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He's a Laker; She's a "Looker:" The Consequences of Gender-Stereotypical Portrayals of Male and Female Athletes by the Print Media

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Abstract

Although an extensive qualitative literature shows that coverage of women's sport often focuses on female athletes' attractiveness (to the exclusion of their athleticism), there is a dearth of quantitative research examining exactly what effect this coverage has on people's perceptions of athletes. As part of a 2 (Gender of the Athlete: Female or Male) x 2 (Gender of the Participant: Female or Male) x 2 (Focus of the Article: Physical Attractiveness or Athleticism) between-subjects design, 92 predominantly White undergraduates (40 men, 52 women) read a fictitious newspaper profile about an Olympic athlete in which the article focused on the athlete's attractiveness (as coverage of female athletes often does) or on the athlete's athleticism (as coverage of male athletes often does). Interestingly, participants neither had favorable impressions of nor liked articles about female and male athletes when attractiveness was the main focus of an article. These findings suggest that the media should be cognizant of the harmful and erroneous impressions that can result from portraying athletes in terms of their personal attributes rather than their athletic accomplishments.

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In an era in which men's professional sport is becoming characterized by multimillion-dollar contracts, player's union lockouts, illegal steroid use, and an individualistic mentality, disgruntled sports fans are increasingly turning to women's professional sport for entertainment. Indeed, leagues such as the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), the Ladies' Professional Golf Association (LPGA), the Women's Pro Softball League (WPSL), the Women's Pro Tennis Tour (WTA), and the Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA) are a welcome sign for fans searching for team-oriented play, affordable seats, and accessible sports stars (Wulf, 1997). In addition to the burgeoning field of women's professional sport, the Olympic Games have also been a showcase for successful female athletes. In the 1996 Atlanta Games, U.S. women's teams earned gold medals in gymnastics, soccer, softball, and basketball (with the softball and basketball teams reclaiming their titles at the 2000 Sydney Games). Their Winter counterparts in the 1998 Nagano Games also fared well, with the first-place women's hockey team and with individual stars Picabo Street, Tara Lipinski, and Christine Witty securing victories.

Female athletes competing at the interscholastic and intercollegiate levels have also made great strides. The Title IX court decision of 1972 requires all federally-funded programs, including athletics, to provide equal treatment and opportunity for participation for men and women. The implication for sports programs was that high schools and public universities subsequently were required to spend equivalent amounts of time and money for male and female athletes' scholarships, recruitment, facilities, supplies, travel, and services (Curtis & Grant, 2001). In part because of these improved opportunities, girls and women's involvement in sport

has reached an all-time high. Whereas in 1971, only 1 in 27 girls participated in high school athletics, over 1 in 3 participated in 1997 (Women's Sports Foundation, 1998).

Although women's participation in professional, Olympic, intercollegiate, and interscholastic sport has reached unprecedented highs, research shows that media coverage of female athletes still lags behind that of men's (e.g., Duncan, Messner, & Williams, 1991; Fink, 1998; Tuggle & Owen, 1999). For example, women were featured on the cover of Sports Illustrated a scant 4 times out of 53 issues in 1996 (Women's Sports Foundation, 1997). A longitudinal study of Sports Illustrated feature articles from the mid 1950s to the late 1980s also revealed that the popular sport magazine allots far fewer column inches and photographs per article for women's sport as compared to men's (Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Salwen & Wood, 1994). A similar pattern was exhibited in television coverage of the Olympics, both in 1992 (Higgs & Weiller, 1994) and in 1996—purportedly "the year of women's sports" (Eastman & Billings, 1999). Even coverage of collegiate and high school sport is gender biased—boys receive more and longer articles than do girls (e.g., Sagas, Cunningham, Wigley, & Ashley, 2000; Woodcock, 1995). In effect, this "symbolic annihilation" (Gerbner, 1972) of women's sport by the media conveys the inaccurate idea that women's sport is inferior to and not as noteworthy as men's sport.

Coverage of women's sport is inferior to that of men's not only in quantity but in quality as well (e.g., Birrell & Theberge, 1994; Daddario, 1998; Duncan, 1990, Duncan & Messner, 2000; Kane & Parks, 1992). Sport commentators and writers often allude or explicitly refer to a female athlete's attractiveness, emotionality, femininity, and heterosexuality (all of which effectively convey to the audience that her stereotypical gender role is more salient than her athletic role), yet male athletes are depicted as powerful, independent, dominating, and valued

(Hilliard, 1984; Messner, 1988; Sabo & Jansen, 1992). Because competitively participating in sports is inconsistent with society's prescribed female role, the media coverage of female athletes seems to be trying to protect female athletes from rejection (or, more cynically, giving the public what they think it "wants") by emphasizing other aspects of their "femaleness," such as their attractiveness (Kane, 1996). For instance, although Gabrielle Reese, Anna Kournikova, Katarina Witt, and Jan Stephenson are all exceptional athletes, the media often focus on their attractiveness, a problem that is much less common for male athletes. In effect, the media tend to represent female athletes as women first (i.e., through focusing on their hair, nails, clothing, and attractiveness) and as athletes second; however, male athletes for the most part are portrayed solely in terms of their athleticism (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983).

This trivialization of women athletes is consistent with schema theory, which proposes that people have implicit cognitive structures that provide them with expectancies when processing information (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). One of the most socially constructed and dichotomous stereotypes is that of gender (Burn, O'Neal, & Nederend, 1996). Gender schema theory argues that people are socialized (e.g., through parents, teachers, peers, toys, and the popular media) into believing that gender differences are significant and worth maintaining (Bem, 1981). Although there is actually more variability within than between the sexes, the concept of distinct and exclusive gender differences persists nonetheless (Martin, 1987).

When people do violate our well-ingrained schemas (as would a female truck driver or a male secretary), they are consequently perceived more negatively than are people who are schema-consistent (e.g., Knight, Giuliano, & Sanchez-Ross, 2001; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). It may be, then, that men are readily portrayed by the media as athletes first because being an athlete is consistent with the traditional male role (Coakley & White, 1992). However, for

women, being an athlete contradicts the conventional female role, and thus media coverage emphasizes other aspects of their "femaleness" (such as their attractiveness). Consequently, the narratives of male athletes are free to focus on their athletic accomplishments, whereas the portrayals of female athletes focus on aspects of their femininity, possibly to make these female athletes appear more gender-role consistent.

The trivialization of women’s sport by the media is well established, but researchers have yet to empirically investigate how differential portrayals of male and female athletes affect the public’s view of the athletes. Although researchers have speculated as to how people’s beliefs might be influenced by biased coverage (e.g., Fasting, 1999), there is a dearth of research on the actual consequences of these differential portrayals as well as on the extent to which the media can truly influence people’s perceptions of athletes. In addition, members of the media argue that they simply provide coverage that “the public wants,” yet this also remains to be substantiated by empirical research. In other words, to what end the media merely reflects or actively refracts public opinion is still unknown. As such, the purpose of the present investigation was to address these previously unanswered questions in the sport literature. To explore how gender-consistent and -inconsistent portrayals of athletes affect people’s perceptions, a hypothetical Olympic profile was designed in which the focal point of the article was either a male or female athlete’s physical attractiveness (a typically female portrayal) or athleticism (a typically male portrayal).

In general, it was predicted that female athletes described as attractive would be perceived more positively (e.g., as more likable, more dedicated to sports, and more heroic) than female athletes who were not described in such a manner, because being attractive “softens” the perceived gender-role inconsistency of a female athlete. Conversely, male athletes described as attractive were expected to be perceived more negatively than would males not described as

such, because the gender schema for male athletes leads people to expect that a man's athleticism, rather than his physical attractiveness, should be the focus of a magazine article.

Furthermore, the results were expected to be qualified by the gender of the participant. Because women typically are more accepting of schema-inconsistency (e.g., Fiala, Giuliano, Remlinger, & Braithwaite, 1999; Greendorfer, 1993) and of female athletes in general (Nixon, Maresca, & Silverman, 1979), three-way interactions were expected such that male participants would perceive gender-typical behavior (i.e., articles about attractive female athletes and athletic male athletes) positively, whereas female participants would be more likely to value atypical, out-of-role behavior (i.e., articles about athletic female athletes or attractive male athletes).

Method

Participants

Data were collected from 92 predominantly White undergraduate students (40 men, 52 women) at a small liberal arts university in the Southwest. Participants were recruited primarily from introductory psychology and economics classes and were given extra credit in their courses for completing the study. Additional participants were recruited from the men and women's Division III soccer teams at the university, and they were given small prizes as incentives.

Design and Materials

A 2 (Gender of the Athlete: Female or Male) x 2 (Gender of the Participant: Female or Male) x 2 (Focus of the Article: Physical Attractiveness or Athleticism) between-subjects design was used to explore perceptions of athletes as a function of their gender and the focus of an article. Because newspaper and magazine articles rarely just describe physical attributes, a picture of the hypothetical athlete was included in the article. To minimize potential confounds, a pilot test was conducted to match male and female targets on attractiveness and age. From a pool

of 12 "head shot" color photographs, one male target (M attractiveness = 6.47 on a 7-point scale; M age = 19.43) and one female target (M attractiveness = 6.93; M age = 21.20) were selected because they received similar scores on these attributes.

In the article emphasizing the athlete's physical attractiveness, the athlete was described as "becoming known as much for his [her] incredible body as for his [her] powerful strokes," as being one of People Magazine's "Fifty Most Beautiful People in the World," and as having recently signed a modeling contract to make a "Wet and Wild" calendar for Speedo swimwear after the Olympics. By contrast, in the article that focused on the athlete's athleticism, he or she was described as "becoming known both for his [her] incredible speed and his [her] powerful strokes," as being one of Sports Illustrated's "Fifty Up-and-Coming Athletes," and as having recently signed a contract to model for a Speedo promotional calendar.

Each article was followed by a response sheet designed to assess participants' reactions to the profile. Specifically, participants were asked to rate on 10-point scales ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 10 (Very much) several different characteristics of the athlete, including how feminine (i.e., tender, cheerful, affectionate, sympathetic, gentle, compassionate, and warm; Chronbach's alpha = .93), respectable (i.e., acting as a leader, respectable, ambitious, a good representative of the U.S.A., and a good role model; Chronbach's alpha = .90), athletic (i.e., athletic, competitive, talented, serious about sports, and dedicated to sports; Chronbach's alpha = .84), and aggressive (i.e., aggressive, dominant, and forceful; Chronbach's alpha = .85) they perceived him or her to be. Using the same scale, participants were also asked to make other judgments about the athlete, such as how likable, heroic, similar to the "ideal" man/woman, and physically attractive they perceived the athlete to be. Participants were then given the opportunity to record open-ended responses about their overall impression of the athlete.

In addition, because the media have argued that gender-consistent coverage is "what the public wants" (Kane, 1996), a secondary category of dependent variables was used to assess participants' liking of the hypothetical article. Thus, participants also rated (on the same 10-point scale) how much they liked the article (i.e., how flattering the coverage was to the athlete, how interested they would be in reading more about the athlete, and how accurately the coverage depicted the athlete; Chronbach's alpha = .87). Participants were then instructed to give their open-ended responses about their overall impression of the article.

A number of control procedures were used to eliminate extraneous variables. First, because the gender-appropriateness of an athlete's sport is so salient, it was necessary to choose a sport that was not perceived as especially masculine or feminine. To determine whether or not a sport was considered gender-neutral, 15 participants were asked to rate the gender-appropriateness of 16 sports on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (Appropriate for men) to 7 (Appropriate for women). The sport of swimming ($M = 4.07$) was chosen as the athlete's sport in this study because it was perceived as gender-neutral, consistent with previous research (Metheny, 1965). Next, to ensure a balanced gender representation in the sample, a randomized-block design was used to assign equal numbers of male and female participants to each of the four conditions. Finally, to minimize additional error variance, the athlete's reported age (i.e., 21 years old) and name (depending on the condition, either "Nick Gleason" or "Nicole Gleason") were consistent across conditions.

Procedure

Potential participants were approached and told that the current study was "an investigation of people's perceptions of Olympic athletes." After agreeing to complete the questionnaire, participants read a hypothetical newspaper account about an athlete (who

ostensibly had competed in the 1996 Summer Olympic Games) and then made judgments in response to the coverage and the athlete involved. All participants saw identical profiles, except that the first names (i.e., the gender) and type of coverage (i.e., attractive- or athletic-focused) varied according to each of the four specific experimental conditions.

After reading four profiles (three additional hypothetical profiles were included as part of a separate investigation) and completing the corresponding response sheets, participants recorded their answers to demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, athletic status, and the amount of time they spend following sports through the media) and other personality measures, including the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) and the Sex-Role Egalitarian Scale (Beere, King, Beere, & King, 1984).[1] Upon completion of the questionnaire, participants were told that the article was hypothetical, thanked for their participation, and dismissed.

Results

The data were analyzed using a 2 (Gender of the Athlete: Female or Male) x 2 (Gender of the Participant: Female or Male) x 2 (Focus of the Article: Physical Attractiveness or Athleticism) between-subjects Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). Because there was no effect of participant gender, the reported results collapse across gender. An Athlete Gender x Focus of the Article interaction was obtained for participants' ratings of the athlete's attractiveness, F (1, 83) = 5.56, p = .021. As expected, female athletes depicted in terms of their attractiveness (M = 8.90) were seen as more attractive than those depicted in terms of their athleticism only (M = 6.54; t(43) = 5.14, p = .0001); by contrast, there was no difference in the perceived attractiveness of male athletes described as attractive (M = 8.18) or as athletic (M = 7.46; t < 1, ns), as Figure 1 shows.

Additionally, there were several main effects of the focus of the article. Athletes whose coverage focused on their attractiveness were viewed as less talented (M = 8.08) than were

athletes who were described in an athletic manner (M = 8.96), F (1, 83) = 11.68, p = .001. Athletes described as attractive were also seen as less aggressive (M = 6.22) than athletes described as athletic (M = 6.97), F(1, 83) = 4.05, p = .047. Furthermore, athletes portrayed as attractive were viewed as less heroic (M = 5.43) than were athletes portrayed as athletic (M = 6.52), F (1, 83) = 5.74, p = .019. Finally, when attractiveness was the focus of the article, people liked the article less (M = 5.18) than when the coverage focused on the athlete's athletic ability (M = 6.14), F (1, 83) = 5.09, p = .027.

Discussion

The results of the present study confirm that people's perceptions of athletes are influenced by the gender of the athlete and by the type of media coverage provided in the article. Interestingly, although the same picture was used in each condition, a female athlete whose attractiveness was the main focus of an article was perceived to be more physically attractive than was a female athlete whose athletic accomplishments were the focus of an article. However, the same pattern was not found with male athletes. Previous research has demonstrated that people have weaker schemas for ideal athletes than for ideal persons because the general public has fewer experiences (and thus, fewer cognitive associations) with the very specific category of "an ideal athlete" as opposed to the broader category of "an ideal person" (Martin & Martin, 1995). It follows that perhaps the schema for a female athlete is not as strong as that for a male athlete (because of less "mere exposure" through their "symbolic annihilation" by the media; Gerbner, 1972), and thus people's perceptions (especially of attractiveness it seems) of a female athlete are more malleable and open to alteration. As such, this study implies that people are more apt to rely on peripheral information (such as the angle provided by the type of coverage) to form impressions of a female athlete.

Regardless of athlete gender, however, focusing on attractiveness to the exclusion of athletic ability had striking consequences on how athletes were perceived. Interestingly, our results indicate that male athletes are also affected by trivializing coverage; however, since men are rarely portrayed by the media in terms of their attractiveness (as female athletes often are), this marginalizing coverage seems to predominantly affect female athletes. Because of this negative effect on impressions of female and male athletes, the media need to be cognizant of (a) the damage that focusing on athletes' attractiveness can have on people's perceptions, (b) the fact that people might prefer articles that focus on an athlete's athleticism more than ones that focus on attractiveness, and (c) the reality that they do not merely reflect public opinion; they, in fact, can actively shape it.

Interestingly, participant gender was not a significant factor in ratings of the athlete or the article—a finding contrary to some previous research (e.g., Fisher, Genovese, Morris, & Morris, 1977), but consistent with other research (e.g., Michael, Gilroy, & Sherman, 1984). Perhaps this heralds a change in men's attitudes toward female athletes. Although women have traditionally been more accepting than men of female athletes (Nixon, Maresca, & Silverman, 1979), with the accomplishments of female athletes at the professional, Olympic, college, and high school levels, men might now be more aware and, hence, more accepting of women's sport.

An examination of the open-ended responses further confirmed what the quantitative data revealed. For example, one female participant shrewdly noted about the female athlete whose coverage centered on her attractiveness, "If I were her, I would be offended that this article talked more about my physical appearance than my talent—a typical attitude towards women. They can't resist talking about your appearance." A male participant similarly remarked, "If this was done in an edition of Cosmopolitan I might have liked it, but it told me nothing about her as

an athlete." Yet another male participant said, "I wonder what her priorities are...is she using the 'swimming thing' to parlay a sweet modeling career?" Open-ended responses about male athletes portrayed as attractive revealed that they, too, were perceived in a negative light. A female participant wrote that this athlete was "a snobby rich kid who is a good swimmer and is used to everyone telling him how great he is." Another female participant remarked, "The article gave no mention of sports or athletic profile, only appearance. When speaking of an athlete in an Olympic sport, that is disconcerting."

There were several limitations of the present study, most notably that the kind of methodology used (i.e., "effects" research) cannot truly simulate the long term consequences of the media as a tool of socialization (Lewis, 1991). Although this kind of research does have certain limitations, other researchers have recognized its potential theoretical and practical value. For instance, in their research involving "face-ism," Archer and his colleagues took a qualitative finding (i.e., that pictures of women in the media often feature their entire body, whereas photographs of men usually only feature their heads) and experimentally determined through a quantitative methodology that this pattern results in men appearing smarter and in women appearing objectified (Archer, Iritani, Kimes, & Barrios, 1983). In a similar vein, the current research has shown the negative impressions and effects that can occur from articles which focus exclusively on an athlete's attractiveness. It is through this process of triangulation and examining the same phenomenon from different paradigms and disciplinary perspectives that we will begin to be able to truly understand social patterns and their potential effect on society.

Another potential limitation was that some of the conditions within the study lacked external validity (i.e., male athletes are seldom depicted in terms of their attractiveness). Although articles such as these are rarely found in the print media, it was important to include

them in the present study so that it could be empirically determined how gender-atypical portrayals of male and female athletes affect people's perceptions. That is, a conscious decision was made to trade internal for external validity in the present case. Finally, participants were not asked to report their race, and thus, the race of the participant was not taken into account in analyses. Although the majority of participants were White, previous research shows that White and Black participants weigh certain characteristics differently when evaluating the attractiveness of White and Black individuals (e.g., Hebl & Heatherton, 1998). Diverse audiences (in terms of age, socioeconomic status, education level, sexual orientation, and political orientation) might also differ with regards both to how much they like articles that focus on male and female athletes' attractiveness and athleticism and to their subsequent impressions of the athletes.

Opportunities are rife for future quantitative research in the area of gendered portrayals in the sport media. For example, the photographs selected for inclusion in the present study were both of White targets. Because people have different expectations and schemas for Black female athletes, the results from the present study might not generalize to athletes of other races For instance, it traditionally is more acceptable for minority and working-class female athletes to participate in gender-inappropriate sports (e.g., basketball, soccer, hockey) than for White and middle-class female athletes because of the former group's more dynamic perceptions of femininity (Cahn, 1994; Metheny, 1965). As such, further research is necessary to investigate the potential interactions among participant race, participant gender, athlete race, and athlete gender (Gissendaner, 1994)

In a broader scope, more experimental quantitative research should be conducted to empirically verify what descriptive qualitative studies have been reporting all along—that female

athletes receive trivializing coverage from the media. For instance, "gender marking" (i.e., qualifying athletic contests and teams for women as though men's contests are the norm or standard) is very prevalent in television coverage of female athletes (Kane, 1996). Sports writers and commentators often use gendered labels to describe games in which female athletes participate (e.g., the "Women's Final Four"), yet male athletic contests are not referred to in these gendered terms (e.g., the "Final Four" rather than the "Men's Final Four"). Although researchers have speculated that this type of coverage marginalizes female athletes by making them appear to be "the other" rather than the norm, research has yet to empirically demonstrate the consequences of gender marking. Exploring how these and other types of gender-stereotypical portrayals affect both male and female athletes is an important next step in the sport literature.

In the meantime, the present study provides an empirical perspective to the burgeoning psychological and sociological fields that study the media, sport, and gender. At no other time in history have women had as much personal encouragement (Weiss & Barber, 1995) or as many opportunities to participate in sport (Women's Sport Foundation, 1998) as they do now, yet coverage of women's sport still lags behind men's coverage in both quantity and quality. The media need to be cognizant of the effects of their trivializing and marginalizing coverage and of the fact that this type of coverage may not be "what the public wants" after all. Hopefully, with a sustained and diligent commitment from the media, sport will be viewed as an unconditionally acceptable and beneficial activity for women.

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Footnote

[1] These demographic and personality variables (e.g., athletic status, age, BSRI [Bem, 1974], and SRES [Beere, et al., 1984]) were included to explore the potential moderating effects that they might have on the interactions and main effects. However, preliminary analyses revealed no significant pattern of results, and thus these variables are not discussed further.

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Perceived attractiveness of the athlete as a function of athlete gender and focus of the article (attractiveness or athleticism).