seeks to investigate the visual strategies used in the portrayal of NBA players on the covers of *SLAM* magazine through the lens of visual social semiotics. The central aim is to understand how athletes are visually constructed, how these representations position them in relation to the viewer, and what broader social meanings such depictions convey. The research is guided by three interrelated questions:

* How are NBA players depicted?
* How do the visual structures on SLAM magazine covers guide the viewer’s interpretation of NBA players’ cultural significance?
* In what ways do gaze, angle, and distance on SLAM magazine covers construct a social relationship between NBA players and the viewer?
* How are NBA players visually categorized in terms of individualization, specificity, and social roles on SLAM magazine covers, and what ideological meanings do these representations convey?

These questions serve to explore the semiotic resources employed in the images and the ideological implications of such visual choices, particularly in terms of identity, power, and viewer engagement

## **4.4 Hypothesis**

The hypothesis states that *SLAM* magazine covers are created in such a way to create a mutual bond between the NBA players and the reader. Thanks to visual discourse analysis it is noticeable that the visual strategies used are there to let the reader identify himself with the sportsmen. The vast majority of analysed covers show that both the sportsmen and the readers are placed on level grounds.

# **Chapter 5: Data analysis**

The following analysis examines 50 SLAM magazine covers published between June 2016 and March 2023, using a visual social semiotic approach grounded in the theoretical framework of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). Drawing on representational, interactive, and compositional meanings—as well as the Representation and Viewer Network and the Visual Social Actor Network—the aim is to explore how NBA players are depicted visually, how they are positioned in relation to the viewer, and what broader cultural narratives emerge from these portrayals.

Using the methodological tools introduced earlier, the analysis focuses on identifying visual patterns that construct the identity and social standing of professional basketball players. Each cover functions as a cultural text that reflects values, ideologies, and aspirations embedded in contemporary basketball culture. Key elements such as gaze, angle, distance, salience, and framing are examined to understand how meaning is created and how the viewer is invited to engage with the subject.

The data is presented in two stages. First, the quantitative coding results are outlined to show the frequency and distribution of specific visual features. This is followed by a qualitative interpretation of the results in relation to the research questions. The findings suggest that SLAM magazine consistently constructs a visual discourse in which NBA athletes are not only elevated figures but also accessible icons, reinforcing a cultural narrative that positions sporting fame as both inspirational and achievable.

# **5.1 Findings**

## **5.1.1 Representational meaning**

The data from table 1 indicate that narrative structures are scarcely employed through frontal angles and low shots, reinforcing the image of players as dominant and engaged figures (see image 1). According to Kress and van Leeuwen (p. 141, 2006), narrative structures rely on vectors—lines of action that indicate movement and interaction. In SLAM magazine, this is reflected in poses that suggest energy, competitiveness, and athleticism. The frequent use of low-angle shots further amplifies this narrative, portraying players as powerful figures, towering over the viewer and reinforcing their status as basketball icons. The conceptual structure has by far dominated the narrative structure in the results. This shows that *SLAM* magazine pays attention to classifying the readers at an equal level with the athletes. Conceptual structures play a crucial role in establishing a sense of identification between the viewer and the represented athletes. The dataset reveals a high frequency of eye-level shots and direct gaze, indicating an effort to position the players as relatable and accessible. In SLAM magazine, the use of central framing and salience techniques, such as lighting and colour contrast, further enhances this relationship by ensuring that the player remains the dominant point. The direct gaze of the athletes, a recurring feature in the dataset, creates what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) describe as a *demand* relation, where the subject actively engages with the viewer, fostering a sense of personal connection.

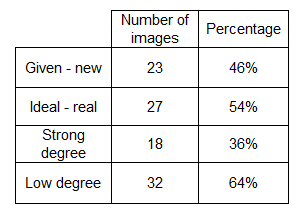
Figure REPRESENTATIONAL MEANING EXAMPLE

While narrative structures are used to convey action and power, conceptual structures are fundamental in creating a relationship between the viewer and the athlete. By positioning NBA players as both aspirational and familiar figures, SLAM magazine constructs a visual discourse that extends beyond sports, embedding basketball culture within broader cultural narratives. The findings suggest that the magazine strategically employs a balance between movement and stillness, engagement and detachment and power, ensuring that the players are perceived not only as elite athletes but also as figures with whom readers can connect on a personal level.

Figure Interactive meaning sample image

table 3: summary: interactive meaning

The data demonstrates a strong dominance of the *demand* gaze, with 44 out of 50 images (88%) showing the athlete making direct eye contact with the viewer. In terms of shot distance, medium shots are the most frequently employed (50%), followed by long shots (44%), while close shots are minimally used (6%). The predominance of medium and long shots suggests a balance between contextualising the athlete within a broader spatial or performative frame and maintaining visual proximity. Medium shots allow for partial bodily representation, conveying a sense of action or posture, while long shots typically provide environmental cues or suggest a more detached observation. Frontal positioning appears in 80% of the images, with only 20% adopting a side view. Frontal shots, much like direct gaze, establish a sense of involvement. The compositional analysis of 50 *SLAM* magazine covers reveals distinct patterns in information value, salience, and framing, all of which contribute to the construction of meaning and viewer engagement. The data indicates a near-balanced division between the

Table 4 Summary: Compositional meaning

ideal-real structure (27 covers, 54%) and the given-new structure (23 covers, 46%). This suggests that SLAM magazine predominantly structures its covers to present NBA players as idealized figures, reinforcing their status as aspirational icons in basketball culture.

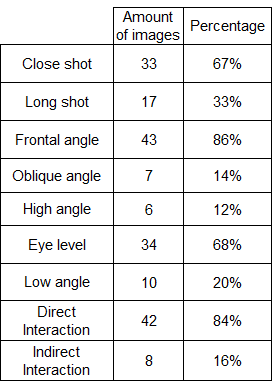
A notable trend in salience is usually the consistent placement of the figure in the middle across all covers. This dominant positioning ensures that the viewer’s attention is immediately drawn to the featured athlete, strengthening their significance within the frame. Additionally, framing plays a key role in defining the visual impact of these images. The dataset shows that 32 covers (64%) exhibit low-degree framing, suggesting a more open composition that integrates the player into the broader context of the sport or cultural discourse. In contrast, 18 covers (36%) feature strong-degree framing, which isolates the player, intensifying their individuality and their personal brand or significance. The dominance of Ideal-real structures and central figure placement suggests a consistent effort to maintain NBA players as iconic representations of basketball excellence. Meanwhile, the inclusion of Given-new structures and the variation in framing degrees indicate a level of adaptability, allowing the magazine to evolve its visual narrative in response to cultural and sporting developments. These results show how compositional meaning actively shapes audience perception, strengthening the magazine’s role in constructing both the individual and collective identity of professional basketball. The analysis of 50 *SLAM* magazine covers using the Representation and Viewer Network framework reveals distinct visual strategies in how NBA players are portrayed. The findings demonstrate that *SLAM* magazine prioritizes close shots (33 covers, 67%), providing an intimate connection between the athletes and the audience. The use of long shots (17 covers, 33%) is significantly less frequent, indicating that most covers focus on individual prominence rather than contextual or distant framing. This emphasis on close-ups aligns with the magazine’s intent to present players as central figures in basketball culture, proving their status being both aspirational and relatable figures. In terms of relational positioning, the vast majority of covers employ a frontal angle (43 covers, 86%), positioning the athletes in direct engagement with the viewer. The oblique angle (7 covers, 14%) is rarely used, suggesting that *SLAM* prefers a composition that creates direct involvement rather than detachment. The dominance of the frontal perspective supports Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) claim that direct engagement enhances viewer interaction, reinforcing the magazine’s role in constructing a close relationship between the reader and the athlete. The power dynamics within the covers are primarily established through vertical angles. Eye-level shots (34 covers, 68%) are the most prevalent, creating a sense of equality between the viewer and the represented athlete. This strategy suggests that *SLAM* magazine positions basketball players as relatable figures rather than incomparable idols. However, low-angle shots (10 covers, 20%) also appear, reinforcing the dominance and authority of the players. High-angle shots (6 covers, 12%) are the least utilized, indicating that *SLAM* deliberately avoids depicting athletes from a diminished or subordinate perspective. This aligns with sports media conventions, which often frame athletes as authoritative and powerful figures. Regarding interaction, direct engagement (42 covers, 84%) is the dominant feature, with most athletes making eye contact with the viewer. This technique creates what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) describe as a *demand* relationship, where the subject actively seeks engagement from the audience. In contrast, indirect interaction (8 covers, 16%), where the athlete looks away from the viewer, is less common. This suggests that *SLAM* magazine intentionally constructs its visual narratives to establish a connection between the players and the audience, highlighting their cultural and personal significance. These trends highlight a consistent visual strategy in *SLAM* magazine’s cover design. The frequent use of close shots, frontal angles, eye-level perspectives, and direct engagement suggests a deliberate effort to position NBA players as accessible, influential, and central to basketball culture. While variations exist in power representation and interaction, the overarching compositional patterns demonstrate a cohesive approach to empowering the athletes’ prominence and relatability within the sports media landscape.

table 5 summary: representation and viewer network

# **5.2 Interpretation of findings in light of research questions**

## **5.2.1 How are NBA players depicted?**

The analysis of representational meaning across 50 covers of *SLAM* magazine reveals a dominant use of conceptual structure (72%), with narrative structures appearing in only 28% of cases. These findings offer critical insights into how NBA players are visually constructed and how these representations inform the viewer’s perception of athlete identity and status. Through the lens of visual social semiotics, and in response to the research questions posed, the following section interprets how these patterns reflect broader **A basketball player on the cover of a magazine

AI-generated content may be incorrect.**communicative intentions. The dominance of conceptual structures indicates that *SLAM* magazine primarily chooses to depict NBA players in a static, emblematic manner rather than through dynamic, action-oriented imagery (see Figure 3). This suggests an emphasis on the identity, status, and symbolic meaning of the athlete, rather than their performance or athletic process. Conceptual meaning, as theorized by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), focuses on classification, attributes, and the role of the represented participants. These findings imply that the athletes are portrayed more as cultural icons and representations of power, excellence, and status rather than as active participants in a moment of play. The reduction in narrative imagery suggests a shift from temporality and movement to permanence and symbolic function, thus creating a closer social relation with the viewer. The prevalence of conceptual imagery establishes an informal, almost monumental connection between the player and the viewer. In this mode, the players are shown engaging in specific actions that invite identification through shared activity. They are depicted as archetypes—heroes, leaders, or figures of aspiration. This stylized approach constructs a relationship built on shared experience and on admiration and recognition of status. It supports the notion that the magazine contributes to the representation of NBA players, elevating them to an equal level of social representation that extends beyond sport into cultural significance.  
While the representational structure itself does not directly define social distance or interaction, its interplay with visual positioning (e.g., gaze, angle, framing) offers critical context. The preference for conceptual structures, when combined with features such as frontal angles and eye-level shots, creates a balanced, controlled distance between the viewer and the subject. It fosters a relationship of mutual recognition, where the player is accessible visually. The scarcity of narrative representation, often linked with dynamic and performative gestures, limits the portrayal of immediacy and interaction, thereby supporting the static, iconographic nature of the depicted athletes.

Figure 5 representational meaning, conceptual structure sample image

Figure 6 representational meaning sample image

## **5.2.2 How are NBA players visually categorized in terms of individualization, specificity, and social roles on SLAM magazine covers, and what ideological meanings do these representations convey?**

**A basketball player on the cover of a magazine

AI-generated content may be incorrect.**The interactive dimension of visual representation, as theorized by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), offers a framework for understanding how images position the viewer in relation to the represented subject. Drawing on the dataset of 50 *SLAM* magazine covers, the analysis of interactive meaning reveals consistent strategies in the use of gaze, distance, and angle. As can be seen in Figure 4, these elements, when interpreted collectively, construct a relationship between the NBA player and the viewer that is rooted in engagement, accessibility, and aspirational connection. The data reveals that 88% of the covers feature a *demand* gaze, where the athlete looks directly at the viewer. This visual choice positions the player as an active participant in the image-viewer relationship, constructing what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) describe as a *demand* offer, inviting the viewer to engage with the athlete not as an outsider, but as someone worthy of attention and connection. Additionally, 80% of images feature a frontal angle, further reinforcing involvement and engagement. This depiction communicates openness and a willingness to connect, suggesting that the athletes are not distant figures to be merely admired, but approachable and relatable personalities. The use of medium (50%) and long shots (44%) rather than close-ups (6%) contributes to a balanced social distance. While the figures are not positioned too intimately, the consistent use of frontal angles and direct gaze build this distance. The representation allows viewers to see the players in full or partial figure, often including key elements of their posture, attire, and expression. This composition maintains a respectful distance, while simultaneously promoting identification. The players are not elevated as unreachable idols, but rather are placed on visually equal ground with the viewer. The interactive framing implies that the athlete’s status is achievable, reinforcing the notion that anyone, regardless of background, could become a professional basketball player. The data shows that *SLAM* magazine strategically uses visual grammar to establish a relationship of equality between subject and viewer (see figure 6). The dominance of the eye-level angle and frontal pose, combined with the direct gaze, constructs a sense of mutual recognition. The viewer is not looking up in reverence or down in judgment, but rather across, on the same visual level. This visual equality translates ideologically into accessibility: the NBA player is not above the audience, but of the same world, potentially from similar origins, and now serving as an inspirational figure who once stood in the viewer’s place.

Figure 7 Interactive meaning sample image

Figure 8 sample image

## **5.2.3 How do the visual structures of information value, salience, and framing on SLAM magazine covers guide the viewer’s interpretation of NBA players’ cultural significance?**

The analysis of compositional structure reveals that the majority of images (54%) follow the Ideal-Real structure. This layout positions the most valued or aspirational content at the top of the image (Ideal) and the more factual or grounded elements at the bottom (Real). When NBA players are situated in the Ideal position, they are symbolically elevated and portrayed as icons of excellence, success, and aspiration. However, with 46% of the covers structured according to the Given-New model, there is also a strong presence of visual narratives that invite the viewer to process the information sequentially—from what is known or familiar (Given) to what is new or unknown (New). This balance between Ideal-Real and Given-New indicates that players are framed as aspirational, and that they are also presented in ways that emphasize development, change, and progression—qualities associated with personal growth and relatability. Framing data further supports the notion that SLAM magazine intentionally has a visual connection between the athlete and the audience. With 64% of images employing low-degree framing, NBA players are integrated into the broader compositional field, suggesting openness and a sense of inclusion. This contrasts with strong-degree framing (36%), where figures are visually isolated, enhancing their iconic or individual status. The prevalence of low-degree framing minimizes the visual distance between subject and viewer, presenting the player not as a remote superstar, but as part of a shared context—one that the viewer can imagine inhabiting. This choice supports an interpretive reading in which players are not simply admired from afar but are visually and conceptually embedded within a narrative of accessibility and shared experience. The balanced use of compositional structures and the dominance of low-degree framing suggest that NBA players are positioned on equal visual ground with the viewer. The arrangement of elements in the composition does not elevate them to an untouchable or mythic status, but rather, frames them within reach—visually and symbolically. This strategic layout reinforces the notion that the players’ journey is one that the viewer can identify with, possibly emulate, and even aspire to replicate. The visual grammar does not establish an unbridgeable gap between the viewer and the represented subject. Instead, it encourages interaction, empathy, and a sense of shared narrative. The visual depiction of NBA players is largely constructed through close and medium shots, with close shots appearing in 67% of the sample. This compositional choice reduces **A basketball player on a cover

AI-generated content may be incorrect.**the psychological and symbolic distance between the viewer and the subject. By framing players in a way that emphasizes facial expressions and bodily presence, SLAM magazine **A basketball player on the cover of a magazine

AI-generated content may be incorrect.**presents them not as distant idols, but as human, accessible, and expressive figures. Additionally, the overwhelming use of frontal angles (86%) further positions the athletes in a way that promotes involvement and connection. Frontal representation suggests openness and inclusion, inviting the viewer to engage with the image rather than observe from a detached position. The use of eye-level shots (see figure 7) in 68% of the covers significantly contributes to the construction of an equal power dynamic between the viewer and the athlete. In visual semiotics, eye-level positioning denotes equality, signalling that the viewer is not placed above or beneath the subject. This visual equality undermines hierarchical distance and supports a democratic reading of the image, whereby the athlete is perceived not as an unreachable icon, but as a relatable figure, someone the viewer could become. Furthermore, the presence of low-angle shots (20%), which traditionally imply the subject’s dominance, remains as a minority in the dataset, emphasizing SLAM’s consistent approach to positioning players as culturally significant but not visually inaccessible. In terms of interaction, the data reveals a strong tendency toward direct engagement: 84% of the images feature direct address, where the subject gazes directly at the viewer. This *demand* gaze, as defined by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), invites connection and response, implying a relationship in which the viewer is not only observing but participating. This approach personalizes the athlete’s image, transforming it into a communicative act. It cultivates a sense of familiarity and interaction, enhancing the impression that NBA players are not abstract figures of fame, but real individuals whose experiences and expressions resonate with the viewer. Taken together, these elements of distance, angle, and gaze shape a representational strategy that brings the reader into the world of the athlete. By employing close, eye-level, and frontal shots with direct address, SLAM magazine aligns the subject and viewer on common ground. This visual rhetoric challenges traditional notions of celebrity detachment and instead constructs a participatory relationship. The player becomes someone with whom the viewer can identify, a peer rather than a pedestal figure. The implication is clear: basketball stardom, as visualized by SLAM, is not an unreachable dream but a potential reality.

Figure 10 compositional meaning sample image

Figure 9 sample image

Figure 11 representation and viewer network sample image

# **Conclusion**

This thesis has examined the visual representation of NBA players on SLAM magazine covers from 2016 to 2023, focusing on how conceptual, narrative, and compositional meanings are strategically employed to construct athlete identity and shape audience engagement. Through multimodal analysis, it has been shown that SLAM magazine consistently applies a deliberate visual language that positions players not only as elite sports figures but also as culturally significant icons. The findings indicate that conceptual structures dominate the visual discourse, with a high frequency of eye-level shots, direct gaze, and central figure placement, all of which work to establish a sense of equality and identification between the viewer and the athlete. Narrative structures, while present, primarily serve to reinforce themes of power and athleticism through low-angle shots and dynamic poses. The compositional analysis further supports this, revealing a balanced use of ideal-real and given-new structures, along with varying degrees of framing that highlight both individual and collective identity. Moreover, the Representation and Viewer Network analysis underscores the magazine’s preference for close, frontal, and direct portrayals, enhancing viewer involvement and reinforcing the personal and cultural relevance of the players. These consistent visual strategies demonstrate how SLAM magazine actively shapes the perception of NBA athletes within a broader cultural narrative, reflecting the league's expanding global influence and the evolving role of athletes as both performers and public figures. Summing up, SLAM magazine’s cover design serves as a powerful site of visual discourse, where the boundaries of sport, culture, and media intersect. By foregrounding accessibility, relatability, and aspirational status, the magazine not only documents the evolution of basketball but also contributes to the construction of its cultural meaning in contemporary media.

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# **Appendix**

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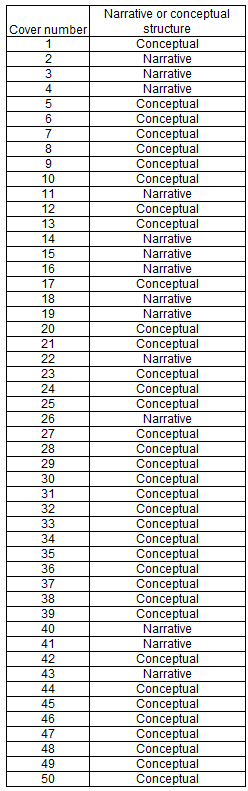


Table 1 representational meaning

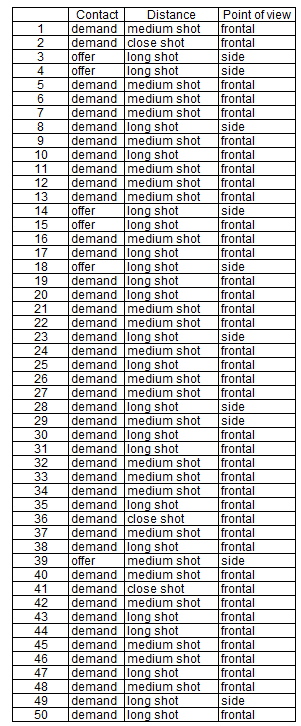


Table 2 interactive meaning

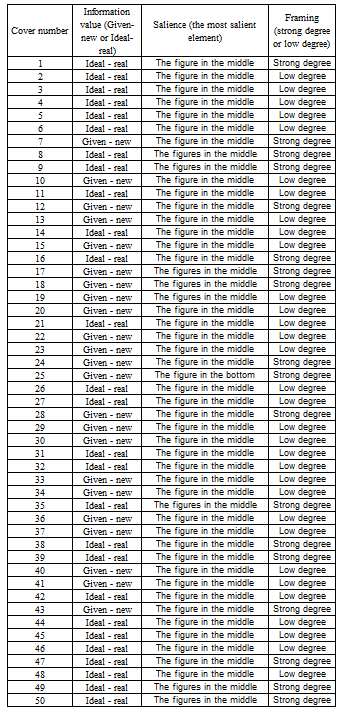


Table 3: compositional meaning

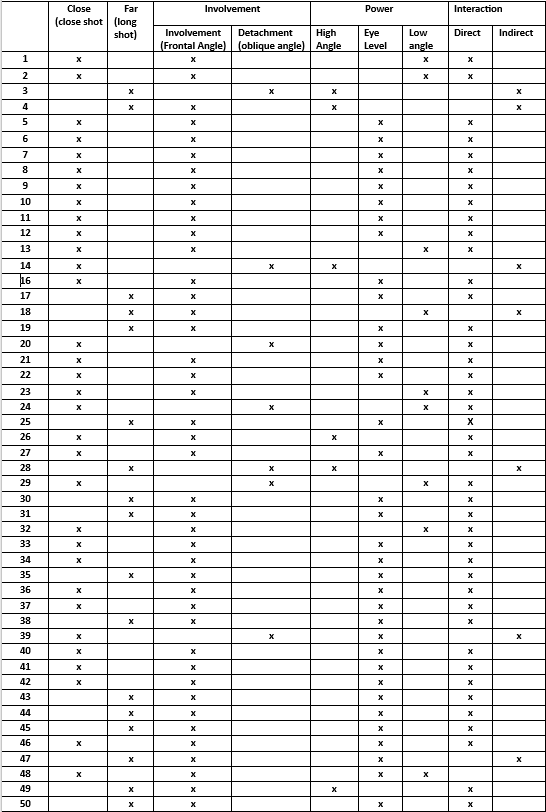


table 6 representation and viewer network

1. Niepotrzebne skreślić [↑](#footnote-ref-2)