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­Body image is actually what we call a multi dimensional construct, and that means it has a number of dimensions as what we think of body image. The most obvious one and what people are really familiar with is the appearance dimension, so that’s how you think about your body in term of its appearance and how you feel about your appearance, but there are also other parts of body image like its function – what it can do, what your body allows you to do and move and experience, and those are some of the things about body image that perhaps we’re not so familiar with.

With those multi dimensional constructs of body image media focus tends to be mostly on appearance, particularly for women, and we don’t actually see much for the other side being focused on in media portrayals, but the Olympics gives a really good opportunity for the media to show the functional aspect of our bodies and what the bodies can achieve and the wonderful achievements that the Olympians do make. So it’s actually a really great opportunity to show the different side of body image, and I think what the Olympics does, it has two positive aspects in terms of the media coverage for body image; it shows the functional aspects of body image, but it also shows a range of different body shapes and sizes. We’re pretty used to in the media, seeing one typical, stereotypical body size for women being shown as the ideal. But what the Olympics does is show there are different body sizes and shapes that are actually really important for different functions. So someone who’s a basketballer, has a very different body shape and size than someone who is a gymnast or a discus thrower or something like that. So actually getting a celebration of a whole range of different body sizes, rather than just one body size being the ideal, and the rest just being put aside or not being treated quite so well, so I think that’s a really fantastic aspect of the Olympics coverage.

As I was saying, the Olympics can be really positive in the portrayal of the functions of the body. But sometimes we can actually go down a route with media coverage that maybe isn’t so positive for everybody. When we get to the point when we stop thinking about the functions of the body and start maybe glamourising the athletes for how they look, and focusing on perhaps the more attractive athletes, then I think that’s an unfortunate side effect of Olympic coverage and sports coverage in general. But also, that doesn’t necessarily effect everybody in the same way. There are some people who are more vulnerable to these effects, so if they already have body dissatisfaction so they don’t feel comfortable about their body, or they’re really keen on emulating and looking like celebrities and people in the media, they’re more likely to be effected by that coverage that’s highlighting just the appearance based aspect of body image and of the athletes.