

The influence of consumerism on Spanish physical education teachers

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Abstract

Consumer culture and neoliberalism have significantly influenced contemporary globalised, Western(ised) and highly visual societies. These influences have also infiltrated physical education settings, contributing to market-driven surveillance of physical education teachers' physical appearance. This paper examines the reflections of a group of physical education teachers working at the primary and secondary levels in Spain concerning subjectivities of bodies and professional practices. It draws on semi-structured interview data and the Foucauldian concepts of Panopticon and surveillance to explore the ways in which the participants were influenced by the market and neoliberalism. The results of the study invite us to reflect on how images and messages from media may promote certain expectations for physical education teachers concerning physical appearance, dress and sports supplements consumption. The findings have implications for teacher education and the preparation of physical education teachers to resist dominant discourses promoted by the media.

Keywords

Consumerism, physical education teachers, panopticon, subjectivities of bodies

Introduction

Western(ised) societies are characterised by the pervasive influence of consumer culture (Featherstone, 2007). The effects of consumerism are linked to neoliberal and market influences

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in societies (Featherstone, 2010, 2014), which emphasise certain clothing brands and idealise/normalise particular body types. Consumer culture plays a persuasive role in society, contributing to the idealisation and normalisation of slim, fit, toned and youthful bodies (Rudman, 2015; Schniter and Shields, 2014). Consumerism, globalisation and the influences of the market have also reached the field of Physical Education (PE) and sports (Fitzclarence, 1990; Kirk, 2004). Research suggests that PE and sports professionals may aim to achieve the ideal body stereotypes that are portrayed in the media (González-Calvo et al., 2017) and the consumption of certain sport brands.

The negative effects of media body images on self-esteem, body satisfaction and confidence have been widely investigated (e.g. Boyce et al., 2013; Robinson et al., 2017). However, the impact of these images and messages on PE teachers' subjectivities of bodies warrants further examination, given their influential professional roles as teachers of the body and health. Significant others (e.g. friends, partners, family members) may also place pressures on professionals working in PE, fitness and sport contexts to develop a certain body type, given the embodied identity of these fields (Macdonald and Kirk, 1999) and the general assumption that these professionals need to be role models for their students and clients (Varea, 2018; Varea and Tinning, 2016; Webb et al., 2008).

While most of the literature investigating consumerism and privatisation in PE has focused on schools outsourcing PE (Evans and Davies, 2004; Kirk, 2004; Robinson and Randall, 2016), little research has yet been conducted to examine the influences of the market on PE teachers' subjectivities of bodies and their professionalism. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to explore how consumerism influences PE teachers' subjectivities of bodies and their professional practice.

Neoliberalism and globalisation

Neoliberalism comprises a complex and contradictory set of practices and discourses shaped by current global economies (Azzarito et al., 2017; Macdonald, 2014), including capital accumulation, profit-making, outsourcing, privatisation, and individualisation of responsibility through the capacity to make (sound) choices (Macdonald, 2014). Neoliberalism also promotes a hyper-responsible self and a denial of imposed constraints and limitations (Rose, 1999). Under the influence of neoliberal discourses, individuals may be convinced that they are shaping their own life conditions; however, this is the result of a covert technique used to govern individuals by persuading them to make meaning of their lives as if it were the result of their own choices.

Under these compelling influences, individuals are called upon to self-monitor and to invest in successful selves, particularly via the adoption of highly individualistic healthy and physically active lifestyles (McRobbie, 2007). Neoliberalism and globalisation intersect in policy prescriptions that dominate the 21st century development agenda (Heron, 2008) and global flows of capital, knowledge and resources (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). The field of PE, which 'carries the stamp of neoliberal globalization' (Macdonald, 2011: 36) via the promotion of health and citizenship (Macdonald et al., 2008), must also critically examine the pervasiveness of neoliberalism (Macdonald, 2011).

Throughout the global neoliberal society, a global fitness and health market exists, driven by popular consumption and commodities (Azzarito et al., 2017). Contemporary society is replete with messages about the body that permeate individuals' lives (Varea, 2018). These messages are particularly prevalent in the mass media culture of fitness, health and sport, where the body has

become a site of anxiety (Evans and Davies, 2004). Contemporary society comprises a world of images and bodily visibility through which cultural messages about the body are constantly (re)produced (Azzarito, 2009).

Citizens in general, and PE teachers in particular, are mass consumers of corporatised media (Fisette and Walton, 2014). Consumerism has become deeply linked with the processes and pleasures of global capitalism, as demonstrated in the media (Paterson, 2006). Douglas (2003) claims that consumer societies are competitive and how we consume demonstrates this, relying on the maintenance of some distinction between luxury and necessity. Consumption – almost by definition – is opposed to authenticity (Paterson, 2006), and the neoliberal system may be leading to a globalisation and homogenisation of services, products and ideas (Fernandez-Balboa, 2017), contributing to the overabundance of the identical (Han, 2012). Individuals now turn into confused and acritical consumers, who are unable to justify their decisions, given the possibility to access numerous options (Fernandez-Balboa, 2017).

The lack of criticality and resistance to discourses presented in the media result in the positioning of dominant practices, products and discourses as ‘ultimate truth’ (McDonald and Birrell, 1999). As the media is becoming one of the most powerful sites for learning about fitness, health and ‘ideal’/‘normal’ bodies (Donaghue and Allen, 2016; Field et al., 2012; González-Calvo et al., 2017) in a highly visual society (Jenks, 1995; Jones, 2003), PE teachers are now faced with the challenge of exposing a hidden curriculum of heteronormative, racialised and gendered media-driven conceptions of normal and ideal bodies (Azzarito et al., 2017), which have significant effects on students’ physical identities.

Consumerist surveillance: the Panopticon of the market

The principle of the Panopticon (Foucault, 1979), a system of surveillance first introduced into European prisons in the 18th century, depicts a powerful mechanism to control the body. Via the Panopticon, bodies are made more visible, and are controlled and disciplined through the gaze (Azzarito, 2009). Subjects being watched (or who feel they are being watched) internalise the gaze and regulate their behaviours and subjectivities towards a certain norm (Webb and Quennerstedt, 2010). In the original Panopticon, the gaze was that of a guard positioned at the centre of the prison. However, the gaze has shifted from a physical being to the media (Molnar and Kelly, 2013). Social media, through the nature of its interactions, enables a shift in surveillance from guard to others. Mass media, on the other hand, contributes to the shift in surveillance by influencing people’s constructions of ‘normality’. When individuals are often exposed to specific brands and body shapes that appear in the media, they internalise and normalise those discourses and images, and, in doing so, a market-driven gaze upon individuals is created. Therefore, the media acts biopedagogically (Wright, 2009), disciplining bodies and behaviours.

Several studies have linked internalisation and body surveillance to the use of mass media (e.g. Morry and Staska, 2001; Tiggemann, 2005). This internalisation of bodies and appearance standards has been shown to trigger body surveillance (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012; Vandenbosch and Eggermont, 2012), that is, a regular monitoring of one’s appearance to check for compliance with internalised standards of appearance (Vandenbosch and Eggermont, 2015). The (re)definition of societal norms is a way of social control which generates expectations regarding body shapes and patterns of consumption (Webb and Quennerstedt, 2010). Accordingly, Bauman (2000) claims that surveillance has now been replaced by seduction, and the media contributes to this. Thus,

through the media and the use of digital technologies, individuals now self-surveil their own bodies (Mathiesen, 2013).

The contemporary neoliberal society is characterised by marketisation, choice and measurable efficiency (Hall, 2003; Petersen, 1997). The neoliberal subject is an autonomous, choosing and self-invented subject (Webb and Quennerstedt, 2010), being responsible for their own destiny and techniques of self-regulation to have the skills and qualities necessary to succeed in the new economy (Walkerdine, 2003). Given the increase of technological and communication systems in the last few decades, societies are under an umbrella of panoptic and disciplinary control (Foucault, 1979), now through different digital technologies and media. In the commercialisation and expansion of the contemporary health and fitness industries, the panoptic gaze is present in texts and images of fitness, health and exercise-related media, functioning as an economy of visibility (Duncan, 1994), disciplining our consciousness. In a highly visual(ised) society, 'not only do the few see the many (Panopticon), but also, the many see the few (Synopticon) . . . the Panopticon functions to discipline the body, the Synopticon disciplines our consciousness' (Azzarito, 2009: 22). The mass media, and particularly television, bring the 'many' – as there are simultaneously hundreds of millions of people – watching and admiring the few (Mathiesen, 1997). In this way, the Synopticon contributes to the internalisation of dominant discourses and the lack of critical reflection, directing, controlling and disciplining our consciousness (Mathiesen, 2013).

Texts and images produced by the media reinforce dominant discourses on health and fitness, contributing to an exacerbated gaze towards bodies. These discourses legitimate certain tendencies and practices under manufactured consent (Herman and Chomsky, 2002), resulting in a feeling of emptiness that can only be filled with more consumption. This type of control results in an aggravated compulsive consumption of goods and services provided by multinational companies which impose homogeneity as a new form of surveillance (Fernández-Balboa, 2017).

This occurs, of course, within the neoliberal context of apparent autonomy and free choice. Consumer culture (Featherstone, 2007) is obsessed with the highly visible body (Featherstone, 2010) and, significantly, PE teachers operate in a context of magnified embodiment (Webb and Quennerstedt, 2010).

Methodology

The participants in this study were PE teachers working in primary and secondary schools in Spain. Fifteen teachers volunteered to participate in the study, of whom seven were female and eight male, aged between 28 and 37 at the time of the interviews. All participants held undergraduate and postgraduate degrees related to PE and had a minimum of three years' working experience. To obtain a teaching degree, PE teachers in Spain must study at university level for four years. There are two possible paths to graduate as a PE teacher in Spain. The first pathway is to study to become a primary school teacher, with a specialisation in PE. This degree allows the graduates to teach at primary school level. The second path is studying a degree entitled 'Physical activity and sport sciences', which enables the students to teach at secondary school level. A Master's degree is also required to teach in secondary schools, which typically takes one year of full-time study to obtain. Teachers who wish to work in state schools must pass a further exam after obtaining their Master's degree. However, for private schools, this is not required.

Ethical clearance was gained through the university of Valladolid and pseudonyms have been used throughout when reporting data to ensure anonymity. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The interviews were

audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to enhance trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). Questions were used to guide the dialogue but the interviews were largely conversational in style. Questions relevant to this paper that were asked in the interviews included: 'Do you think you are influenced by consumerism? If so, in which way/s?', 'How do you think consumerism may influence your teaching practices?', 'Do you think that students' perceptions of their PE teacher are influenced by the clothes the teachers wear?'. As the term 'consumerism' may not have the same meaning for everyone, the interviewer and each participant had a brief discussion regarding this term prior to the commencement of the interview, to ensure that they both were referring to the same phenomenon.¹ Interviews were conducted in Spanish and then translated into English by the first author after the analysis.

Data were analysed using a thematic content analysis (Libarkin and Kurdziel, 2002) and constant comparison (Denzin, 1989; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Descriptive and pattern coding were used to analyse both within-case and cross-case patterns (Bøe et al., 2017). The constructed themes were related to participants' understandings of consumerism, their daily habits regarding consumption and the possible consequences on their future teaching practices. The themes are presented in three main categories: 1. body shape ideals; 2. sports brands; and 3. sports supplements consumption.

Findings

Body shape ideals

Most of the participants demonstrated awareness of the effects of mass media upon their constructions of an ideal body, and reflected on the ways in which these ideals influenced their own subjectivities of bodies. For example, 'Paula stated:'

Of course mass media influences, as it's impossible to stay out of this consumer culture . . . I know very clearly who my role models and beauty ideals are and who, in one way or another, influences how I take care of my image. They're what society tells us women need to be – slim, but curvy, with no body hair and young. (Paula, 35, primary school PE teacher, 10 years of experience)

In this particular case, Paula has a significant amount of experience (i.e. 10 years) as a PE teacher and she is still influenced by these messages. Interestingly, Paula also made reference to beauty ideals for women. The market-orientated gaze acted upon Paula through the media, as she stated that media influences consumer culture and explained how she takes care of her appearance. Mass media has been proven to link internalisation of appearance parameters and body surveillance (Morry and Staska, 2001; Tiggemann, 2005). Therefore, the media and the role models that Paula is following influenced her aesthetic ideals. Research has highlighted that (pre-service) PE teachers are not immune to media messages (Fernández-Balboa and Muros, 2006; Garrett and Wrench, 2012), and Paula supported this point.

Similarly, the media can surveil people's bodies in terms of muscularity, this particularly affecting men. In this sense, 'Carlos commented:'

I think everyone wants to have an ideal body type, everyone wants to be more muscular. Muscularity represents a sense of masculinity, a sense of power, just like the models in some fitness magazines. (Carlos, 30, secondary school PE teacher, six years of experience)

The drive towards muscularity among men has been widely researched (e.g. Donaghue and Allen, 2016; Kwan and Trautner, 2011; Morgan, 2005; O'Hara et al., 2014), and particular attention has been paid to the effects of images of muscularity presented on television and in magazines (Field et al., 2012; Pope et al., 2001; Vandebosch and Eggermont, 2015; Yan and Bissell, 2014). These media effects may be even more problematic for male PE teachers given the embodied identity of their profession. Previous studies have suggested that PE is a location where boys can reinforce taken-for-granted ideals of masculinity and sporty bodies (Brown and Evans, 2004; Drummond, 2010; Gerdin, 2016, 2017; Gerdin and Larsson, 2018), and Carlos seems not to be an exception. The media-driven gaze acted on Carlos in terms of his muscularity, and the Synopticon led him to internalise the assumption that the desire for muscularity was universal.

Some participants mentioned the importance of challenging their students and developing their critical thinking skills with respect to the pervasiveness of media messages. For example, 'Carol, Fernando and Marta stated:'

There is a lot of pressure from society, which is influenced by what mass media sells as an ideal body. For students, it seems that they need to fit within those bodily parameters: athletic, lean, and not overweight . . . When I ask them [students] if I'd have been thin and athletic-looking, what would be 'my value' as PE teacher? They always stay silent and stare at me. (Carol, 31, secondary school PE teacher, six years of experience)

I should probably talk to them [students] from a more critical perspective, be more committed and transmit more values during my lessons. Teaching also involves trying to change consumer visions. However, since I have always been a sportsperson, I do not know how to face some things in my lessons. (Fernando, 35, secondary school PE teacher, nine years of experience)

I am not indifferent to consumerism, I think I am also a victim of it. However, in front of the students, I do criticise the bodily stereotypes found in advertisements, which are very far from reality and from what is healthy. (Marta, 34, secondary school PE teacher, seven years of experience)

Carol, as stated above, decided to confront her students on common body ideals, asking them if they would have different perceptions of her if she were slim and athletic-looking. By posing such questions, Carol, as an endomorph rugby player, attempted to engage the students in critical reflection regarding body shape expectations for PE teachers. As an avid athlete herself, even though she could be considered physically fit, she did not match the stereotypical slim and athletic-looking body considered ideal for female PE teachers in Spain.

Fernando, on the other hand, talked about how teaching should include discussions directed to change consumer visions. Importantly, he recognised that, as he had always been a sportsperson, he did not feel adequately prepared to negotiate some of these issues in his teaching practice. This is consistent with Tinning's (2010) claim that, as many PE teachers are physically skilful mesomorphs, they do not always understand uncoordinated or overweight students. While the gaze in Fernando's comment derived from the market, he still conformed to dominant discourses by choosing not to engage his students in critical discussion in his lessons. Importantly, the Spanish secondary school curriculum briefly mentions as one of its objectives that students need to know how to 'critically value social habits related to health and consumption' (Ministerio de Educación, 2015: 177). Despite this, Fernando did not engage in critical discussion about consumption with his students.

Marta, however, both recognised the effects of consumerism and reported criticising bodily stereotypes found in advertisements during her lessons, as she considered these stereotypes impossible to achieve by healthy means. In this way, Marta's construction of subjectivities of bodies was contradictory, given that she was aware of the Panopticon of the market upon her own body, but also criticised body ideals stereotypes portrayed in the media during her lessons.

Sports brands

Participants talked about athletes as role models in the media, mentioning that the brands that high-profile athletes wore influenced them when selecting sports attire. 'Luis, Cesar and Pablo stated:'

I had different athletes as role models – attractive, successful in life, with women, money, fame . . . I wanted to be like them, and everything started with the simple fact of having the clothes that they wore, even though they were expensive. To achieve this ideal image from athletes, there are two possible ways: how you dress and how you look. Today I try to get away from these ideals, but it's hard. (Luis, 32, secondary school PE teacher, seven years of experience)

I don't allow certain stereotypes and consumerism to influence me excessively, but I do recognise that they influence me in the way I dress, and even in how I establish more relationships with certain people and not with others. I know that it's inevitable to judge by the appearance of the body, given that it's the first image that we show and we try to show off our best image, in accordance with our possibilities. To do this, the brands, how we dress and how we behave are determinants. (Cesar, 36, primary school PE teacher, 11 years of experience)

I do recognise that I like running shoes, particularly the brand Jordan. They are very expensive, but it's a material good that I like to have. I don't think there are more clear examples from my personal life related to clothes; however, all my sports attire is Nike or Adidas. They are usually better quality, last longer and fit really nicely. (Pablo, 32, secondary school PE teacher, seven years of experience)

Luis and Cesar mentioned the difficulty of avoiding media influences with regard to the positioning of athletes as role models and the prioritisation of particular brands. Their reflections exemplify how leading multinational corporations use the media to advertise their products, and neoliberal consumers of the era subsequently 'choose' to buy their products. As Paterson (2006) claims, global brands like Nike promote energy and dynamism, and values such as competitiveness and fairness. Nike's famous 'swoosh' is a globalised and easily recognisable visual icon which involves different associations and connotations (Barthes, 1999). The prices of these products are usually quite high worldwide, but in Spain the prices of some sport attires represent a higher percentage of individuals' average income than in other countries. For example, in Spain, an average full Adidas outfit (i.e. a pair of running shoes, a pair of training pants and a sweatshirt) represents around 18% of an average monthly net salary of a PE teacher with five years of experience. However, in Australia, the same full outfit represents half that: about 9% of a similarly experienced PE teacher's monthly income. Nonetheless, irrespective of the cost, the market-driven gaze acted upon Luis, Cesar and Pablo regarding their attire. Multinational companies influenced their attitudes and behaviours (i.e. the decision to buy something), imposing homogeneity on the goods they consumed and fostering the illusion of free choice.

Significantly, the influences of certain brands may directly infiltrate PE classroom situations. Participants mentioned how some brands influenced students' perceptions of them as PE teachers,

and others warned of the possible hidden messages that they, as PE teachers, could transmit to their students via their clothes. In this regard, 'Natalia and Victor commented:'

Sometimes, students value the kinds of clothes and brands that the teacher wears. If those clothes are worn by some sport stars or their preferred athletes, they influence them even more . . . With our ways of dressing we transmit values to students that are not always the best ones. (Natalia, 29, primary school PE teacher, four years of experience)

I try in my lessons to develop critical thinking among students that allows them to distinguish real needs from artificial needs created by consumerism, such as clothes from specific brands. Even though I try, it's hard to fight against it . . . Clothes from prestige brands are more expensive and, therefore, are associated with certain social and life success, and who doesn't want to be successful in life? (Victor, 37, primary school PE teacher, 14 years of experience)

Victor's efforts to develop critical thinking in his students, to encourage them to distinguish immediate needs from market-driven needs, should be recognised. The participants seemed to often encounter contradictions regarding messages from the media, the impacts of these messages, and their notions of best practice as PE teachers. Most importantly, some recognised the ways in which the prioritisation of prestige brands could constitute hidden curricula in their classes. For example, 'Julia and Gonzalo commented:'

Some brands really attract my attention and, whenever I can, I buy them . . . I know that my sports clothes could be sending some messages to the students. In this regard, I think consumer culture is present within my profession. (Julia, 31, primary school PE teacher, six years of experience)

I have sometimes considered whether it would be a better idea to not wear certain brands in class, because I might be consolidating and encouraging messages which dictate what the body should look like and how we should dress to exercise (Gonzalo, 35, primary school PE teacher, 10 years of experience)

Although Julia and Gonzalo were reflecting on the possible influences of wearing certain brands in their classes, they did not report resisting or confronting this directly. Even more significantly, some participants stated that certain brands influenced their sports and professional subjectivities. For example, 'David commented:'

Brands influence my sports identity and, consequently, I imagine this is reflected in my lessons. PE teachers wear sports clothes, and I try to wear the ones I prefer, those that fit me best. It's part of me, it's part of my profession. (David, 28, secondary school PE teacher, three years of experience)

David did not provide reflections or criticism on PE teachers' choices to consume certain brands. He also linked PE teachers' sports and professional subjectivities directly to their clothing. The brands participants wore are in no way an appropriate basis for determining PE teachers' effectiveness, professionalism and sports identity (assuming that this last characteristic is important for teaching PE?). Nonetheless, David associated discourses of professionalism with the attire that they wore. He did not take into consideration other aspects that also constitute professionalism, such as the rapport built with students. This may be a result of schools not imposing specific attire for PE teachers in Spain, as it contributes to a higher visibility of brands.

The Panopticon driven from the market defines, therefore, not just appearance and diet, but also attire. As Evans et al. (2008: 389) observe, ‘we are bombarded daily with information and advice on what to eat, how to exercise, where to live, what clothes to wear and what weight we should be’. This also confirms what Damhorst (2005) has suggested about how dress is part of our interactions and self-identity to others. As Turner (1991) asserts, the physical body, when dressed, reflects the social body and the social norms that influence it. Clothes have the potential to normalise (and sexualise) bodies and, in this particular case, they can also influence the discursive constructions of a ‘professional’ PE teacher (Varea, 2014).

Sports supplements consumption

None of the participants was currently playing sports professionally, yet they talked about their strong sports subjectivities, and how they have consumed – and still consume – sports supplements to enhance their performance. ‘Pablo, Gonzalo and Carol commented in this regard:’

I drink a protein shake after my training at the gym five times per week. I also consume caffeine and creatine during certain periods . . . to enhance my physical performance and my body image. (Pablo, 32, secondary school PE teacher, seven years of experience).

In the past, when I used to play lots of sports, I’ve consumed many different sports supplements. The main reason was to enhance my sports performance . . . Now I still consume some supplements, but I don’t play sports that often. (Gonzalo, 35, primary school PE teacher, 10 years of experience)

I use protein supplements and carnitine to improve my sports performance, but not on a constant basis, I just consume them when the training is intense . . . I do consume caffeine pills on a regular basis, as they help me to be more productive and active. (Carol, 31, secondary school PE teacher, six years of experience)

Although the consumption of sports supplements to enhance performance may be justified, particularly among professional athletes, participants in this study also stated they consume vitamins to improve their daily performance, particularly during exam periods. In this sense, ‘Luis commented:’

I have always consumed vitamins during exam periods. Even until today I consumed them during certain periods, as they improve my sleep, complement my diet, make me feel more vigorous and help me to stay focused. (Luis, 32, secondary school PE teacher, seven years of experience)

Luis expressed that, through the consumption of vitamins, he can improve his physical and mental capacities. The advertisements for these kinds of products often include a scientific/medical discourse that seems to legitimise their consumption. Potential consumers are, therefore, convinced about the benefits of the product and they are not well informed about possible side effects, particularly in the long term. As a consequence, scientific/medical discourses are still highly valued in today’s society and have the potential to influence consumers’ decisions and habits. However, there seems to be lack of evidence to support the proposition that some sport supplements actually enhance physical and/or mental performance (Heneghan et al., 2012). Some participants believed in these sport supplements, as they said that they are supported by scientific research. Cesar and Fernando, for example, reflected on the possible influences of the neoliberal

market, and yet, they expressed confidence in how most of the sports supplements are ‘officially supported’. They said,

These products [sports supplements] can be a trap from the market, but not necessarily in all cases. I have used some supplements and they have worked. I achieved my goal and they didn’t have any side effects . . . You need to distinguish when a product is concerned with the consumer’s health and when it just wants to increase sales . . . Most of these sports products work and they are also warranted by scientific studies. (Cesar, 36, primary school PE teacher, 11 years of experience)

Sports supplements are worth considering if you aim to enhance your performance and improve your aesthetics. They are probably ‘adorned’ with some marketing, but they certainly are warranted by a lot of scientific support that you can’t question. (Fernando, 35, secondary school PE teacher, nine years of experience)

The medical discourses included in the advertisements may blind participants with science. Significantly, none of the teachers mentioned the high content of carbohydrates found in many of these supplements, and how they are not as healthy as advertised. Accordingly, Popkin (2009) suggests that the sports supplements arena may be one of the few nutritional contexts in which sugar, salt and a high caloric content are defined as healthy and not as life threats. Nonetheless, some other participants expressed contradictory opinions about the consumption of sports supplements. For example, ‘Natalia and Henar commented:’

I believe there are better ways to achieve good results. These products [sports supplements] are quite expensive and we can’t rely totally on them. The marketing message behind these products is to promote miraculous results when it is clear they are just impossible. (Natalia, 29, primary school PE teacher, four years of experience)

I wouldn’t recommend the use of these products [sports supplements] to anyone. I’d actually help people to reflect on the predominant beauty standards in current society and guide them towards a critical consumption, so people can question their reasons for buying them. (Henar, 32, primary school PE teacher, eight years of experience)

Natalia has already demonstrated critical reflection towards consumerism, when she analysed the possible effects of wearing specific brands in front of her students (see section on ‘Sports brands’). In this sense, Natalia continues to challenge dominant discourses found in today’s neoliberal and consumer society. Importantly, some other reasons that participants mentioned to justify the consumption of different sports/nutrition supplements were the lack of time and fatigue preventing their cooking proper meals. ‘Pablo, Paula and Cesar commented in this sense:’

When I don’t have much time or I’m exhausted because of my work or studies, I just have protein bars or meal replacements. They’re similar to a full meal, balanced, healthy and much quicker. (Pablo, 32, secondary school PE teacher, seven years of experience)

I do consume replacement bars quite often. You need to have time for cooking and sometimes I don’t have much time left, so I just consume these kinds of supplements that have the same nutrition value as a regular meal. (Paula, 35, primary school PE teacher, 10 years of experience)

There are some days that my main meal is a protein shake. I should try to eat better, but it’s much more expensive to cook because of the time that you need to invest in the kitchen. (Cesar, 36, primary school PE teacher, 11 years of experience)

Cesar's eating habits caution careful consideration, given that his main meal during the day may be a protein shake. Importantly, these participants are PE teachers, who are supposed to have been educated in health during their Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) programmes. While the school and university subject in Spain is called just 'Physical Education' and not 'Health and Physical Education', the programmes also include content related to health. The aforementioned participants were, therefore, considering only an immediate solution to their problems (i.e. lack of time, feelings of exhaustion), which is common in neoliberal and consumer societies (Bauman, 2007). The working ideology behind these practices is to find a quick solution to maximise the productive time in the present, without taking into consideration possible negative effects in the long term. In this sense, even though Cesar is 'saving money' at the moment not cooking for himself, he might be spending more money on health care in the future. Importantly, the participants were convinced that these supplements options are healthy and none of them mentioned the artificial ingredients that they usually contain, as they were only focused on the nutritional content.

While the teachers were referring to private forms of consumption, rather than advocating for these supplements in front of their students, it would be difficult for these teachers to foment critical consumption in their students – as required in the Spanish secondary school curriculum – if they are not critical consumers themselves. Scientific/medical discourses legitimise the consumption of sports supplements that often resemble candies and other junk food (Namie and Warne, 2013). Sport, mass media and food are means by which Western(ised) societies promote and legitimise certain cultural messages (Frye and Bruner, 2012), and sports supplements work as a link between the three of them (Namie and Warne, 2013).

Conclusions

This paper explored the influences of consumerism on a group of PE teachers working at the primary and secondary levels in Spain. Consumer culture, neoliberalism and the influences of the market acted upon these PE teachers' subjectivities of bodies and professionalism. The participants were influenced by the body images and messages portrayed in the media in terms of their ideal self-presentation, their decisions regarding the clothing they wore, and their choices regarding sports supplement consumption. The Spanish secondary school curriculum clearly states that students need to learn to be critical consumers; however, these teachers were not always capable of being critical consumers themselves. Indeed, some recognised that they may have been transmitting a hidden curriculum to their students via their clothing choices. They constantly faced contradictory and problematic positions regarding what they wore, what and how they taught, and the effects of messages and images promoted by the media.

The results of this study suggest that PE teachers' professional subjectivities may be significantly influenced by dominant social values originated from the market and by the effects of neoliberalism. From this perspective, PE constitutes an instance of consumerist surveillance in contemporary societies. The PE teachers were consciously influenced by consumerist values, while simultaneously supporting consumerism by 'choosing' to buy specific brands and sports supplements. Mainly through advertising, society and consumerism have repressive effects associated with the 'cult of the body' (Tinning and Glasby, 2002), which affected the participants' practices and contributed to the construction of a problematic relationship between their professional subjectivities and their subjectivities of bodies.

An important extension of this study would be to examine how pedagogical and curricular PE practices address the reconceptualisation of an 'ideal body' and how PE lessons can be used as an opportunity for critical analysis of ideal bodies, social pressures and the influences of media. Teacher

educators should also consider the inclusion of content to develop critical thinking with pre-service PE teachers, particularly on issues related to consumer culture and media. Some specific examples of how PETE systems may be changed to foster the significance of critical examination of an ideal body, the influence of the media and consumption patterns, include: (a) drama/theatre and body language activities to work on content related to self-esteem and body image; (b) the use of body journals (González-Calvo et al., 2017) to foment in-depth reflections during practicums;² and (c) practice-based activities to analyse the influences of the media on feelings and perceptions related to the body.

PE teachers in Spain have a responsibility to teach students to critically evaluate social habits related to health and consumption. PE teachers need to critically examine and reconsider the conceptions of health and consumerism that they hold and transmit in their classes, and the possible implications of these for the wellbeing of their students and fellow practitioners.

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Notes

1. For the purposes of this study, the term ‘consumerism’ refers to a preoccupation with and an inclination toward the buying and accumulation of goods considered non-essential and that provide personal satisfaction. Only those goods related to sport and physical activity were taken into consideration for this paper.
2. Pre-service PE teachers in Spain are usually required to teach PE and other subjects in schools in order to complete their degree programme. This professional practice period is commonly known as a ‘practicum’.

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