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PRETTY VERSUS POWERFUL
IN THE SPORTS PAGES

Print Media Coverage of U.S. Women’s Olympic Gold Medal Winning Teams

Ray Jones
Audrey J. Murrell
Jennifer Jackson

To examine how descriptions of the performance of female athletes are likely to reflect dominant beliefs about gender in society, 769 passages from the print media describing gold medal winning contests for four U.S. women’s teams in the 1996 Olympics (basketball, gymnastics, soccer, and softball) and the U.S. women’s hockey team in the 1998 Olympics were subjected to content analysis. The sports analyzed fall under the categories of Matteo’s study classifying the gender appropriateness of sport (masculine, feminine, and neutral). Two dimensions were examined for each passage: task relevance and use of gender stereotypes. Consistent with our expectations, female athletes in male sports were described by the print media using frequent male-to-female comparisons and comments that had little to do with sports or the athlete’s performance. Print media coverage of female athletes in female sports focused on performance while reinforcing female stereotypes. Implications of the images of female athletes portrayed by the print media are discussed.

The 1996 Summer Olympics and the 1998 Winter Olympics were landmark events for U.S. women’s sports teams. In the summer of 1996, U.S. women’s teams won gold medals in basketball, gymnastics, soccer, softball and synchronized swimming. In the winter of 1998, the U.S. women’s hockey team won gold in Nagano. The athletes on these successful teams received a tremendous amount of attention in the national media, particularly following their performances in their teams’ gold medal winning contests. Many of these contests were nationally televised and reported in major newspapers and magazines (Conniff, 1996). The intense media coverage of these successful women’s teams provides an opportunity to examine how the media portrayal of female athletes’ performance reflects beliefs about gender.

The gendered nature of sport has received considerable attention. In social psychology, scholars have examined how sport involvement is

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considered either socially acceptable or unacceptable for females based on how each particular sport conforms to traditional images of appropriate feminine behavior (Kane, 1988; Koivula, 1995; Metheny, 1967; Rowe, 1998). In particular, Matteo (1986) classified the sex typing of sports into three categories: male appropriate (such as basketball, soccer, and football), female appropriate (such as gymnastics, ice skating, and ballet), and neutral (such as golf, softball, tennis, and volleyball). Male-appropriate sports emphasize physical contact through active, aggressive, and autonomous behavior, whereas female-appropriate sports emphasize aesthetics and beauty while discouraging physicality (Csizma, Wittig, & Schurr, 1988; Kane & Snyder, 1989; Salminen, 1990). As a result of beliefs concerning the sex appropriateness of particular sports, women who participate in male-appropriate sports must challenge traditional sex role stereotypes by combating the belief that their participation is less valuable than men’s involvement (Theberge, 1997).

In addition to studies of the sex appropriateness of particular sports, scholars have examined how beliefs regarding the sex typing of sport are likely to be reflected in the popular media’s portrayal of female athletes (Cohen, 1993; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Welky, 1997). This body of work has shown how the attitudes toward the institution of sports generate and support sexist ideologies and beliefs about gender (Blinde, Greendorfer, & Sankner, 1991; Harry, 1995; Higgs & Weiller, 1994; Kane, 1995; Nelson, 1994). In particular, work by McHugh, Duquin, and Frieze (1978) and later by Theberge (1991) revealed that descriptions of the performance of female athletes are likely to reflect the dominant beliefs about gender in the larger society. Thus, we expect that the widespread beliefs concerning the sex appropriateness of various sports are likely to be reflected in print media coverage of women’s sports in the most recent Olympic Games.

We test this assertion through a content analysis of print media coverage of female athletes (see Lau & Russell, 1980). Our approach uses a methodology similar to the content analysis of print media coverage of Black and White National Football League (NFL) quarterbacks used by Murrell and Curtis (1994). Although their study compared print media accounts of athletes playing the same position in the same sport differentiated by race, we compare print media descriptions of athletes of the same gender, differentiated by the gender appropriateness of the sport in which each participates.

The print media descriptions in our study are taken from athletes competing in five different sports. Each description focuses on a common setting; that is, a female athlete’s performance in their team’s gold medal winning contest in the Olympics. In Olympic team sports, the common feature of a successful team, regardless of the sport, is a victory in the gold medal game. In the summer of 1996 and the winter of 1998, six U.S. women’s teams were victorious in their sport’s gold medal game, five of which received a tremendous amount of coverage in the national print media. The success of U.S. female athletes in five different popular team sports, under this intense media glare, provides an excellent opportunity to observe how
descriptions of their successful performance reflect dominant beliefs about
gender in the larger society.

We offer three main hypotheses to be tested in this study. First, pas-
sages describing the performance of female athletes are likely to convey
beliefs about gender, a hypothesis that follows closely from similar claims in
previous studies (McHugh et al., 1978; Theberge, 1991). Second, the per-
formance of females playing male-appropriate sports is more likely to
include task-irrelevant statements, male stereotypes, and comparisons to
male athletes than descriptions of females playing female-appropriate or
neutral sports. This hypothesis follows the work showing that male-
appropriate sports emphasize active, aggressive, and autonomous behavior
(Koivula, 1995; Matteo, 1986). Sportswriters confronted with stereotypic-
consistent information will tend to focus on other qualities more consist-
ent with gender stereotypes (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), and thus will fre-
cently make statements unrelated to the athlete’s performance or task.
Third, the performance of females playing female-appropriate sports is
more likely to be described using passages that reflect female stereotypes,
and is more likely to be described using passages that contain task-relevant
statements, than females playing male-appropriate or neutral sports. This
hypothesis follows the work showing that female-appropriate sports
emphasize passive behavior and place value on aesthetics over physicality
(Csizma et al., 1988; Kane & Snyder, 1989; Matteo, 1986; Salminen, 1990).
The presence of stereotypic-consistent information decreases the need for a
cognitive search for other (task irrelevant) information on which to base
judgments and evaluations (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

METHOD

PROCEDURE

Six different newspapers from 1996 and seven different newspapers
from 1998, along with the magazine Sports Illustrated, were selected and
submitted for analyses of content. The 1996 newspaper sample consisted of
articles from USA Today, the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, the
Boston Globe, the Chicago Tribune, and the Atlanta Journal and Constitu-
tion. The 1998 newspaper sample consisted of articles from USA Today, the
Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, the Boston Globe, the Chicago Trib-
une, the Philadelphia Inquirer, and the Washington Post. These publica-
tions were selected because each is a primary media outlet nationwide
and/or in a major metropolitan area. A total of 769 behaviors and explana-
tions were identified from a total of 67 articles selected that described the
performance of athletes in the gold medal winning performances of the U.S.
women’s basketball, gymnastics, hockey, soccer, and softball teams.

A graduate student identified passages within each article that con-
tained performance-related statements about individual athletes. These
passages were checked by another coder until 100% agreement was reached.
Each passage was then copied onto one side of a 3 × 5-inch index card. All proper names were removed for each passage. A code to identify the athlete and the source of the passage was placed on the opposite side of the card to allow for blind coding of the passages. This procedure replicated that used by Lau and Russell (1980) and Murrell and Curtis (1994).

CODING

The coding was designed to reflect Matteo’s (1986) categories for the gender appropriateness of sport. The five sports fit into Matteo’s three categories: male appropriate (basketball, hockey, and soccer), female appropriate (gymnastics), and neutral (softball). Each performance passage was examined in relation to two dimensions: task relevance and depiction of gender. We chose these dimensions for various reasons. The teams we looked at were successful, each winning an Olympic gold medal. Their success was the direct result of how they performed in a game or meet, the actual task. Although the teams were successful in different sports, each team was composed solely of women; therefore, gender is salient.

TASK RELEVANCE

The task relevance dimension denoted if the passage described the athlete’s performance in her team’s gold medal winning contest (task relevant), if it described the athlete in a sports-related context that was not relevant to her performance in her team’s gold medal winning contest (non–task relevant but relevant to sport), or if it described the athlete in a context that had no relevance to sports or to the athlete’s performance in her team’s gold medal winning contest (non–task relevant). For example, “Teuting stopped all but one shot and made several outstanding saves” was coded as task relevant, “She was a big hockey star in high school” was coded as non–task relevant but relevant to sport, and “She plays the cello” was coded as non–task relevant.

DEPICTION OF GENDER

The depiction of gender dimension denoted if the passage described the athlete’s performance by referring to stereotypical female characteristics such as her beauty, passivity or subservience to a male coach or parent (stereotypic female); if it described the athlete’s performance by referring to stereotypical male characteristics such as the physicality of her play or her determination (stereotypic male); or if it described the athlete’s performance through a comparison to a male athlete (male comparison). For example, “The slender 6-foot 5-inch center with the modeling contract in her purse” was coded as stereotypic female, “There is no machine on Earth that can calibrate the courage Strug mustered. That is beyond measure” was coded as stereotypic male, and “She’s the Shaquille O’Neal of women’s basketball” was coded as a male comparison.
RESULTS

Ratings for the dimensions of task relevance and depiction of gender were analyzed using a chi-square analysis to assess the frequencies of the various types of task-relevant statements and statements depicting gender with the gender appropriateness of the sport as the independent variable. These results are depicted in Figure 1 (task relevance) and Figure 2 (depiction of gender).
Consistent with our expectations, there was a higher frequency of task-relevant comments ($\chi^2 = 46.01, p < .001, df = 2$) in descriptions of females playing the female-appropriate sport (57.1%) and the neutral sport (53.7%) than in descriptions of females playing the male-appropriate sports (36.9%). Conversely, there was a higher frequency of non–task-relevant comments ($\chi^2 = 39.98, p < .001, df = 2$) in descriptions of females playing the male-appropriate sports (40.9%) than in descriptions of females playing the female-appropriate sport (20.2%) and the neutral sport (27.6%). These findings confirm our hypotheses suggesting that accounts of females playing male-appropriate sports would contain a higher frequency of task-relevant comments. The accounts of the gymnasts and softball players had a greater focus on performance than the accounts of the soccer, basketball, and hockey players (see Figure 1). Furthermore, in contrast to the accounts of the gymnasts (female) and softball players (neutral), the accounts of the soccer, basketball, and hockey players (male) placed a greater emphasis on issues that had no relevance to sports or the athlete’s game performance (see Figure 1).

With reference to depiction of gender, there was a higher frequency of male comparison comments ($\chi^2 = 9.99, p < .01, df = 2$) made when describing females playing male-appropriate sports (20.8%) than were made describing females playing the female-appropriate sport (8.0%) and the neutral sport (15.6%). In regard to comments reflecting female stereotypes ($\chi^2 = 4.50, p < .10, df = 2$), accounts of each sport type exhibited a significant frequency of such comments: male appropriate (57.6%), female appropriate (66.7%), and neutral (53.1%). Both of these findings supported our hypothesis that accounts of females playing female-appropriate sports would contain a higher frequency of female stereotypes and male-to-female comparisons (see Figure 2). In addition, our finding regarding the frequency of female stereotypical comments in depictions of females playing male sports strongly supported our hypothesis. Although we had expected that these accounts would reflect beliefs about gender, we did not expect that depictions of the basketball, hockey, and soccer players would be so heavily laden with stereotypic female comments (see Figure 2).

To examine our hypothesis that depictions of female athlete’s performance, in general, would reflect beliefs about gender, ratings for the three task-relevance dimensions were examined using a multiresponse categorical cross-tabulation of the ratings for the three depictions of gender dimensions for the entire 687 comment data set. These results are depicted in Table 1.

We found that when female stereotypes were present in an account of an athlete’s performance, these accounts typically also contained a task-irrelevant comment as well (51.3%). Statements comparing female athletes to males were also frequently accompanied by a description of task-irrelevant issues or concerns (39.1%). Conversely, statements that emphasized male stereotypes typically described a task-oriented aspect of the athlete’s performance (62.2%). These findings support our hypothesis that
TABLE 1

Frequencies of Task-Relevant Comments by Depiction of Gender Comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Stereotypic Female</th>
<th>Stereotypic Male</th>
<th>Male vs. Female Comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Task relevant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column %</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non–task relevant but</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relevant to sports</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column %</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non–task relevant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column %</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

descriptions of female athletes' performance would reflect widespread beliefs about gender. Statements that discussed how “pretty” a female athlete was typically described the athlete outside of a traditional female sporting context (e.g., gymnastics), whereas statements that described a female athlete's “power” were usually directed at the athlete's performance in the gold medal winning game (see Table 1). Thus, “pretty versus powerful” seems to be an important distinction that is used by sportswriters when confronted with female athletes in stereotypic male and stereotypic female sports.

DISCUSSION

The present study extends the work on the gender appropriateness of sport by Matteo (1986) by showing how these beliefs are conveyed in print media descriptions of female athletes' performance in male-appropriate, female-appropriate, and neutral sports. It is clear that descriptions of female athletes' performance reflect widespread beliefs about gender. Female athletes are judged and evaluated using traditional beliefs about gender whether they are competing in a traditional gender-appropriate or in a nontraditional gender-inappropriate sport. All five of the gold medal winning contests described within the print media contained a high frequency of gender stereotypic comments that were clearly related to the overall gendered nature of sport.

For female athletes playing male-appropriate sports, our results suggest that despite the fact that female athletes on the basketball, hockey, and soccer teams (traditional male sports) have achieved at superior performance levels, print media coverage frequently deemphasizes task-relevant aspects of their performance and focuses instead on performance-irrelevant
dimensions. In addition, sportswriters frequently compare female athletes on gold medal winning teams to their male counterparts. This tendency is a reflection of traditional beliefs regarding the gender appropriateness of sport. As Theberge (1997) suggests, whereas women who play and succeed in male-appropriate sports pose a powerful challenge to the historical connections between gender, physicality, and power, this challenge is ultimately still weakened by the fact that their participation and success is socially constructed as an alternative to their male counterparts, who play the version of the sport that "really counts." The print media accounts examined here clearly demonstrate that one method for devaluing the performance of these athletes is through a barrage of task-irrelevant statements and condescending comparisons to male athletes.

For female athletes playing female-appropriate sports, it is promising to see a trend toward print media accounts that focus more on describing their performance—providing details of what a gymnast does—as opposed to simply describing how graceful she looked or how she has the personality to make her America's next sweetheart. Still, our results indicate that the accounts of females playing the female-appropriate sport had the highest frequency of female stereotypic comments. Thus, the beauty and grace of the gymnasts was still the main point of emphasis, even with the U.S. women's gymnastics team winning the gold medal for the first time in Olympic history.

For future research, it would be fruitful to consider the various individual factors that influence the type of coverage female athletes receive in the print media. For instance, one must wonder if a sportswriter's gender has any impact on the way he or she describes the topic they are reporting. Thus, it would be interesting to examine whether there are any systematic differences between the descriptions written by male sportswriters and female sportswriters. This is similar to the approach of Wann and Hamlet (1995), who assessed the impact of the gender of authors in the selection of topics for sports psychology and sociology journals. Unfortunately, the number of passages taken from articles written by female sportswriters was insufficient to conduct meaningful statistical analyses. However, it would be informative to determine whether increasing the gender diversity of sportswriters would alter the print media's coverage away from "pretty versus powerful" to simply providing accurate coverage of the outstanding performances of female athletes.

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