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**Scholarship 2023**  
**Health and Physical Education 93501**

**OUTSTANDING SCHOLARSHIP  
EXEMPLAR**

Sport's deep integration into and importance for society cannot be understated; its microcosmic nature reflects the constant evolution of the modern world, yet also the inherent humanity that keeps it grounded. The proclaimed pertinence it has to Aotearoa in being a vital cog of our national identity is justly warranted, as the lessons we obtain from sporting engagement are naturally applied to further aspects of life. This is witnessed from the media to personal experience, making it strikingly clear the degree to which sports influence societal paradigms and structures.

*"Sports teaches you character, it teaches you to play by the rules, it teaches you to know what it feels like to win and lose - it teaches you about life" - Billie Jean King<sup>1</sup>*

However, as is the cyclical nature of humanity, the converse is also vividly apparent. How the media perpetuates and constructs sporting narratives can have a dramatic effect on engagement in sports, both in a positive and negative manner. This can lead to varying levels of participation, interest, and economic impact on national, regional and communal scales. I posit that this key sociological factor is a deep-rooted cause of Aotearoa's shifting levels of teenage sporting activeness, particularly for female and LGBTQ+ adolescents, which is often superficially perceived as a source of proud national identity.

Sport New Zealand's *Every Body Active* strategy<sup>2</sup> has recognised the generational imbalance of this engagement, and how it specifically has been detrimental to teenagers. According to the report, tamariki (both male and female) average over 10 hours of 'play, active recreation and sport' a week between the ages of 5 and 11,

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<sup>1</sup> Brainy Quote. *Billie Jean Quotes*. [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/billie\\_jean\\_king\\_364072](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/billie_jean_king_364072)

<sup>2</sup> Sport New Zealand. "Every Body Active: Strategic Direction 2020-2032". <https://sportnz.org.nz/media/1160/strategy-doc-201219.pdf>

continually rising until reaching a peak engagement rate of 12.5 hours/week at the age of 12. However, this participation drastically reduces for our rangatahi (12-18 years old), who average 8.3 hours a week of physical activity; essentially, physical activity decreases by a third for Kiwis during adolescence, an incredibly damaging statistic considering how highly we as New Zealanders triumph sport and exercise.

This data has been used as a foundation for Sport NZ's strategic plan from 2020-2024, which they state will focus on increasing the engagement and participation of tamariki and rangatahi. In my view, the latter is a far more pressing issue than the former, due to the statistics listed above. It is also a dilemma that I can speak about from personal experience, being currently in my final year of high school; thus, the evaluation and critique of this aspect of the *Every Body Active* strategy, with a particular focus on decreased teenage female and LGBTQ+ involvement, will be the primary focus of my report. I will also predominantly focus on the 'sport' aspect of the Every Body Strategy, not 'play' and 'physical recreation', and how its relationship with the media affects overall teenage physical activity levels.

### **The Issue of Declining Adolescent Physical Activity: Impact on Health and Wellbeing and the *Every Body Active* Strategy**

As the *Every Body Active* strategy outlines, high levels of physical recreation are paramount to healthy well-being. Through data taken from Angus and Associates's 2017 report, *The Value of Sport and Active Recreation to New Zealanders*, they highlight various positive perceptions of physical activity; 89% of people agree that being physically active helps relieve stress, 92% agree that being physically active keeps people fit and healthy, and 88% agree that sports and other physical activities

help build confidence<sup>3</sup>. These statistics all help to consolidate the public consensus that sports and exercise are beneficial for rangatahi, both physically and mentally.

Sport and physical activity have forever been intrinsically linked with the Te Whare Tapa Whā model of well-being (more commonly referred to as the Hauora model), which was derived by New Zealand psychiatrist and Maori health expert Sir Mason Durie in 1984<sup>4</sup>. While sport could simply be viewed as only providing a source of *taha tinana* (physical health), it is understood to result in more positive spiritual (*taha wairua*) and mental (*taha hinengaro*) wellbeing respectively<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, being a part of a team/community is an important way of fulfilling *taha whānau* (social health) and making new friends and connections.

Physical, mental/emotional and social factors are generally accepted as important facets of wellbeing; however, the significance of spirituality is often forgotten. The presence of religion and spirituality in one's life has been shown to increase mental well-being and sporting performance<sup>6</sup>, outlining the importance of *taha wairua*. Sport provides a platform for an individual to find a sense of purpose and belonging in a community, helping to increase their spirituality regardless of their affiliation to a religion, meaning this relationship works both ways. When combined with one's *whenua* (land, place and roots), these aspects of Hauora build the four walls of the home, figuratively and literally supporting each other to ensure one's well-being does not fall and crumble to the ground.

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<sup>3</sup> Angus and Associates (2018). *The Value of Sport and Active Recreation to New Zealanders*. <https://sportnz.org.nz/media/1313/angus-associates-value-of-sport-final.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Mental Health Foundation (2023). *Te Whare Tapa Whā*. <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/te-whare-tapa-wha>

<sup>5</sup> Hapū Hauora (2022). *Why Be Physically Active?* <https://www.hapuhauora.health.nz/health-areas/physical-activity/why-be-physically-active/>

<sup>6</sup> Noh, Y. (2020) A systematic review of religion/spirituality and sport: A psychological perspective. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1469029219300615>

In addition to Durie's model, Sport NZ refers to ihi, wehi and wana as key foundations of wellbeing. *Te ihi* is defined by Sport NZ as "positive energy within that is ignited by what is seen, heard, [and] felt", *te wehi* as "the emotional reaction that acknowledges ihi", and *te wana* as 'the collective energy that unites people, connects people to environment and people to kaupapa'<sup>7</sup>; all of these ideals do not exist within a vacuum, as "ihi begets wehi, that begets wana", forming a holistic model. These ideals can then link to Hauora to develop the connections between the four cornerstones of wellbeing, being the 'glue' that joins its concepts together.

The alarming trend of teenagers' decreasing time spent participating in physical recreation, becoming as low as 5 and a half hours a week by the time they're 18<sup>8</sup>, is heavily detrimental to their wellbeing. In addition to having lower levels of taha tinana, social, spiritual and mental wellbeing would naturally decline, due to the vital importance sport has to each factor as explained earlier. This is reflected in ihi, wehi and wana as the flow of positive energy exuded by physical activity is halted, meaning there is no positive emotional reaction, or opportunity to connect with the environment or kaupapa physically. New Zealand Ministry of Health statistics mirror this assumption, as "Nearly one in four (23.6%) young people aged 15–24 years experienced high or very high levels of psychological distress in 2021/22, up from 5.1% in 2011/12"<sup>9</sup>. This is over four times higher than only a decade prior, which is an extremely concerning pattern. Admittedly, the data shown is not specifically due to lower physical engagement, but both trends are strongly correlated and byproducts of a wider societal issue that will be delved into later in the report.

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<sup>7</sup> Sport New Zealand. "Every Body Active: Strategic Direction 2020-2032". <https://sportnz.org.nz/media/1160/strategy-doc-201219.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Sport New Zealand. "Every Body Active: Strategic Direction 2020-2032". <https://sportnz.org.nz/media/1160/strategy-doc-201219.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Ministry Of Health (2022). Annual Update of Key Results 2021/22: New Zealand Health Survey. <https://www.health.govt.nz/publication/annual-update-key-results-2021-22-new-zealand-health-survey>

While they formed their 2020-2024 strategy with evidently good intentions, I conjecture that Sport NZ missed the mark when trying to identify the cause of the decline. The barriers that they propose hindering play and sporting participation, in that individuals are either ‘too busy’, ‘don’t have the energy’ or are ‘already doing a good amount’ are shockingly ambiguous and do nothing to explain the issue. What are teenagers too busy with? Why do they not have the energy to be physically active? And what constitutes doing a ‘good amount’ of arbitrarily undefined activities or commitments? By failing to understand the crux of the issue, Sport NZ is ensuring that said issue will not be resolved; despite the proclaimed additional avenues and affirmation for physical activity, if adolescents are still too busy, or lacking in motivation and energy, there is nothing to suggest that those factors will change.

Another issue I find with Sport NZ’s strategy is that it over-generalises the problem outlined and does not provide specific details hindering adolescent participation, nor an appropriate method of reducing their impact. They state that ‘[New Zealand] used to be a very active population, but activity levels are now in decline due to a range of social, economic, technological, political and social factors’<sup>10</sup>, yet it does not state what these factors are, nor the extent that activeness has decreased compared to previous generations. Their five strategies to resolve this issue - ‘build on current momentum’, ‘be more focused’, ‘look for new ways of achieving a greater impact’, ‘be more innovative, adaptive and agile’ and ‘remain open to culturally distinctive pathways’<sup>11</sup> - all highlight an emphasis on future improvement. However, if the range of past and present factors they cannot define continue to persist, they will still hinder

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<sup>10</sup> Sport New Zealand. “Every Body Active: Strategic Direction 2020-2032”. <https://sportnz.org.nz/media/1160/strategy-doc-201219.pdf>

<sup>11</sup>Sport New Zealand. “Every Body Active: Strategic Direction 2020-2032”. <https://sportnz.org.nz/media/1160/strategy-doc-201219.pdf>

participation rates, regardless of the strategy Sport NZ attempts to employ.

Essentially, while the *Every Body Active* strategy has correctly identified the prevalent issue of decreasing teenage activeness, they have not located the decrease's cause, or a suitable approach to reduce the impacts of these unknown factors. In addition, apart from separating rangatahi by gender - highlighting that females have lower physical activity - they have not identified subgroups that may skew data, such as LGBTQ+ individuals. Consequently, these mysterious causes will remain, unchecked and unopposed, continually driving teenagers away from physical recreation. However, when critical thinking is applied to the issue, its mystery and intrigue ultimately fade as 'the wider societal issue' presents itself.

### **Societal Causes For Decline and Functionalism**

Due to sports' microcosmic nature, it stands to reason that the diminishing numbers of the adolescent population choosing to participate in sporting - and therefore physical - avenues is reflective of the growing societal epidemic plaguing my age group. Modern media, and its consequences in perpetuating stereotypes and gender disparity, are key factors in the declining activeness of modern teenagers; we are constantly being threatened by external forces that may decrease levels of physical recreation, turning us toward other avenues and interests.

Functionalism, a popular sociological theory about the workings of society, states that social institutions, such as the government, media and educational sectors, shape societal norms and uphold cultural hegemony<sup>12</sup>. Sport is one such pillar of society, with its historic patriarchal and homophobic structure reducing the

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<sup>12</sup>Ashley Crossman (2020). Understanding Functionalist Theory. <https://www.thoughtco.com/functionalist-perspective-3026625>

participation and interest of female and LGBTQ+ individuals. When paired with a fellow social institution in the media, functionalism proposes that they will continue to perpetuate societal norms and restrict engagement for those who are oppressed.

No societal evolution has defined the past decade more than the grand shifts of the media industry through technology. Information, entertainment and communication have all become increasingly digitalised, affecting teenage Kiwis more than most. 2021 statistics highlighted that New Zealand teenagers spend 42 hours per week on average in front of a screen, ranking 4th highest among the 38 OECD nations<sup>13</sup>. This has directly impacted time spent playing sports, being over 5 times higher than their typical engagement in weekly physical recreation (8.3 hours/week). It is very simple to attribute this issue solely to rising technological use, but doing so would again be avoiding the root of the problem. Media's perception of sports, and the gender stereotypes they perpetuate as per functionalist theory, feed into the unfortunate trend the *Every Body Active* strategy alludes to; thus, they should be explored and understood to a greater depth before conclusions can be drawn.

### **Sporting Representation in Media**

Sport's influence on the modern world cannot be contained within a vacuum, as it continually crosses international, cultural and generational boundaries. On a global scale, events such as the Super Bowl, Football World Cup and the Olympics frequently attract hundreds of millions, if not billions, of viewers, being some of the most-watched events in history. Its place in mainstream media has never been in question, and its importance to the global consciousness is undeniable. Even back

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<sup>13</sup> John Gerritsen (2021). *New Zealand teens among world's biggest internet users*. Stuff.  
<https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/education/300303738/new-zealand-teens-among-worlds-biggest-internet-users>

home, the All Blacks are possibly New Zealand's most famous organisation and invoke unparalleled levels of national pride. Sport dominates the headlines of national media outlets such as *One News* and *Stuff*, and some of our most famous individuals are sportspeople themselves. So why, when considering how accessible media makes these sources of sporting inspiration, would teenagers be turned away from indulging in their sports and physical activity? Well, in my opinion, it is not so much a matter of if they are exposed to sport, but *how* they are exposed to it.

The drastic rise in social media and short-form content, through platforms such as Tiktok, Instagram and YouTube, have lowered society's attention spans and condensed sporting media into moments, highlight reels, and snippets that do not tell a full story. Adolescents are not as deeply connected in the game, or the team they are watching, but in the action or the individual. This commodifies sport almost purely as a source of entertainment that should be viewed, rather than played and enjoyed; it becomes less relatable and more artificial, and thus teenagers are incentivised to 'consume it rather than do it'.

This consumerist approach, in contrast to creating pathways for youth involvement in sports through media, is greatly damaging the development of sports at younger levels. Aspiring teenagers often struggle to see themselves reflected in the *ihi* exuded by professional athletes, due to the prevalence of technology. Their sporting heroes are stuck behind the other side of the screen or through a subvertingly positive and utopic Instagram profile. It is becoming increasingly rare for athletes to be seen in public due to their large presence online and the attention that they would gather from doing so, therefore often they shy away from exposing themselves

publicly, instead communicating through social media sites. This gives off the impression that they are untouchable and unreachable because of their blue tick and falsely perfect life, which is in contrast to the teenager's situation.

From my own experience, it can be difficult to view athletes as normal individuals due to the large extent they are commodified and outwardly made to look perfect, either through the media industry forming a popular narrative or the athletes themselves trying to grow their brand. I don't see myself aspiring to be the next Beauden Barrett or LeBron James, because quite frankly, I don't see a path to getting there as it seems a world away from secondary school sports. This is unfortunate, as when I was a tamariki, and not predisposed to such narratives, I was much more invested and interested in sports and did have those dreams. My wehi was significantly stronger due to the increased authenticity of my sporting idols, who I admired immensely. This lack of sporting motivation is commonplace, as my fewer hours of physical recreation are reflected in the majority of my peers.

To further extrapolate this issue, media organisations are always seeking the latest drama or controversy to slap onto their Instagram pages, or individuals capitalising off of these moments to post a funny sports TikTok in the pursuit of millions of views. While this may be beneficial in terms of dragging eyeballs into the sport, it does nothing to keep them there and translate their interest into real-life applications. One swipe further and the person has forgotten about the breathtaking 30-yard screamer, or the controversial Blackcaps wicket, and continued with their day. Mainstream sports media have seen a decline in younger viewership<sup>14</sup>, with rangatahi instead

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<sup>14</sup> Philip Molnar (2021). Can professional sport leagues reverse the trend of declining younger viewership? <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/business/story/2021-10-08/can-professional-sport-leagues-reverse-the-trend-of-declining-younger-viewership>

turning to social media and short-form entertainment for their sports fix. If Sport NZ considered this phenomenon and used the popularity of sports in the media as a path towards grassroots physical activity, instead of a disconnect from it, then we may see teenage engagement rise.

Altering the media-pushed narratives of sport and the extent to which it is commercialised online could have beneficial impacts on teenage wellbeing. Promoting more accurate depictions of sport, instead of the hyperbolic perfectionism that ensues through social media, would allow rangatahi to illicit a stronger response of wehi as the ihi being projected would be more authentic and relatable. This would establish a stronger emotional connection between the teenage viewer and their favourite athletes, akin to the relationships I felt I had with my childhood sporting paragons like Richie McCaw and Brendon McCullum, deepening my love for cricket and rugby. Through my adolescence, however, my affinity towards both sports diminished due to how the media portrayed them, and by 16, I was playing neither, thus decreasing my physical activeness. Changing the media's sporting narrative would encourage rangatahi like me to engage again in physical activity and further develop their sense of wana. With these stronger foundations in place, sports and media become a more welcoming environment to foster aspects of one's Hauora, showing the upside in functionalism as they will shape healthier societal norms.

### **Gender Disparity and Sporting Stereotypes**

Unfortunately, many barriers are holding back this resurgence of wellbeing, no more so than the gender disparity in sports. This is a major factor behind a decline in female teenage sporting participation (Sport NZ data shows that they average fewer

hours per week playing sports than men in every age group), which is a direct result of the difference between male and female sporting representation in the media. This allows for certain stereotypes to be perpetuated, negatively impacting participation.

Ultimately, statistics highlight that sport is a male-dominated industry, from economic revenue to viewers and media exposure. Despite this, New Zealand is more progressive than other countries in their representation of women in sporting media. According to 2021 statistics, female sports accounted for around 20% of sports media coverage in the country, which was five times the global average of 4%<sup>15</sup>. This was a 6% increase from the previous year, indicating a huge rise in female sporting exposure in the news and shifting societal norms. However, this still means that male sports coverage is present in the media 4 times as often as female sports, a significant discrepancy between the sexes. This negatively influences female rangatahi's wana as they do not see themselves represented to the same degree.

Of course, there are inherent reasons why females are less represented in sports coverage than males - it is presumptuous and incorrect to attribute this disparity simply to patriarchal misogyny, as functionalism states. Simply put, due to the differences in physiology between males and females, men can play sports at a higher skill level. Their increase in testosterone, height and strength means that they, on average, operate at a 10-12% higher level across elite sports,<sup>16</sup> which is a substantial margin. Thus, male sport is objectively more skilful and emits a more substantial ihi, if you define one's sporting entertainment as watching athletes of the

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<sup>15</sup> Gee, Samantha (2022). *Media paying more attention to women's sport but concerns remain*. <https://www.nz.co.nz/news/national/471053/media-paying-more-attention-to-women-s-sport-but-concerns-remain>

<sup>16</sup> Coleman & Schreeve (2018). *Comparing Athletic Performances: The Best Elite Women to Boys and Men*. <https://law.duke.edu/sports/sexe-sport/comparative-athletic-performance/>

highest calibre compete against each other, which many do. Unfair or otherwise, human biology has significantly contributed to this discrepancy.

Furthermore, male sports tend to get greater coverage because of their target audience. A survey conducted in August 2019 found that 76% (over three-quarters) of respondents who watched sports more than any other content were male. This is over three times higher than the 22% of female respondents (2% did not specify gender), indicating strongly that sports are generally consumed by the male audience.<sup>17</sup> Naturally, men would tend to watch more male sports, not only because of the higher level as previously outlined, but because they're male themselves and thus can relate to the game more innately; this then sees male rangatahi inspired through their wehi to participate in sports to a far greater degree than women.

However, this is likely not simply a causal relationship resulting in increased male sports coverage. The fact that the media does display men's sports to a far higher extent than women's sports would draw more males in to watch it, meaning there is a higher proportion of males in the sporting audience, increasing the demand for men's sports coverage, and so on. This exponential, snowballing effect will continue to negatively affect teenage girls' levels of physical recreation, as they do not see themselves represented enough in sporting media and kaupapa. Unless more work is done on a governing and distributive level to even the exposure of male and female sports (which New Zealand is working towards, but is still a long way off), then both factors will continue to feed off each other and restrict female pathways into sports even further.

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<sup>17</sup> Statista (2019). Share of sports viewers worldwide. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1114119/sports-fans-gender-distribution/>

The flow-on effect from these starkly different exposure levels is the major gap in the commercialisation of sports and player salaries, further impacting the gender disparity of adolescent sporting participation. Because male sports gain more media coverage and viewership, it is more profitable for the game, with more revenue being generated and given to those within the sport, be it teams, coaches, players or institutions. Therefore, when deciding on a career in adolescence, women may be turned away from sports, knowing that the pay is considerably less than for men.

In no sport is this gap more pronounced than the most popular game, football. 'The Beautiful Game', as it is affectionately called by its followers, has approximately 3.5 billion fans (over 1 billion more than the next most popular sport, cricket), and 250 million players, across 200 countries around the world<sup>18</sup>. Thus, no sport would be more influential globally in attracting new players through media coverage than football. For the top male and female divisions of English football, men on average make around 100 times what women do annually (£3.09 million<sup>19</sup> compared to £30,000<sup>20</sup>). Knowing this, aspiring male footballers would be more incentivized to pursue a career in the sport and carry on playing. In contrast, young British women may be disenfranchised by likely earning a far lower salary at the top level of the sport than men, being even less than the average national wage (£33,000 a year)<sup>21</sup>.

This issue, while not prevalent to the same drastic extent, still rears its ugly head in Aotearoa and its most popular sport, rugby. While Black Ferns earn respectable wages of \$60,000 to \$130,000 per year, it pales in comparison to the All Blacks,

<sup>18</sup> World Population Review (2023). *Most Popular Sport by Country*.  
<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/most-popular-sport-by-country>

<sup>19</sup> Sportsest (2023). *English Premier League Salaries By Teams And Their Yearly Wages Bills*.  
<https://sportsest.com/premier-league-salaries-by-teams/>

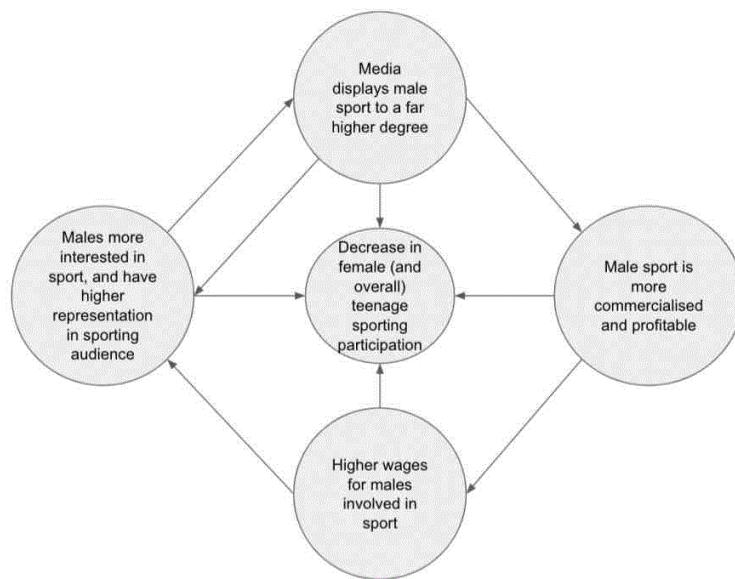
<sup>20</sup> Matt Smith (2022). *How much do women's footballers get paid?*  
<https://www.football.london/womens-football/women-footballer-pay-england-lionesses-25197540>

<sup>21</sup> D. Clark (2023). *Median annual earnings for full-time employees in the United Kingdom in 2022, by region*.  
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/416139/full-time-annual-salary-in-the-uk-by-region/>

whose top earners reportedly make around 1 million annually<sup>22</sup>. On a provincial level, this is similarly amplified, with women participating in the Farah Palmer Cup (National Provincial Championship) earning half the average wage of the male equivalent<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, the same pattern as in the United Kingdom occurs, with young women abandoning the sporting industry as the pay gap is exponentially higher than the 2022 New Zealand average of 9.2%<sup>24</sup>, which is an issue in itself.

These issues of gender disparity in sports can all be traced back to the media and functionist theory, and their role in the reduced exposure and interest in women's sports. As previously highlighted, New Zealand has recognised this imbalance and is working towards rectifying the situation, but the model I have devised below representing the cycle of gender disparity still paints a stark picture, as male sports coverage accounts for 80% of the sporting media in the nation.

### **The Cycle of Sporting Gender Disparity**



<sup>22</sup> Radio NZ (2022). NZ Rugby mulls World Cup bonus for Black Ferns. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/sport/478692/nz-rugby-mulls-world-cup-bonus-for-black-fern>

<sup>23</sup> Zoe Goerge (2022). *The Podium: Rugby World Cup equal pay and the misconception about women's sport*. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/rugby/rugby-world-cup/300713984>

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Women (2023). *What's my Gender Pay Gap?* <https://women.govt.nz/gpa>

As you can see, my model is not a perfect cyclical embodiment of the issue; the large proportion of male sporting audiences and media coverage feed off of each other, allowing the issue to be amplified further. All four factors contribute directly to a decrease in females' physical activity, particularly among teenagers whose main form of influence is the media, specifically social media and shorter-form content (which is naturally derived from the mainstream coverage of sports). However, when combined as a collective, the problem is made all the more severe. Balancing the funding and wages for female and male sports will not immediately bridge the gap of sporting engagement to break the cycle, because of the gender disparity in sports media influencing the youth. Thus, to truly remedy the situation, it is the media's representation of sports, and specifically its gender incongruity, that must be rectified. The *Every Body Active* strategy fails to realise this point of view, instead attempting to create its own positive cycle of physical activity, which blatantly ignores the oppressive, pre-existing paradigms of media manipulation and functionalism.

### **Gender Stereotypes in Sport Extrapolated by the Media**

Yet even with attempting to balance male and female sporting representation in media, as the NZ government is clearly trying to do, the stereotypes that are created by the media itself will continue to restrict teenage sporting engagement and exercise levels for both males and females alike. To properly address the issue, such deeply ingrained notions of gender must begin to dissolve.

Dangerously unrealistic body and fitness standards are being popularised by social media platforms, which should be held accountable for their impacts on adolescent activeness. Young, impressionable women are frequently being turned away from

sports due to how their female sporting idols are portrayed, or choose to portray themselves. They are bombarded with images and videos of how female athletes should look - as fit, feminine and attractive - to maximise commercial revenue from the sport and appeal to the disproportionately heterosexual male audience, further extrapolating the cycle of gender disparity I derived above. This, therefore, results in a space where women do not feel valued for their sporting prowess, but rather for their physical appearance. Stanford University graduate, Emily Liang, summarises this trend in her academic report on the issue, *The Media's Sexualization of Female Athletes: A Bad Call for the Modern Game*:

*"Unlike male athletes, female athletes do not have the luxury of being primarily portrayed as performance athletes, as coverage of their beauty and sex appeal usually overshadow highlights of their on-field endeavours" - Liang, 2011<sup>25</sup>*

Yet this should not be considered a luxury to have, as female athletes are not pursuing a career in modelling or as a social media influencer, but as a sportsperson. In any morally just world, this is what they should be portrayed as, as it is factually what they are. Instead, the fact that they're being publicly sexualised and viewed for their body is not only disrespectful to the athletes themselves but to the millions of aspiring female rangatahi around the world. They are being made to believe through sporting coverage that their bodies should look a certain way, which is not the case.

In 2021, the Norwegian women's beach handball team protested against the uniform regulations of the sport, requiring team members to wear extremely revealing

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<sup>25</sup> Emily Liang (2011). *The Media's Sexualization of Female Athletes: A Bad Call for the Modern Game*. <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/587>



clothing with tight restrictions on the maximum and minimum length. They did so by wearing shorts instead of a bikini at the European Championships in July, in defiance of the game's rules. Whilst initially fined for their actions, the media attention they garnered and subsequent criticism of the IHF (International Handball Federation) resulted in a rule change in October of that year, permitting women to wear shorts<sup>26</sup>. Not only was this a heroic triumph for women's sport in standing up for female rights against the evidently ingrained sexualisation, but it represented the

This photo went viral on Twitter in July 2021 depicting the discrepancies between male and female uniforms for international handball matches.

positive impacts media can have in removing stereotypes, instead of popularising them. Instances such as this encourage young women that there is a place for them in sports to be themselves free of oppressive restrictions and regulations, increasing their sense of *taha wairua* and *taha hinengaro*.

While the majority of this report has focused on issues in women's sports reducing teenage participation (due to girls' lower teenage activity levels), it is important to note that barriers persist for both genders. How male athletes are often stereotyped (as strong, masculine and non-emotional) by the media has detrimental impacts on rangatahi, especially for those who do not fit the popularised heteronormative ideals of their chosen sports. As a consequence, gay male athletes are severely underrepresented in sporting arenas, either from being put off sports at a young age, or not feeling comfortable coming out and facing large scrutiny over their sexuality.

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<sup>26</sup> The Associated Press (2021). Bikini rule changed in beach handball after Norwegian player protest. <https://www.cbc.ca/sports/bikini-rule-change-handball-player-protest-1.6232786>

Earlier in 2023, former prop Campbell Johnstone became the first ever All Black to come out as gay, which was a monumental moment for male LGBT athletes in New Zealand. In his interview with Seven Sharp<sup>27</sup>, Johnstone spoke of his struggles 'living a double life' playing rugby, and feeling like he was 'not fitting the mould' of what an 'All Black or Crusader' should be. However, by coming out now he hopes that it can 'take away the pressure and stigma surrounding the issue' and help other gay athletes feel comfortable with their sexuality. The significance of this event cannot be understated, as despite there being over 1200 All Blacks throughout history,<sup>28</sup> only one has come out as gay. While there is no national data on the proportion of men that are gay in New Zealand, according to 2020 statistics, 4.2% of adult New Zealanders identified themselves as being part of the LGBT community,<sup>29</sup> with the actual number believed to be even higher due to people not feeling comfortable sharing that information. If this figure were applied to past and present All Blacks, 51 players would be expected to be gay, a significant number.

While I myself am not gay, I have friends my age who are, and have seen first-hand how they have dissociated from traditional 'masculine' sports after coming to terms with their sexual identity. Johnstone's coming out would have been a landmark moment in their lives, finally seeing a place for people like themselves within rugby, but it came too late; they had already moved on and fell out of love with our national sport, because of its deeply ingrained homophobia. If others like Johnstone had shown the bravery he did in their early teenage years,

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<sup>27</sup> TVNZ (2023). *First All Black player to publicly come out as gay tells his story*. <https://www.1news.co.nz/2023/01/30>

<sup>28</sup> Wikipedia (2023). *List of New Zealand national rugby union players*.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_New\\_Zealand\\_national\\_rugby\\_union\\_players](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_New_Zealand_national_rugby_union_players)

<sup>29</sup> Stats NZ (2021). *1 in 20 adults identify as LGBT+ in major social survey*.  
<https://www.stats.govt.nz/news/1-in-20-adults-identify-as-lgbt-in-major-social-survey>

perhaps my friends would still be playing rugby today, and enjoying it just as much as heterosexual male Kiwis tend to.

However, for more sportsmen like Johnstone to feel ready to come out publicly, and inspire gay rangatahi, more needs to be done to create an inclusive environment emitting positive ihi. Restructuring the historically embedded archetypes of what a male athlete should be will show gay male teenagers that there is a place for themselves in sports. To achieve this, a leaf should be taken out of the book of the women's game in analysing how they treat sexual diversity. Women's sport is typically more welcoming and receptive to other sexualities, to the point where five current or recent White Ferns (the NZ women's cricket team) are fully open about their same-sex marriages,<sup>30</sup> actually being higher than the national average. Doing so would help foster a wana of openness and diversity within men's sports, and consequently see more athletes expressing themselves and inspiring teenagers to participate, thus increasing their sense of Hauora through physical recreation.

### **Potential Solutions for Increasing Teenage Participation in Sports**

When reflecting on the *Every Body Active* strategy, it is important to remember the motivators people have for engaging in sports. The report states that 76% of people who play sports do so 'for fun', 45% 'to hang out with family and friends', yet only 28% 'to physically challenge [themselves] or to win'. Sporting ability should not translate to sporting and physical participation, because that is not why the majority play sports in the first place. We do so for the social interactions it provides us, as

<sup>30</sup> Juili Ballal (2022), *List of Women Cricketers involved in same-sex marriage*.  
<https://femalecricket.com/women-cricket-news/24316-list-of-women-cricketers-involved-in-same-sex-marriage.html>

sports are a vessel for building relationships and enhancing the human experience. However, despite social media's intention of bringing people closer to sports through its heightened exposure, it generally ends up driving teenagers away. These sporting narratives constructed by individuals and organisations on social media clearly have detrimental effects on adolescent well-being, diminishing the four aspects of Hauora and limiting one's sense of ihi, wehi and wana. As such, the nation and *Every Body Active* strategy must address this issue to improve the mental health and well-being of rangatahi in New Zealand. From the research that I have conducted throughout this report, I have identified 3 main causes of teenage decline in physical activeness, which are all a direct result of or greatly accentuated by the media:

1. The commodification of sport through modern media, both by short-form content and glamorised social media profiles for both athletes and organisations,
2. The cycle of gender disparity in sports causing female teenagers to have lower levels of physical activity than males, and
3. Popularised gender stereotypes in sports that pigeonhole athletes and restrict the involvement of rangatahi who do not fit into, or appreciate, these specific archetypes.

To increase the levels of teenagers' physical activity this trifecta of tribulations must be addressed. Doing so will have immensely beneficial impacts on their wellbeing, through feeling more motivated and encouraged to be active. These ramifications must occur on a national level, due to the vast influence global media holds over Kiwi rangatahi, as communal regulation alone is not enough to resolve the issue. While each problem can be traced back to the media and overlaps to some degree, being proponents of the wider functionalist theory, they are all different enough that

separate strategies must be employed to have a worthwhile impact on increasing teenage activeness. As such, I will split my recommended solutions for the *Every Body Active* strategy into three subcategories, tackling each issue independently.

### **1. Breaking down the sporting perfectionism present in social media**

We must work to abolish certain preconceptions about the utopian nature of sports in social media. In its place, avenues for aspiring teenagers to connect with their sporting idols in authentic and genuine ways should be promoted, leading to increased participation. This needs to be the responsibility of sporting organisations, media outlets with contracts for promoting the sport, and social media companies accountable for spreading unrealistic conceptions of athletes and sports in general. In terms of how the *Every Body Active* strategy can approach this issue, their governing body, Sport NZ, can work with the relevant national sporting agencies in the country, such as the NZRFU and NZC, to create pathways for them to connect with local communities to a greater degree. Admittedly, it would be difficult for Sport NZ to influence modern social media such as TikTok and Instagram. However, heavier advertising for mainstream sports events and encouraging adolescents to support their local teams and sporting community would be advantageous for increasing participation. Taking some of the emphasis off of online interaction and engagement, and looking for ways in which to inspire Kiwi rangatahi in the real world, would allow teenagers to communicate with professional athletes more personally. As such, they would be provided with a better picture of life at the top level of the game. An approach similar to this may already fall under the umbrella of looking 'for new ways of achieving a greater impact', as per the *Every Body Active* strategy, so this advice may not be relevant. However, being more specific about

their goals, as well as the reasons why they are being carried out, would give the public more certainty about the validity and direction of Sport NZ's strategy.

## **2. Piercing the cycle of gender disparity in sports**

By being a Crown agency funded by the Government, Sport NZ would also have some influence regarding national policies around media and advertising for sports in the nation. Using this power to further address the clear issue of gender disparity in sport, primarily through media coverage as previously alluded to, would help to balance the levels of female and male rangatahi participation. There are two main methods in which to achieve this goal: continuing to 'build on current momentum' (as the *Every Body Active* strategy states) towards women's sports accounting for 50% of the national sporting media coverage, and reducing, if not eliminating, the gender pay gap in New Zealand sports. Quite simply, if female teenagers are more exposed to their gender in sporting media, they will be provided with more inspiration and motivation to play sports. Games such as rugby and cricket would no longer be so heavily male-dominated, thus women would feel more comfortable engaging in them. The *Every Body Active* strategy should, therefore, look at a national level for ways to achieve this, whether it be a long-term plan with a clear goal of gender equality in sports by a certain year, or by enforcing strict rules and regulations on governing bodies to reduce gender disparity. There are multiple ways this could be achieved with their large influence and resources, it would just require decisive action and professional execution. An additional focus should be at the grassroots level and ensuring equal opportunities are afforded to both boys and girls, especially in the teenage bracket, naturally increasing participation levels by giving rangatahi more avenues of physical activity.

### **3. Removing and rethinking ingrained sporting stereotypes**

The final present barrier to teenage physical activity that must be addressed concerns the dangerous stereotypes perpetuated by the media and generationally ingrained in sporting communities. As explained, these deeply impact both male and female youth and restrict their engagement by making them feel alienated or disenfranchised from their chosen sports. To begin, more appropriate regulations should be put in place in women's sports around uniforms, commentary and media coverage, which prevents athletes from being objectified and judged on their appearance. Previous instances of sportswomen and organisations standing up against unfair stipulations, such as the Norwegian women's beach handball team in 2021, should become the rule rather than the exception to instil societal change and progress. Sport NZ is pivotal in providing this on a national scale, ensuring that women feel comfortable in how they are being portrayed through sport, both as players and spectators. In terms of promoting LGBTQ+ awareness in men's sports to foster inclusivity and acceptance, more needs to be done in terms of communication of the issue, and acknowledgement of underlying homophobia and heteronormative structures that are historically present. International campaigns such as 'Rainbow Laces', where sports players don rainbow-coloured boot laces in support of the LGBT community, have made decent progress towards removing these stereotypes, but their 2021 survey showed that only 40% believed competitive sport was welcoming for gay and bisexual men<sup>31</sup>. The *Every Body Active* strategy did not recognise this as an issue, but from these statistics, it is evident that men's sport has not yet reached a point where everyone feels accepted and respected. As such,

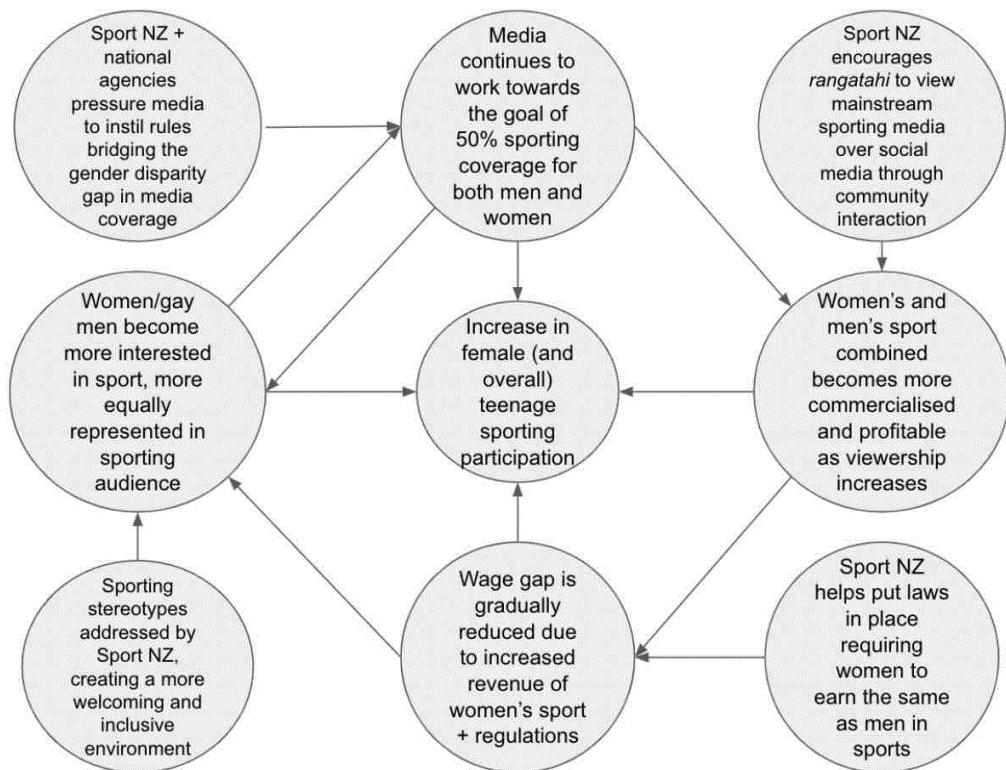
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<sup>31</sup> Stonewall (2022) *Rainbow Laces: New research showing British public overwhelmingly support LGBTQ+ people in sport*. <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/about-us/news/rainbow-laces-new-research-showing-british-public-overwhelmingly-support-lgbtq-people>

Sport NZ should make this a priority moving forward in their strategy towards 2024 and beyond.

Despite each issue holding its own importance and severity, they do influence and extrapolate each other, together forming a sporting culture that greatly reduces the participation of rangatahi. To combat this, I have created a counter-model to the cycle of gender disparity previously included on page 14, outlining where Sport NZ can make improvements that will increase adolescent levels of physical activity.

### **Sport NZ's Role in Breaking the Cycle of Gender Disparity and Increasing Sporting Participation of Rangatahi**



This model represents how the four main approaches I have outlined can be utilised by Sport NZ to combat the cycle of sporting gender disparity and increase female

teenage participation, in addition to gay male rangatahi (by abolishing stereotypes) and adolescents overall (through community engagement). By doing so, a positive cycle will be created, where gender and sexuality representation is more balanced, and is mirrored in both viewership and physical engagement. When applied to the *Every Body Active* strategy itself, it will make the document more specific, directional and in touch with the real barriers facing rangatahi today, and why they supposedly 'don't have the energy' to be physically active. All strategies listed will serve to increase a rangatahi's sense of ihi, wehi and wana towards sports and exercise, for the reasons listed throughout my report. Furthermore, it will improve their sense of Hauora, with relatability, equality, and acceptance as the three key cornerstones of my presented model, all pivotal to healthy well-being.

### **Conclusion and Final Thoughts**

Youth sport in Aotearoa is vital for promoting positive Hauora, and inspiring ihi and wehi, yet its wana is perhaps the most important aspect of all. The collective energy exhibited by physical activity is a microcosm of wider society and is an energy that has been on the decrease since the rise of media and digitalisation via the ideals of functionalism. On a macrocosmic level, adolescents have been drifting further and further apart despite social media's goal of connecting humanity, undermining their *taha whenua* and greatly diminishing their well-being and sporting participation. Sport's role in reigniting this wana is imperative for satiating the innate human desire for connection and community, making the *Every Body Active* strategy all the more meaningful for future generations of rangatahi.

Throughout this report, I have identified barriers and offered solutions pertaining to the decline in teenage physical recreation, with a particular focus on the dangerous influence of media today on sports. However, the list of barriers is endless and could vary from the generational mindset of rangatahi to their motivation towards fitness and financial state. The severity of the issue cannot conclusively be refined to a 26-page report - for example, I have not analysed how the media has specifically influenced Māori, Pasifika and disabled rangatahi's sporting participation, which are all major issues in their own right, nor alternate sociological theories to functionalism - and I do not claim to hold all of the answers regarding adolescents' decreasing activity levels. My research, argument, personal views and model are merely one side of a multi-faceted debate, and perhaps do not afford Sport NZ, alongside its *Every Body Active* strategy the kudos they deserve for their continuous effort addressing the problem; in reality, this is dealt with to a far better degree than in other nations, as reflected in the ratio of male and female sporting media coverage. Yet by the same token, there are undoubtedly flaws within the strategic plan that must be addressed on an executive level, which my report intended to illuminate clearly and effectively. What is certain, however, is that sport will continue to influence rangatahi in various, meaningful ways, both in a positive and negative sense. The role of the media, and indeed Sport NZ, is to continue to ensure these implications lean towards the former and are a source of elevation for one's well-being, not a detriment to it.

# Outstanding Scholarship

**Subject:** Health and Physical Education

**Standard:** 93501

**Total score:** 21

<b>Q</b>	<b>Score</b>	<b>Marker commentary</b>
1	07	<p><b>Application of knowledge</b></p> <p>This report is nicely balanced between research and the candidate's own ideas. It is based on concepts and ideas that are key to the health and physical education learning area, such as Te Whare Tapa Whā, stereotypes, media, gender disparity, functionalism, ihi, wehi and wana. The report does not try to do too much by drawing in a large number of concepts or higher-level theories, but instead weaves the discussed concepts throughout the whole report showing excellent depth of understanding. The report synthesises the issues to create their own diagram of how gender disparities are perpetuated.</p> <p>The report addresses future actions, which are drawn from their earlier discussion. The future actions are synthesised to create a model to break the cycle of gender disparity in sport.</p> <p>To be an 8, this report could have had a stronger connection to the underlying concepts of the health and physical education curriculum, such as health promotion. It also could demonstrate more divergent ideas at times.</p>
	07	<p><b>Critical thinking</b></p> <p>The report is critical throughout, both towards the strategy document of <i>EveryBody Active</i>, as well as around the issues present in declining participation in sport. Issues and practices, particularly in the media, and with how rangatahi engage with media, are questioned and challenged with insight and perception.</p> <p>The report demonstrates frequent independent reflection on the issues, using the candidate's own experience as well. At times the report asks critical questions, which could be more sustained. The report also takes a stance early on, that rangatahi should be prioritised over tamariki, due to the steep decline in participation rates.</p> <p>Critical thinking is also demonstrated in the creation of two models – one to identify the current cycle of gender disparity within sport, and one to integrate and synthesise the proposed solutions.</p>

	<b>Communication</b>  The topic, despite not having a title, is identified early. The strategy document of <i>EveryBody Active</i> is also introduced early, and research is discussed to clarify and show the scope of the issue. There is a nice balance of research and the candidate's own ideas.  The report uses subheadings to keep the discussion structured. The report flows nicely, and is laid out in a way that is coherent, logical, and sophisticated. The report stays focused on the identified topic and supports their argument with relevant Aotearoa New Zealand examples.  The strategy document of <i>EveryBody Active</i> , and the concepts of functionalism and ihi, wehi, wana are integrated throughout the report, making it convincing, clear, and compelling.  There are some minor terminology inaccuracies. The report states it will focus on sport, but then regularly refers to physical activity and physical recreation. Research presented is also on physical activity levels rather than sports participation, the latter of which would have strengthened the position and argument of the report.
07	