

## Online Newspapers Portrayal of Arab Female Athletes in Rio 2016 Olympics: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

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**Abstract:** *Rio 2016 Olympics witnessed an unprecedented increased participation of Arab female athletes, many of whom unconventionally competed in games that are stereotypically categorized as male-appropriate/dominated. This reflects an ideological change in the substantive structure of sport as a male site, marking a new era for women's empowerment in the Arab world. The current study explores the interplay of multiple and interacting semiotic modes used in selected national and international online newspapers covering Arab female athletes in 2016 Olympics. It compares/contrasts how Arab and Western ideologies representing the achievement of these athletes are mediated through various modes. The study is grounded in the methodological framework of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) (Machin and Mayr 2012). It starts with the hypothesis that MCDA contributes to our understanding of how mediated verbal and visual messages work together to indicate a shift in the construction of Arab female athletic identity.*

**Keywords:** athleticism, gender ideology, identity, media discourse, multimodality, Rio 2016 Olympics

### 1. Introduction

Critical linguistics (CL) is founded on the assumption that language is a social practice that is inseparable from culture. Language reflects how people act and regulate societies. Through language, people “seek to promote particular views of the world and *naturali[z]e* them, that is, make them appear natural and commonsensical” (Machin and Mayr 2012:2-3). Such a view of language is taken up and modified by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which in turn regards discourse as a social construction that shapes and is shaped by society. Indeed, discourse reflects social values and ideas, and it contributes to the production and reproduction of social life; media discourse is a useful concept for thinking about the kind of values and identities that are transmitted in news, and what kinds of social relations these favor.

Sport is considered “a major global, cultural, and economic force .... [that is] strongly linked to ideologies and identities”; it is a key site for “the re/production of masculinity and heterosexuality” (Meân and Kassing 2008:128). Sport is a gender demarcator, for gender is the main categorization of sportswomen, (re)producing them as females who play sport rather than as athletes in the main. Because the community of sport has always been a powerful site for the construction of masculinity and male identities, women's entry into the arena has been continually resisted, and women athletes have been either excluded

or framed within traditional discourses of femininity. Women's participation in competitive sports is said to represent their quest for equality and control of their own bodies (Sherry, Osborne and Nicholson 2016). Indeed, the increased presence, acceptance, and achievements of females in sports have reduced stereotyping and have raised awareness about the need to negotiate traditional discourses on femininity and athleticism. The Olympic Games are generally a symbolic embodiment of female empowerment, being a place for proficient world-class female athletes who claim an empowered stance and stand on equal footing with their male counterparts defying dominant gendered ideologies. In turn, media coverage of the Olympics provides a fertile land to explore female athletic identities and gender ideologies.

The present paper adopts a Social Semiotic view of textual and visual communication, i.e., both language and image play part in legitimizing social practices and maintaining ideologies and power relations in a society. The paper investigates the portrayal of Arab female athletes in 2016 Olympics in national and international online newspapers. Taking into account both the increased participation of Arab female athletes in 2016 Games and the unprecedented record of female achievement, it becomes obvious that there has happened an ideological change in Arab communities regarding the structure of sport as a male site. Rio 2016 Olympics may be regarded as a fertile area for research that aims at exploring a new era for women's empowerment in the Arab world. Due to established associations resulting from both textual and visual semiotic resources, online newspapers reporting the Olympics are regarded as a significant discourse projecting the emerging identities of Arab female athletes.

The present study compares/contrasts how Arab and Western ideologies representing the achievement of the Arab female medalists are mediated through various modes in online newspapers, focusing on the first medalist as a case study. The study utilizes the methodological framework of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) offered by Machin and Mayr (2012). It starts with the hypothesis that MCDA contributes to our understanding of how mediated verbal and visual messages work together to indicate a shift in the construction of Arab female athletic identity. It attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. How do online newspapers employ multiple semiotic modes to construct the identity of Arab female medalists?
2. To what extent does the multimodal design of news reports reproduce or challenge dominant discourses and stereotypes of Arab females?
3. How far are the selected Western and Arab online newspapers similar/different in constructing ideologies concerning Arab female medalists?

## **2. Literature review**

The literature review reveals that a wide range of research documents "how media continue to devalue female athletes", reducing interest in and respect for women's sports, lowering perceptions of women's athleticism, and promoting negative

body image among girls (Heinecken 2015:1035). According to Caple (2013), Lee (2012) and Jones (2006), the majority of studies investigating the portrayal of sportswomen in the media focus on North American and European media and center on the quality and quantity of coverage usually compared to that for men. These studies demonstrate that females receive less media coverage than males with a number of exceptions in recent years particularly starting with 2004 Olympic Games. Other research focus on gender roles and sports, giving evidence that sports media discourse contributes to reproduction of ideological power relations between men and women.

Caple (2013) points out that, except until recently, findings of qualitative analysis of the verbal and visual representation of sportswomen in the media give evidence either for the use of sexualized language, for trivializing females' achievements, for focusing on the personal/domestic lives of sportswomen, or for infantilizing female athletes by referring to them as 'girls' and 'young ladies'. Furthermore, research on visual representation of women's sport points out that images contribute to the maintenance of male dominance over the field of sport. Sherry, Osborne and Nicholson (2016) reveal that images of female athletes in international media still "fail to represent the realities of women's sport performance" (299). A number of analyses of the photographic representation of sportswomen typically give evidence for passive posing, over-sexualizing or aestheticizing women in terms of make-up and stylish clothing.

Two recent studies focusing on media-discourse portrayal of female athletes are worth highlighting. The first study is by Godoy-Pressland and Griggs (2014); it investigates the photographic representation of female athletes in the British print media during the London 2012 Olympic Games which is commonly referred to as 'Women's Games'. The study focuses on the triangulation of gender with location, position and camera angle of photos. Employing quantitative content analysis of 787 photos from *The Times*, the study compares the amount and prominence of photographic coverage of both female and male athletes during the Games in *The Times*. Findings of the study reveal that while *The Times* under-represented sportswomen in photos during the London 2012 Olympics, there is obviously increased gender equality in the location, page prominence and camera angle of photos of female athletes compared to previous studies on the media representation of female athletes at the Olympics.

The second study is conducted by Caple (2013); it uses qualitative multimodal discourse analysis to examine the portrayal of female athletes in both the headlines and photographs of 500 news stories in Australian print newspapers during a regular summer sporting calendar for two weeks. The study focuses on the ways in which photographs interact with the verbal text in news reports. Using the Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) social semiotic perspective of Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), the study aims to assess the consistency of message across text and images as well as to indicate the shift in the discourse on female athletes in the Australian print news media. Findings reveal that Australian sportswomen are still under-represented in comparison to that for male athletes. However, the study detects a shift in Australian media discourse suggesting that new discourses

are emerging in which sportswomen are portrayed “in the same way as their male counterparts as elite sports players” (p. 288).

### **3. Arab female athletes in Rio 2016 Olympics**

Rio 2016 Olympics witnessed an unprecedented increased participation of Arab female athletes, many of whom unconventionally competed in games that are stereotypically categorized as male-appropriate/dominated. There were one hundred twenty-three Arab women from over fifteen different Arab countries at the Rio 2016. Obviously, “War, displacement, poor facilities, scarce funds and social pressures” did not hurdle them from competing in the Games (Kadi 2016); the following are just few examples. Saudi Arabia doubled the number of female athletes representing the kingdom in London Olympics 2012 by sending four women to Rio – two runners, one judoka and one fencer. Defying conservative mindsets and social pressure, the Saudi women were “such an inspiring model of women who work hard for what they want to pursue” (Tawfik 2016). UAE sent four women as well, one of them became the UAE’s first female swimmer at the Olympics, and she was chosen as the nation’s flag-bearer in the opening ceremony. Lebanese women athletes out-numbered men in the nine-member team. There were nine Arab swimmers in the women’s 50m freestyle heats, from countries such as Palestine, Syria, Libya, Kuwait, and Sudan. The one single woman representing Libya was a seventeen-year-old swimmer who had to launch a crowd-fund campaign to finance the cost of her training and coaching. Of the one-hundred-twenty-one athletes representing Egypt at the Olympics, thirty-six were females – marking the largest female representation in decades.

During Rio 2016 Olympics, Arab females made many headlines and turned the eyes of the world to Muslim female athletes in the Arab region (El-Saady 2016). One unforgettable moment in the Olympics was when eighteen-year-old Syrian refugee Yusra Mardini won her 50m butterfly heat. Mardini’s story went viral, particularly because she had saved the lives of twenty people when she jumped off a sinking boat and pushed it into the land as she was fleeing from Syria by the sea. Another story witnessed a huge reaction and highlighted the massive cultural divide between Western and Islamic women’s teams. The first female beach volleyball pair from Egypt “turn[ed] perceptions of the sport on their head” with their full-length bodysuits while competing with bikini-clad German rivals (Allen 2016). The Egyptian pair stirred controversial debates nationally and internationally. Some regarded the game as highlighting the Olympic ideal of different cultures coming together and of giving flexibility to countries with religious and cultural requirements. Some celebrated the empowerment of Muslim Arab athletes who could compete in sport without giving up your personal beliefs. However, several news reports criticized the pair’s conservative attire and talked about ‘clash of civilizations, ‘bikini vs. burkini’, and ‘cover-ups vs. cover-nots’. Interestingly, few days after the game, the Dutch pair showed up in a game against Australia wearing their bikinis over full-length bodysuits, stirring anger in the western press which blamed them for

ruining the sport (Robinson 2016), and leaving many questioning if that was in solidarity with the Egyptian team.

In collecting medals, Arab female athletes made a significant achievement excelling at the highest level in sport and inspiring many female generations to come (Abulleil 2016; 2017). Of the total sixteen medals won Arabs, six (37.5 %) were won by female athletes. This marked the first time six Arab women made it to the podium at the same Olympics. Bahrain amassed gold and silver by two Kenyan-born women in steeplechase and the marathon. The other four medalists are Arab-born. They all claimed bronze in stereotypically male-appropriate games: two Tunisians in fencing and wrestling and two Egyptians in weightlifting and Taekwondo. Indeed, Rio 2016 Olympics was “the birthplace for many firsts” for Arab female athletes in general and for hijabi women in particular (Harvard 2016). Such an achievement is highlighted by taking into consideration several cultural and funding barriers that hinder these women athletes from engaging in sport and exhibiting their talents.

#### **4. Methodology: From DA to MCDA**

Discourse Analysis (DA) moves the focus on sentences to more complex form of communication; it focuses on “how people use language and the role that this language plays in social and political life and in culture” (Berger 2016:598). According to Berger (2016), integrating semiotics in DA resulted in “a multidisciplinary enterprise that deals with qualitative approaches to communication of all kinds in many disciplines” (598). With the introduction of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), analysts such as Van Dijk, Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak focused on revealing hidden connection between language, power and ideology, opening the door to endless research on the taken-for-granted exercise of power relations in different discourse types. As CDA expanded to include mass-mediated texts that comprise different semiotic modes of communication (i.e. linguistic and visual choices), a visual turn in the field took place and brought about a transformation from monomodality to multimodality as advocated by the valuable works of Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996; 2001). This kind of analysis comes under the term Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) (Jones 2012). Kress and Van Leeuwen focused on ‘meaning potentials’, i.e. the underlying repertoire of choices, thus turning attention to the different semiotic resources and modes of communication that contribute to meaning and communicate complex ideas and attitudes (Machin 2013).

According to Machin (2016), MDA can be best aligned with the core aims of CDA. Such an alignment gave way to Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) to be recognized as a field in its own. Berger (2016) illustrates that MCDA examines the way different modes of communication in discourse are deployed to “transmit ideological messages to people, who generally are not aware that there is an ideological aspects to the texts they are watching and hearing” (599). MCDA is largely indebted to the work of Halliday on Systemic Functional Grammar. It also identifies with the Social Semiotic view of language which regards all communication, whether through language, images, or sounds,

as “accomplished through a set of semiotic resources, options and choices” (Machin and Mayr 2012:15). Such semiotic choices signify broader values, attitudes, and ideologies and help in the (re)production of power relations.

The present study utilizes the framework of MCDA suggested by Machin and Mayr (2012) to analyze the visual and language choices in discourse. According to Han (2015), Machin and Mayer have developed a detailed model for MCDA which seemed inaccessible before (417). The framework ensures that “analysis should be based on careful detailed description of the semiotic choices found in talk, text, and images” (Machin and Mayr 2012:29). Machin and Mayr (2012) state that their goal is twofold: (i) to present a set of CDA tools to analyze media discourse; and (ii) to introduce a set of methods for analyzing visual communication. The present study draws on three levels of analysis offered by the model: (i) semiotic choices analysis; (ii) social actor analysis; and (iii) transitivity analysis.

#### **4.1 Semiotic choices analysis**

This part of the framework is concerned with how authors map and combine choices in textual and visual semiotic resources to set up a basic shape of a social and natural world. This mapping attests to the ideological interpretation of events and social practices and reveals implied identities.

##### **4.1.1 Lexical choices**

Machin and Mayr (2012) point out that lexical choices indicate “the ideological work done in the text and the clear stance of the author” (49). They refer to Van Dijk’s view on implicit meanings as part of the *mental model* of a text, rather than the text itself. Meaning lies in the implicit layer of discourse, for implicitness has to do with underlying beliefs and ideologies. So, in analyzing lexical choices, MCDA investigates the following: *word connotations, overlexicalization, suppression/ lexical absence, structural oppositions/ideological squaring, and quoting verbs*.

##### **4.1.2 Iconographical analysis**

Choosing a particular photograph to accompany text is implicitly indicative of the author’s attitude about the roles and utterances of participants. Images communicate things that may be difficult to express through language, for images do not have a fixed meaning; “the producer can always claim that it is more suggestive and open to various interpretations” (Machin and Mayr 2012: 31). Hence, visual resources provide authors with a degree of maneuver that may not be allowed in lexical resources. Doing MCDA iconographical analysis means going beyond the *denotation* of images and revealing their *connotational* potential. The following are the significant connotators of meaning: *objects’ attributes, settings* (i.e. *salience* as exhibited through *cultural symbols, size, color, tone, focus, foregrounding, and overlapping*), *poses* (i.e. *space, openness vs. closeness, activity vs. stillness, body control, and gaze*).

## 4.2 Social actor analysis

This part of MCDA is concerned with the range of semiotic choices available for communicators to represent social actors and construct their identities. Machin and Mayr (2012) refer to van Dijk's concept of *ideological squaring* since representational choices in news reports can align readers alongside or against people. Furthermore, this part of the framework attempts to "identify how different affordances of the two modes have been used to create different meanings", or how one of the modes may carry meanings that are communicated through the other mode (96).

### 4.2.1 Lexical classification of social actors

Machin and Mayr (2012) highlight the following elements in describing referential ideological choices to classify people: *personalization* vs. *impersonalization*, *individualization* vs. *collectivization*, *specification* vs. *generalization*, *nomination* vs. *functionalization*; *use of honorifics*, *objectivation*, *anonymization*, *aggregation*, *pronoun* vs. *noun*, and *suppression*

### 4.2.2 Visual representation of social actors

It is important to consider how images use represented people to connote general concepts, types of people, stereotypes and abstract ideas. Machin and Mayr (2012) focus on *size of frame* (*close*, *medium*, or *long shot*) and *angle* (*face to face*, *side-on*, *look-down-on*, or *look-up-to*). Furthermore, visual representation of social actors involves consideration of depicting them as *individuals* or *groups*, or in *generic* or *specific* terms. It is important to consider visual *exclusions* as well.

## 4.3 Transitivity analysis

Transitivity is the study of what people are depicted doing (i.e. *processes*) and refers, broadly, to who does what to whom (i.e. *participants*), and how (i.e. *circumstances*). Machin and Mayr (2012) build MCDA transitivity analysis on Halliday's SFG by considering *participants* (*doer* and *done-to*) as well as *types of processes* (*material*, *mental*, *behavioral*, *verbal*, *relational*, and *existential*). Similarly, Halliday's categories can be applied to the visual representation of transitivity by looking at what participants are represented as *doing*, who is represented as *agent*, who is *passive*, or if we have access to *internal mental* worlds. It is also important to consider to what extent the linguistic representation of transitivity aligns with the visual representation.

## 5. Case-study and data selection

For its case study, the paper focuses on online newspaper coverage of the Egyptian weightlifting Bronze medalist Sara Ahmed. Ahmed is chosen for a number of reasons:

- Firstly, given her nationality and ethnicity, Ahmed' feat is unprecedented. She is said to have made "double history" for being the first awarded Arab woman at an Olympics in any sport and the first Egyptian female to stand on

the Olympic podium in the nation's 104-year history at the Games (Stonehouse 2016). The 18-year-old Ahmed's bronze is Egypt's first weightlifting medal since 1948.

- Secondly, Ahmed is one of Muslim athletes said to reflect the positive image of Islam in Rio 2016 Olympics. Writing for online TIME magazine, Beydoun (2016) argues that Ahmed and her female Muslim peers are representation of "Muslim excellence" that challenges "prevailing stereotypes" at a time where the world is invaded by Islamophobia and linking Islam with terrorism, "disrupting tropes that have enabled headscarf bans in France and trite oppression narratives in America and elsewhere".
- Thirdly, Ahmed has defied gendered stereotype about female frailty and disempowerment that maybe conjured by the image of diminutive female. Lifting a combined weight of 255kg in the 69kg weight class, Ahmed has shown a kind of physical power few possess especially when one considers her size; "[s]he can out-lift most women in the world" (Beydoun 2016).
- Fourthly, Ahmed has defied societal stereotypes about the role of education in one's life particularly in the Egyptian culture that puts paramount emphasis on the value of High School test score. To prepare and take part in the Olympics, with the support of her family, Ahmed had to skip her final pre-college high school exams, after her appeal to the Ministry of Education to postpone exams had been refused.

From the wide range of online newspapers resources, the study analyzes two articles reporting the attainment of the bronze medal by the Egyptian weightlifter Sara Ahmed. The first is coverage of Ahmed's achievement as posted on the online news release of The Olympic Games Organization. The article is the official coverage of the Organization; the study considers this article as a neutral un-biased representation of the Western view. The second article is posted on Ahram Online newspaper, an Egyptian English-language news website published by Al-Ahram Establishment (Egypt's largest news organization and publisher of the Middle East's oldest newspaper). Elassal's report (2016) is selected to represent the national coverage of the achievement because it is posted few days after the achievement. Obviously, coverage posted immediately after the feat is delivered in short bursts focusing only on the feat news without giving ample insights into the context, whereas later coverage – as Elassal's – reveals a number of important lexical, social and ideological factors surrounding the news.

## 6. Olympic.org coverage

### 6.1 Semiotic choices analysis

#### 6.1.1 Lexical analysis

There is dominance of words belonging to the semantic field of *historic achievements* connoting Sara Ahmed's supremacy and excellence along the years. Starting with the all-capital headline, "YOG WEIGHTLIFTER SARA AHMED BLAZES A TRAIL FOR EGYPTIAN ATHLETES", it is obvious that the metaphorical idiomatic phrase "BLAZES A TRAIL" ideologically squares



Ahmed as different from the others by being a leader that forges ahead and clears the path of achievement for future athletes.

- The article is loaded with words reflecting this new exclusive and historic undertaking, such as “**history** was made”, “the **first** female Egyptian athlete”, “the **country’s record books**”, “**historic** bronze medal”, “for **the first time**”, “**role model** for aspiring female athletes”, and “an **unforgettable night** for weightlifting”.
- There is also recurrent reference to Ahmed’s achievements, such as “**personal best** by 10kg”, “That **mighty** effort”, “a **growing list of triumphs** for Ahmed”, “Her **breakthrough** year”, “**an impressive tally of medals**, including **victories**”, “**topped** the podium”, “perform at **her peak**” and “the performance **of her life**”.

In addition, the article *overlexicalizes* Ahmed’s young age and petite body frame, again, ideologically squaring her as younger than typical participants. Although there is lexical absence about the age of the other contestants, the recurrent reference to Ahmed’s ‘youthfulness’ implicitly points out to her exceptional achievement. Examples are: “**YOG** weightlifter” [*YOG refers to Youth Olympic Games*], “**the teenage** Ahmed”, “The **18-year-old**”, “**Junior** World Championships”, and “who is **just 1.55m tall**”. Indeed, this overlexicalization is functional in framing Ahmed as a well-established athlete with a history of achievements; thus, her Olympic medal is this not sudden nor a co-incidence nor unprepared for, but rather it is the fruit of hard work hard over the years.

Furthermore, lexical absence in the article is employed to highlight Ahmed’s supremacy. Though the article refers to Ahmed as “the first female Egyptian athlete to win an Olympic medal in any sport”, the article also refers to Ahmed as “the second African woman to win an Olympic weightlifting medal”. This may sound as contradiction, but, in fact, following Ahmed’s achievement, Egypt received a belated silver medal from the women’s 75kg class in the 2012 London Olympics, in which Abeer Abdelrahman finished fifth behind three lifters who failed drug tests. The article does not explain such lexical absence, yet readers may recognize it by referring to other news stories. From the point of view of the author of the article, the important story revolves around is Sara Ahmed and her iconic achievement.

The article quotes Sara Ahmed twice. In both quotes, Ahmed asserts that she *cannot explain* her feelings nor *express* her thoughts:

“Two years on from her success in Nanjing, Ahmed – who is just 1.55m tall – still has fond memories of the YOG. “The Youth Olympic Games win gave me good feelings that I can’t explain,” she **admitted**.

No doubt those emotions returned after Ahmed produced the performance of her life in Rio, although once again she struggled to find the words to describe the moment!

“It is a very great honour and I can’t express my thoughts,” **revealed** Ahmed

The author refers to this emotional inability to speak out by “**struggling** to find words” and by the two metapositional quoting verbs *admitted* and *revealed*. So, while Ahmed is authoritative in terms of weightlifting proficiency, she is not in terms of self-expression and articulating her proficiency. Ahmed’s inexpressiveness may be due to her young age (as emphasized by overlexicalization) and/or the overwhelming emotions surrounding a world-class achievement such as the Olympics.

### 6.1.2 Iconographical analysis

Powerful evaluation of Sarah Ahmed’s achievement is accomplished not only overtly through headline and language of the news story but more subtly through her representation in the three images that the article provides. *Image 1* precedes the headline; it is the reader’s first encounter with the news. The image features Ahmed lifting the extremely heavy bar and screaming at the top of her mouth with firmly contracted eyes. *Image 2* interrupts the text almost to the middle of the article; it is a full-length shot of Ahmed smiling in pride as she lifts the medal in front of the off-frame audience. *Image 3* is close to the end of the article; it is a view-from-the top image of Ahmed in full squat position as she grabs the weighted bar tightly and getting ready for the snatch.

Connotators in the three images are symbolic of Ahmed’s salience and load the text with female empowerment; they signify a discourse of female agency achieved through Ahmed’s supremacy and professionalism. The three images depict a real-time event representing a real (not a fictional) female achievement; this credits the images with a high degree of credibility and signifies the attainability of the achievement (echoing the headline of *blazing a flame*). Furthermore, the images represent a female athlete in a professional setting – it is a non-domestic setting free of traditional female attributes. Also, the fact that Ahmed is carrying tremendous weight overrules any stereotypical idea of female frailty.

Considering the setting, it is clear that Ahmed is foregrounded in the three images; she stands in all images alone emphasizing her salience to the event by putting her individual experience at the forefront while diminishing the context and setting. Thanks to the technological facilities of high resolution cameras, colors of the three images are rich and saturated, and tone is bright. Focus is heightened to exaggerate details of Ahmed’s facial expressions; less salient elements (such as the plain green background in *Image 2*) are muted or focus-reduced (such as the Olympic rings background in *Image 1*).

Considering pose analysis, it is obvious that Ahmed’s images suggest an activity, even though images typically freeze the moment into a frame. The sequence of events is framed in the order *Image 3-Image 1-Image 2*. There is an emphasis on her facial impressions. In *Image 1 and Image 3*, Ahmed is standing in controlled postures engaged in the activity of lifting. The images represent her physical control suggesting her professional supremacy and empowering her as a female who managed to defy stereotypical view of female frailty. *Image 2* represents the prize; Ahmed’s dedication to the game over the year is rewarded

and her posture suggests joy and accomplishment as she raises the medal for public display.

Object's attributes analysis reveals the following:

- Ahmed's attire signifies her Muslim identity. In *Image 1* and *Image 3*, Ahmed is dressed in a plain unglamorous tight black unitard and a red sports hijab (both signifying the colors of Egypt's flag). Her waist is supported by a weightlifting belt that allows squat and dead lift with more weight. In *Image 2*, she is dressed in a red sports hijab and a red training suit that apparently looks bigger than her size (echoing the textual emphasis on her young age and small body frame and reflecting low funding from Egyptian Olympic committee). Ahmed's competing in unitard comes after "a rule change by the International Weightlifting Federation in 2011", as the article reports. Indeed, this signifies an ideological change in the international sport arena allowing proficient Muslims to be included and hence expanding the scope of participation and representation. Whether a cultural or religious symbol, Ahmed's hijabs stands for her Muslim identity that does not contradict with her athletic gift and love of the game. Furthermore, the unitard overrules any traditional notions of female sexuality; Ahmed does not actually project her power through stereotypical attire that reveals much of her skin, but rather through professional exhibition of her athletic abilities.
- The weights, the weightlifting belt, the bronze medal and the Rio 2016 souvenir figurine logo are the only *accessories* in the images, overruling traditional image of women with traditional feminine accessories. The weights, the medal and the figurine reflect Ahmed's professionalism and stand for her proficiency in carrying extremely heavy weight and deserving the trophy.

Gaze analysis reveals the following:

- In *Image 1* and *Image 3*, Ahmed is closing her eyes. Had she got them open, the images would have been *demand images* engaging the viewer, as she would be gazing directly at the viewer. But the fact that they images are taken while her eyes are closed signifies the author's emphasis on her self-control and intense concentration. The viewer cannot help engaging with her anyway. *Image 1* is a close shot, encouraging the viewer to focus closely on Ahmed's mixed feelings of agony and determination. With her eyes firmly closed, Ahmed is shutting down any distractions. Her scream stands for defying not only the weights, but also all the hurdles put in her way such as dropping her high school exams, lack of support from the Egyptian Ministry of Education, death of her father a year before the Games, low funding, female marginalization, etc. Many of these hurdles are not revealed explicitly in words but in this one image.
- *Image 2* is an *offer* image as Ahmed is looking off-frame; this invites the viewer to observe her more objectively and consider what she may be thinking. Presumably, Ahmed is looking at the audience and her coach engaging with their cheers and proudly displaying her medal. Gaze analysis of *Image 2* reveals a reciprocal interplay between lexical and iconographical semiotic choices. Looking off-frame into the distance may signify Ahmed's inability to

articulate her feelings, as the quoting-verb analysis reveals. Or, looking off-frame into the audience, Ahmed may be reflecting on *blazing a trail* for her fellow Arab/Egyptian Muslim female athletes to follow her footsteps in the newly-trodden path of empowerment and world-class achievement.

## 6.2 Social actor analysis

The article constructs Sara Ahmed as an active social actor through a number of representational strategies (i.e. ideological referential choices) used in both the lexical and visual modes. Starting from the headline which locates the story in a news frame emphasizing achievement and identity, the author classifies Ahmed as a unique Egyptian female athlete. She is *personalized*, being the center of the text as well as the three images. She is presented as a *specific individual* in the two modes of communication. However, the lexical mode links her to: (i) her brother (as a person who mainly inspired her to start weightlifting) and (ii) to her male compatriot who won bronze in the men's 77kg event few hours following Ahmed's feat. Linking Ahmed to her brother is employed as part of telling her story; so after all, it is about Sara. Reference to Ahmed's male compatriot medalist is also employed as part of constructing Ahmed as both the primary source and a partner in forming the joy of the Egyptian nation.

Again, Ahmed's young age is one of the facts emphasized in the story. This apparently constructs part of her identity and accentuates emphasis on her iconic achievement if compared to her small size and young age. Furthermore, Ahmed is presented in *nominated* terms (twice in the headlines as "Sara Ahmed", then using her last name throughout the rest of the article), and in *functionalized* terms as "YOG weightlifter". Functionalization is not only official, but it also connotes *legitimacy* and highlights agency and professional progress from YOG to senior-level competition.

Focus on Sara Ahmed's gender and ethnicity starts in the headlines: "EGYPTIAN ATHLETES" and "FEMALE EGYPTIAN ATHLETE". Then, throughout the article, Ahmed's Egyptian identity is highlighted: "wrote her name into the **country's record books**", "aspiring female athletes in **her home country**", "claimed **her country's first medal**". There is also one reference to Ahmed as an *African*, ideologically squaring her within African origins.

Interestingly, Ahmed is not directly referred to as Muslim in the text, but rather indirectly as hijabi: "She competes wearing a sports hijab and a full-length unitard after a rule change by the International Weightlifting Federation in 2011." Her Muslim faith is evident in the three images through her attire. So, if this article is silent about Ahmed's Muslim faith or does not classify her as such, it is actually in compliance with the ethics fostered by the Olympic Games Organization. Since this article is the official online coverage of the Organization, it reproduces the ideology of the institution constructing the athlete's identity on professional grounds.

Visual strategies of representing Ahmed as a unique achiever and active social actor align with the lexical representation. Ahmed is depicted as the only individual in the three images. While other news coverage of Ahmed's

achievements includes images of her on the podium with the other two medalists, the article under-study does not include any images of the other medalists – even though the text mentions their names and nationality. Furthermore, considering who else is missing from the image frames (e.g. referees, awarding bodies, audience, coach, etc.) highlights Ahmed’s agency and aligns with the textual representation of Ahmed as the most and the only important person to depict in the news story.

The three images represent Ahmed positively. They connote hard work rewarded. Viewers immediately align with Ahmed’s achievement through the short *distance* between them and Ahmed in the medium and long shots of *Image 1* and *Image 2*, respectively. This, along with the face-to-face *angle*, engages the viewers by helping them focus on details of her facial expressions and hence her inner emotions. *Image 3* has distant view-from-the-top angle; Ahmed stands exactly in the center of the lifting stage in a full squat position; the stage is framed by blue tape that has the print *Rio 2016* as a motif. Underneath her is the name of the Olympics in white print, and in front of her firm feet is a white print of the Olympic rings. Her bar symmetrically frames the printed *Rio 2016* name and the Olympic rings. Indeed, *Image 3* legitimizes Ahmed as an Olympian in action.

### 6.3 Transitivity analysis

Ahmed is an active agentive participant in both the lexical and the visual representation of her transitivity. In the three images, Ahmed is participating in sporting endeavors whether during weightlifting or during her medal-award. Similarly, all the processes represent Ahmed as the active dynamic force in the activity. Transitivity analysis reveals that Ahmed has activated capacity for controlling things, for taking actions, and for making things happen. Action processes foreground her agency and contribute to the representation of physical and mental power:

- Ahmed’s agency is mainly correlated to *material* processes, such as: “**BLAZES A TRAIL**” “ **wrote** her name”, “**won** an historic bronze”, “**followed up** a 112kg lift”, “**competed** at senior level”, “**produced** the performance of her life”.
- Ahmed is engaged in an active cognitive process of *choosing* between her exams and the Olympics: “she **chose** to miss her final high school exams in June to prioritise her preparations”. Here, Ahmed is the *focalizer* of the action; this allows the reader an internal view of an athlete struggling between her athletic ambition and educational goals. An implicit pressure is evident. The article does not talk about Ahmed’s appeal to the Ministry of Education to have her exams in Brazil that was later denied, but the mental process of choosing does.
- Ahmed is presented as engaged in relational processes that state facts about her ranking as in “**BECAME THE FIRST FEMALE**”, and “**became** only the second African woman”. Also, a relational process is used to describe her state of being; her determination is made prominent by placing the adjectival

phrase in the marked front position: “So determined **was** she to perform at her peak in Rio”.

## 7. Ahram online coverage

### 7.1 Semiotic choices analysis

#### 7.1.1 Lexical analysis

There is dominance of words belonging to the semantic field of *historic achievements* connoting Ahmed’s supremacy and excellence along the years. Starting with the headline, “Meet Sara Ahmed, the first ever Egyptian woman to win an Olympic medal”, the author ideologically squares Ahmed as a forerunner surpassing other compatriot women.

- The article is loaded with words reflecting this iconic achievement for Egypt, such as “**the first ever Egyptian** woman”, “created **history**”, “the **first woman** in the country’s **history**”, and “to give **Egypt** its **first** medal at Rio”.
- Due to the nature of the news story (i.e. an interview), there is recurrent reference to Ahmed’s age and corresponding achievement, such as “**started** weightlifting at the age of **ten**”, “**joined** the military organisation club ... at the age of **12**”, “**joined** Egypt’s senior team at the age of only **14**”, “the **youngest** weightlifter in the **national team**”, “**win** six gold medals ... in **2012**”, “**won** three gold medals in the **U-20** World Championships”, “**winning** the gold and bronze medal in the **2013**”, “gold after **winning** the 63kg event at the **2014** Youth Olympics”, “She **climbed up** the rankings in **2015** to finish fourth in the World Championships”, and “At Rio she **broke her record** by 10kg at just **18 years old**”. This *overlexicalization* connotes Ahmed’s perseverance over time, and highlights her progressive success at every stage. Indeed, listing these facts by numbers connotes that Ahmed is a serious accomplished athlete; her Olympic medal is not accidental but well-earned, or as the author puts it “here’s a long story of discipline, determination and enthusiasm behind the teenager’s big moment”.

Furthermore, lexical absence in the article is employed to highlight Ahmed’s supremacy. What is absent from this Ahram Online news story may be recognized by referring to other articles (e.g. Olympic.org’s) dealing with Ahmed’s feat. This article does not refer to the belated medal recently given to the 2012 Olympian. Hence, lexical absence serves as a confirmation that Sara Ahmed is *the first ever* medalist.

The article quotes Sara Ahmed six times. The author’s interpretation of Ahmed’s quotes is presented in the *neutral structure* verbs *said* and *told*: “Ahmed **told** Reuters”, “she **told** reporters”, “she **said** just before the Games”, “she **said**.”, “she **said** at the time”. Ahmed is presented as asserting and listing facts. The *metapositional* verb *explain* in “Ahmed **explained**” marks the author’s interpretation of what Ahmed is saying, in this case justifying why she joined the senior team at the age of 14 (due to her exceptional weightlifting abilities). Clearly, the author’s lexical choices in the use of quoting verbs contributes to portraying an image of Ahmed as an articulate assertive participant (contrary to the article posted in Olympic.org).

### 7.1.2 Iconographical analysis

The article includes one image directly under the headlines. The image freezes a moment of reward into a frame; it features Ahmed smiling in pride as she lifts the medal in front of the off-frame audience. The caption under the image documents Ahmed's identity as both an Egyptian and a female medalist. The image in the article is the same shot of *Image 2* in Olympic.org coverage, but it is cut by third to reveal only Ahmed's upper body. Connotators in the image represent Ahmed's *salience*, and they interplay well with the lexical choices, focusing on Ahmed's world-class achievement. The image depicts a real-time event representing a real female achievement. The result is a high degree of credibility and attainability. Furthermore, the image represents a Muslim female athlete in a professional setting – it is a non-domestic setting free of traditional female attributes. Echoing the lexical choices of achievements, the image signifies a discourse of female accomplishment, agency, and professionalism.

Setting and pose analysis reveals that Ahmed is foregrounded as she poses in exaltation and pride. The colors are rich and saturated, and tone is bright. Focus is heightened to exaggerate details of her facial expressions. Ahmed poses prominently against the plain green background. These elements emphasize Ahmed's salience to the event and put her individual experience at the forefront while diminishing the context and setting. The image suggests an activity of displaying the medal to the public in pride. Ahmed is standing in controlled posture, raising the bronze medal in one hand and the Rio 2016 souvenir figurine logo in the other.

Object's attributes analysis reveals the following:

- Ahmed's attire signifies both her Muslim and Egyptian identity. She is dressed in a red sport hijab and a red training suit. The hijab marks an ideological change in the Sport arena allowing the inclusion of Muslim females. Ahmed's Egyptian identity is also evident in the flag logo embroidering the suit. Interestingly, Ahmed's Muslim faith and the attire are not reported in language explicitly, but they are signaled in the image
- The bronze medal and the Rio 2016 souvenir figurine logo are the only *accessories* in the images, overruling traditional image of women with traditional feminine accessories.

By doing gaze analysis to this close shot *offer* image, viewers are encouraged to observe Ahmed more objectively and consider what she may be thinking as she looks off-frame and slightly upwards in exaltation. It is obvious that there is a harmonious interplay between lexical and iconographical semiotic choices. Ahmed may be reflecting on her long road, present fulfillment and future Olympic aspirations. Mirroring the quote "All Egypt was waiting for one or two medals from our team", the gaze and smile signify agency, as if she is saying "*I did it*".

## 7.2 Social actor analysis

The article constructs Ahmed as an active social actor through a number of representational strategies used in both the lexical and visual modes. Being the interviewee, Ahmed is *personalized* in both language and image. She is presented as a *specific individual* in the two modes of communication. The headlines emphasize Ahmed's exclusive achievement and her ethnic and gender identity: "the first ever **Egyptian woman** to win an Olympic medal". Interestingly, Ahmed, who is still a teenager, is referred to as *woman* three times (twice by the author and once by herself). Indeed, Ahmed is aware of vital role as a female standing for her gender

The lexical mode links Ahmed's history of achievement to five supporting *nominated* individuals and institutions: (i) her coach who backed her journey towards the medal; (ii) her weightlifter brother who supervised her at an early age; (iii) the military organization club in her hometown; (iv) the national team's coach who included her in the senior squad despite her young age; and (v) her Chinese coach who helped her win six gold medals. Linking Ahmed's achievement to other individuals is the author's representational strategy of ideologically squaring Ahmed as an exceptional talent supported by a number of participants who believe in her abilities and foster her journey. Clearly, this marks an ideological change in the Egyptian community (both family and professional athletes) which empowers a female at an early age, opens closed doors for her, and includes her among seniors. Although such an ideological empowerment is not explicitly said in the article, it is implied in the facts that Ahmed lists by herself. Indeed, Ahmed's achievement is presented in such a way that it encourages families to support their girls even if that defies societal stereotypes.

It is worth noting that Ahmed does not separate herself from the wider community; she has a strong sense of societal bonding. She acknowledges their support and takes pride at returning their favor by clinching an Olympic medal. She exalts at fulfilling the aspiration of the whole nation. As she aligns herself with community, the readers as well cannot help but aligning themselves positively with Ahmed while opposing the bureaucratic Ministry of Education. Her *hoping* that the Ministry would allow her to re-sit for the exams in Brazil is an implicit request that the government returns back the bronze medal with another attempt for the exams.

Furthermore, Ahmed is presented in *nominated* terms (twice: in the headlines as "Sara Ahmed", and in the lead paragraph as "Sara Ahmed Samir", then using her last name "Ahmed" throughout the rest of the article except twice as "Samir"). She is also presented in *functionalized* terms as "Egyptian **weightlifter**" and "talented **athlete**". Indeed, functionalization connotes legitimacy and highlights Ahmed's agency.

Visual strategies of representing Ahmed as a unique achiever and active social actor align with the lexical representation. Ahmed is depicted as the only individual in the image, even though she is standing on the podium alongside the other two medalists, whose names, nationalities, and accomplishments are listed in the article. Considering who else is missing from the image frame (e.g.



referees, awarding bodies, audience, coach, etc.) highlights Ahmed's agency and aligns with the textual representation of Ahmed as the most and the only important person to depict in the news story. The image represents Ahmed positively; it connotes the fruition of hard work. Viewers immediately align with Ahmed through the short *distance* between them and Ahmed. The *close-up shot* with a *side-on angle* engages viewers by helping them focus on details of her facial expressions and hence her inner emotions.

### 7.3 Transitivity analysis

Ahmed is an active agentive participant in both the lexical and the visual representation of her transitivity. The image depicts Ahmed as a medalist being rewarded in a world-class sporting event. The majority of verbal processes depict Sara Ahmed as the active dynamic force in the activity. *Material* processes foreground her agency and depict her as having activated capacity for controlling things, for taking actions and for making things happen, such as: “**created** history”, “**totaled** 255kg”, “**won** the gold”, “**had skipped** her final”, “**made** such a huge impact”, and “**moved onto** the senior level”. Yet, other processes depict Ahmed as *a beneficiary* when she is presented as supported by *agents* along her athletic journey such as: “coach **saw in [me]** a good potential”, “**she was trained** by a Chinese coach”. Furthermore, Ahmed is presented as engaged in relational processes that state facts about her rankings, such as: “**is** the first ever Egyptian woman”, and “**I was** the youngest weightlifter”. Ahmed is engaged as well in an active mental process as a *reflector* of action, allowing readers to have an internal view of her deep thoughts, as in “**I hope** the ministry of education will allow me to ...”. Finally, Ahmed is presented as the *sayer* of *verbiage* as in: “She also **spoke about her intense training programme**”. Machin and Mayr (2012) point out that generally those who are allowed to have voice in the media “may be those who have the most power” (110).

Visual representation of Ahmed looking off-frame optimistically upwards encourages the viewers to imagine what her thoughts are. Relating to the lexical representation of Ahmed's agency, viewers may regard Ahmed as engaged in the *cognitive* process of remembering her early beginnings, recollecting fond memories of previous medals, and aspiring for gold in the next Games. This is described in the concluding lines: “... and for her fans back home, there is every expectation that she can move up the podium in the coming years”.

### 8. Findings

In portraying Sarah Ahmed's achievement in Rio 2016 Olympics, both online news stories (Western and national) make use of the interplay between lexical and visual semiotic modes to produce and legitimize a discourse of female empowerment defying stereotypical values. Representational strategies highlight Ahmed's agency as an activated social actor capable of making exclusive world-class achievement in a domain that has long been associated with masculine hegemony. Images in both articles individualize and foreground Ahmed's

supremacy; similarly, the texts ideologically square Ahmed as uniquely different and as an inspiring role model for Egyptian female athletes.

MCDA of both articles reveals few areas of difference between Western and national ideologies representing Ahmed's achievement:

- Olympic.org highlights aspects of Ahmed's identity as a Muslim, speaking of Ahmed's Muslim attire and the inclusion of hijabi athletes by the International Weightlifting Federation. Ahram Online does not refer to Ahmed's attire, leaving it to the viewer to grasp from the included image.
- Olympic.org represents Ahmed as unexpressive for being under the effect of the overwhelming emotions of the attainment. Ahram Online article is an interview; it represents Ahmed as articulate about different stages of her athletic journey.
- Olympic.org refers to one agent in Ahmed's journey towards empowerment, i.e., her weightlifter brother. Ahram Online nominates five agents supporting Ahmed during every step of her journey. This constructs: (i) Ahmed's strong sense of belonging to the community; and (ii) an ideological shift in gender roles in an Arab community that empowers talented females to excel in a typically male-appropriate/dominated game.
- Olympic.org includes three large size images of Ahmed during her final lift (squat – clean-and-jerk – the medal), echoing the headline of paving a road less trodden and blazing trail for many to follow. Ahram Online includes one medium size image of Ahmed raising her medal in pride and exaltation; it is one of the images used in Olympic.org but with different dimensions. Findings verify Machin and Mayr's view that images do not have fixed meanings and are open to various interpretations depending on the context and utterances of participants. The image is the same but it evokes distinct meanings because it interplays with different lexical semiotic choices.

## 9. Conclusion

Language is indeed a social construct; it is a system of options from which communicators choose to represent the world. Media discourse plays a significant role in constructing the world and making meaning. Online newspapers communicators have a range of lexical and visual semiotic choices to represent participants in discourse. Such representational strategies are not neutral but rather ideological, and they connect to broader discourses, social practices, and power relations. Obviously, sport is a powerful site for the (re)production of dominant knowledge about gendered practices. By doing MCDA, the study highlights that in reporting the achievements of Rio 2016 Olympians both national and western online newspapers represent Arab female medalists as serious athletes and active social actors engaged in an action of unprecedented supremacy and world-class power. Indeed, lexical and iconographical choices connote and legitimize both explicitly and implicitly a set of ideas and values related to the role of female athletes in Arab communities, placing them in equal footing with their global counterparts. Such semiotic choices highlight a significant aspect of the emerging revisited identity of Arab female athletes, i.e. empowered agency. Western online

newspapers, in particular, highlight the role Arab female athletes play in challenging traditional stereotypes related to Muslims. This has placed athletes as a tool for naturalizing power relations that goes beyond the Games to realm of gendered Muslim Arab ideology in general. The revisited identity is expected to dominate for as long as communicators maintain to promote discourses and social practices that reproduce these aspects of identity.

### **10. Recommendations**

I recommend that future research deal with the representation of Arab female athletes in 2020 Olympics, hopefully examining the case study of Sara Ahmed. This should give an accurate view of the dynamics of gender ideology in the Arab world and the construction of Arab female athletic identity.

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