Framing Differences in Gender-Related Sport Coverage

by Internet Sites and Newspapers

By

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this study was to determine if any significant differences existed between the gender-specific descriptors used in sport content in traditional newspapers and online sport journalism sites, the latter of which are becoming an increasingly popular primary source of news information. Specifically, this study examined media framing of athletes by analyzing descriptors in articles on the 2007 U.S. Open men's and women's tennis tournaments published in mainstream newspapers, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today*, and the online sport news sites produced by ESPN, Fox Sports, and *Sports Illustrated*. Results showed newspaper articles were more likely to minimize the athleticism of female athletes and delve into their personal lives, thus re-enforcing and strengthening hegemonic masculinity stronger far more than the newer medium of online journalism, which produced mixed results.

Note: The following is an early, abridged, and altered version of an article that will be finished at a later date.

Introduction and Literature Review

New media are changing the way news is gathered, distributed, portrayed, accessed, and consumed (Shultz & Sheffer, 2007). Internet readers tend to be younger individuals who focus their information-gathering more than those who still receive their news predominately from the more traditional mediums of newspapers and televisions (Real, 2006). The increasing popularity of the Internet as a primary news source, coupled with the declining influence of newspapers and television in much of the Westernized world, could represent major changes to the traditional ways in how sport news has been defined and covered by media.

Historically, sport media have focused their attention on men's sports, often ignoring women in sport unless they offered sex appeal (Daddario, 1997; Vincent, 2004). A plethora of research analyzing sport media content have mostly shown men receive more overall coverage than women at all levels of sport (e.g., Duncan, 2006; Eastman & Billings, 2000; Kian, 2008). Content analyses on magazine, newspaper, and television sport coverage have generally shown both quantitative and qualitative gender differences in sport media content that favor men and reinforce the notion that sport remains a masculine domain (e.g., Hardin, Lynn, & Walsdorf, 2005; Messner, Duncan, & Cooky, 2003; Pedersen, 2002). When covering women's sports, media often portray female athletes as sex objects, are more likely to delve into the personal lives of female athletes, and minimize women athletes' accomplishments and skill by regularly comparing their abilities to men, who are set as the standard (Eastman & Billings, 2000; Vincent, 2004).

A plethora of authors have claimed sport and media are two of the primary forces helping to preserve and maintain hegemonic masculinity (e.g., Connell, 1990; 2005;

Miloch, Pedersen, Smucker, & Whisenant, 2005). Connell (2005) defined hegemonic masculinity as the configuration of gender practices, strengthening dominance of men and the subordination of women in society. One way media contribute to the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity in sport is through the use of traditional gender-specific descriptors that often frame differences between female and male athletes that minimize the athleticism and accomplishments of women in sport, while also sexualizing female athletes (Duncan, 2006; Kane & Parks, 1992). Framing is a term regularly employed to describe the means through which journalists make sense of news events by selecting facts and embedding them in storylines (Kuypers, 2002; Lind & Salo, 2002). Hegemonic masculinity is constantly challenged throughout society but rarely changed without the consent of men in power (Connell, 2005).

A challenge to traditional framing of men's and women's sport by mainstream media, and, thus a challenge to hegemonic masculinity in sport, may be emerging from the Internet. Online sites have now surpassed newspapers as a primary news source for U.S. residents and the Internet rivals television as the predominant news source for youths (Pew Research, 2008). Several authors have argued the community nature of the Internet is more accommodating to women than more traditional forms of communication (e.g., Royal, 2008; Spender, 1995; Turkle, 1995). However, research on sport Internet journalism remains in its infancy (Kian & Hardin, in press; Real, 2006). The few studies comparing Internet coverage of male and female athletes have produced mixed results (Cunningham, 2003; Kian, Mondello, & Vincent, in press; Jones, 2004; Sagas, Cunningham, Wigley, & Ashley, 2000), and none of those directly compared Internet

content of female athletes to coverage of women's sports through more traditional mediums.

Purpose

Although exploratory in nature, this research compares gender descriptors used in newspaper sports sections to those in online sport journalism sites. Specifically, this study attempts to determine if any significant differences are present in how more traditional media (newspapers) and newer media (Internet) outlets cover the same men's and women's sport at the same level of competition, in this case the U.S. Open men's and women's tennis tournaments. Moreover, these results can serve as an introductory gauge to see if the increasing popularity of the Internet as a sport news source poses a threat to traditional notions of masculinity often reinforced by mainstream media.

Research Questions

Research questions were employed rather than hypotheses for this exploratory study. Three overriding research questions guided this study:

1. What significant differences – if any – exist in the gender-specific descriptors used to frame newspaper articles on the U.S. Open men's tournament, women's tournament, and articles on both?

2. What significant differences – if any – exist in the gender-specific descriptors used to frame Internet articles on the U.S. Open men's tournament, women's tournament, and articles on both?

3. What significant differences – if any – exist in the gender-specific descriptors used to frame newspaper articles on the U.S. Open men's

tournament, women's tournament, and articles on both compared to

descriptors in online sport sites on the same tournaments?

Methodology

The methodology for this study was a content analysis of the descriptors used in

articles on the U.S Open. Content analysis is a non-reactive method used by social

scientists that has been applied to nearly every form of communication, and often to

analyses of media content (Krippendorff, 2004). A systematic coding of text is a

necessity for content analyses (Neuendorf, 2002; Weber, 1990). However, obviously

analyzing the same text can lead to varying interpretations by different researchers.

Therefore, Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken (2002) argued intercoder reliability

should be employed when conducting content analyses, where two or more coders are

employed to assure results are not the interpretation of just one researcher.

Sampling Selection

This research analyzed media framing of athletes by coding descriptors used in

articles on the 2007 U.S. Open men's and women's tennis tournaments that were

published in three mainstream newspapers and three popular Internet sites. Professional

tennis was selected, because it is one of the only professional sports in the Western world

where the women's game is nearly or as popular as the men's version (Spencer, 2004;

Vincent, 2004). Moreover, the men's and women's U.S. Open tennis championships run

simultaneously, with many reporters assigned to cover both tournaments and some media

outlets combining daily coverage on both tournaments into one article, which provided

another basis for comparison in this study.

The three newspapers selected, *USA Today, The New York Times*, and *The Los Angeles Times* rank first, third, and fourth among U.S. newspapers in average weekday circulation (Editor & Publisher Yearbook, 2008). The second most-circulated newspaper in the U.S., the *Wall Street Journal*, is a business-focus publication that does not offer regular and thorough sports coverage to the extent of the other three, and thus was not included in this study. Online sport news sites produced by ESPN, Fox Sports, and *Sports Illustrated* ranked first, second, and fifth among the most popular multi-sport Internet sites in the U.S. (ComScore Network, 2005). The third and fourth ranking sites for unique visitors, Yahoo Sports and AOL Sports, were not included, because neither assigns writers to attend and cover sporting events to the extent of SI.com or the other two sites.

Units of Analysis

A graduate student regularly checked and located all byline (name of author(s) included) articles focusing on the U.S. Open tennis tournaments published in the six outlets over a 16-day period that included all 14 days of tournament play, as well as the single days prior to and after the tournaments.

Articles not attributed to an individual author(s) were omitted. Without having spatial limitations, Internet sites, including the three in this study, often publish hundreds of non-attributed stories, such as those from press releases and wire services like the Associated Press. Only the text of articles was coded. Headlines were included, but photos, charts, photo captions, and reader comments (after Internet articles) were not.

The Internet sites were thoroughly checked twice daily for new articles, since articles would often be removed from pages for new ones. Attempts were made to access any articles related to the men's and/or women's tournaments by checking under

multiple-page headings and looking under columnists' archives. Included among the online articles for examination were subscriber-only stories. Subscriptions allowing access to all content for both Internet sites were obtained for the duration of this research. Many articles by ESPN Internet staff columnists are only accessible to subscribers.

Coding Procedures

Two graduate students were trained as coders. In a pretest, both coders examined 20 selected articles on the French Open tennis tournaments and coded them for nine specific categories that followed some of the procedures used by previous sport media researchers (Harris & Clayton, 2002; Kian, Vincent, & Mondello, 2008; Vincent, Pedersen, Whisenant, & Massey, 2007). Intercoder agreement between coders in the pretest was 80% or higher for all nine categories using Holsti's reliability formula (Holsti, 1969; Stacks & Hocking, 1998).

Each coder, working independently, then read and coded all articles on the U.S. Open published in the six media outlets for the following descriptive categories: (1) physical appearance, sexuality, attire; (2) athletic prowess, strength; (3) athletic weaknesses, limitations; (4) positive skill level, accomplishments; (5) negative skill level, failures; (6) family role, personal relationships; (7) psychological strengths, emotional strengths; (8) psychological weaknesses, emotional weakness; (9) humor. Statistical information was not coded unless it included a descriptor. Findings from previous research on sport media coverage indicated articles would be significantly more likely to describe female athletes with descriptions on their physical appearances, family roles, athletic weaknesses, negative skill level/failures, psychological/emotional weaknesses, or by adding humor. In contrast, previous research indicated men's sport would more likely

have descriptors on their athletic prowess, positive skill level/accomplishments, and psychological/emotional strength than articles on women's sport (e.g., Billings, Halone, & Denham, 2002; Vincent, 2004).

Results

The six outlets examined combined to publish 192 articles on the U.S. Open tennis tournaments. Of those, 136 (70.8%) were published in the three newspapers, which were more likely to send its own writers to cover the tournaments than the online sites. Among newspaper articles, 57 (41.9%) focused on the men's tournament, 26 (19.1%) on the women's tournament, and 53 (39%) covered both tournaments. For the Internet articles, 27 (48.2%) were on the men's tournament, 14 (25%) on the women, and 15 (27%) on both.

The intercoder reliability rate between the two coders was 83.6%, with the lead author determining final coding results from any differences between the two student coders. Since three distinct categories were compared, coding results were entered into Microsoft EXCEL and an ANOVA randomized block design was used to determine if there were any significant differences per category among articles focusing on men's tennis, women's tennis, and articles containing information on both the men's and women's tournaments (alpha = 0.05). Pairwise comparisons were used to see exactly which attributes significantly differed from others, and between which of the three types of articles (only on male players, only on female players, on both genders of players) (See Tables 1-2). In addition, binomial tests for proportions were calculated to analyze differences between descriptors on men's and women's tennis, and both genders in newspaper articles versus online stories (See Tables 3-5).

RQ1: What significant differences – if any – exist in the gender-specific descriptors used to frame newspaper articles on the U.S. Open men's tournament, women's tournament, and articles on both?

For all newspaper articles examined, pairwise comparisons showed results mostly reinforcing previous sport media research. Among the 10 significant differences shown through the pairwise comparisons in Table 1, the only unexpected results were humor was significantly more likely to be used in articles about men's tennis than articles on women's tennis or on both genders. It should be noted that coders were trained to search for what they perceived to be writers' attempts to inject humorous commentary – not for what the coders themselves found amusing. Other significant differences emerging were expected. Physical appearance descriptors were significantly less likely to be used when writing about men's tennis than either in articles exclusively on women's tennis or in those on both genders. Athletic weakness was significantly less likely to be coded in articles on men's tennis than those focusing on both men's and women's tennis. Positive skill level descriptors were significantly more likely to be prevalent in articles on men's tennis than in stories on women's tennis or on both genders. Not surprisingly, physical strength was significantly more likely to be framed in articles about men's tennis than about women's tennis. Finally, family roles and personal relationships were more prevalent in articles about women's tennis than those on men's tennis and both genders. Family descriptors were also more likely to be used when writing about both genders than men's tennis.

Table 1   Total Codes and Pairwise Comparisons for Newspaper Articles

	Men's (57)		Women's (26)		Both (53)		Z-MW	Z-WB	Z-MB	p-MW	p-WB	p-MB
Physical App., Attire	63	5.4%	70	10.9%	107	10.0%	0.000	0.726	0.000	0.0000	0.7265	0.0000
Ath. Prowess	73	6.3%	40	6.2%	73	6.8%	0.516	0.319	0.305	0.5159	0.3185	0.3051
Ath. Weaknesses	78	6.7%	51	8.0%	92	8.6%	0.167	0.320	0.048	0.1673	0.3205	0.0477
Pos. Skill Level	507	43.7%	228	35.6%	394	36.8%	1.000	0.301	1.000	0.9996	0.3008	0.9995
Neg. Skill Level	143	12.3%	78	12.2%	133	12.4%	0.537	0.437	0.468	0.5367	0.4367	0.4677
Psy. Strength	112	9.6%	47	7.3%	87	8.1%	0.954	0.275	0.896	0.9543	0.2747	0.8956
Psy. Weaknesses	62	5.3%	29	4.5%	65	6.1%	0.778	0.083	0.227	0.7781	0.0829	0.2275
Family/Relationships	83	7.1%	91	14.2%	102	9.5%	0.000	0.998	0.021	0.0000	0.9981	0.0210
Humor	40	3.4%	7	1.1%	17	1.6%	0.999	0.194	0.997	0.9993	0.1936	0.9974
TOTAL	1161		641		1070							

RQ2: What significant differences – if any – exist in the gender-specific descriptors used to frame Internet articles on the U.S. Open men's tournament, women's tournament, and articles on both?

Coding and pairwise comparisons of Internet articles shown in Table 2 offered mixed results that overall did not reinforce traditional stereotypes in sport media coverage as assumed, since only five of the 11 significant findings were expected. Pairwise comparisons showed athletic prowess and athletic weakness were significantly more likely to be used in articles about men's tennis than in articles covering both genders. Positive skill level attributes were significantly more likely to appear in articles on both genders than in those focusing on women's tennis. Physical strength and physical weakness were more likely to be used to describe males and females than both genders. Family role and personal relationships were more likely to be used in women's tennis stories than those on men's tennis or on both genders. Humor and physical appearances

were significantly more likely to be used in articles on both genders as opposed to either

gender individually.

Table 2 Total Codes and Pairwise Comparisons for Internet Articles

	Men's (27)		Women's (14)		Both (15)		Z-MW	Z-WB	Z-MB	p-MW	p-WB	p-MB
Physical App., Attire	35	3.9%	21	4.1%	40	7.9%	0.434	0.005	0.001	0.4339	0.0053	0.0012
Ath. Prowess	62	7.0%	34	6.7%	23	4.6%	0.586	0.927	0.968	0.5863	0.9271	0.9681
Ath. Weaknesses	47	5.3%	26	5.1%	17	3.4%	0.560	0.914	0.954	0.5604	0.9137	0.9540
Pos. Skill Level	392	44.0%	206	40.3%	241	47.7%	0.911	0.009	0.090	0.9105	0.0087	0.0896
Neg. Skill Level	111	12.5%	63	12.3%	80	15.8%	0.528	0.054	0.041	0.5282	0.0538	0.0407
Psy. Strength	112	12.6%	69	13.5%	40	7.9%	0.309	0.998	0.997	0.3088	0.9980	0.9970
Psy. Weaknesses	72	8.1%	39	7.6%	23	4.6%	0.618	0.980	0.995	0.6181	0.9798	0.9954
Family/Relationships	47	5.3%	48	9.4%	28	5.5%	0.002	0.990	0.415	0.0022	0.9902	0.4153
Humor	13	1.5%	5	1.0%	13	2.6%	0.785	0.027	0.077	0.7850	0.0271	0.0772
TOTAL	891		511		505							

*RQ3: What significant differences – if any – exist in the gender-specific descriptors used
to frame newspaper articles on the U.S. Open men's tournament, women's tournament,
and articles on both compared to descriptors in online sport sites on the same
tournaments?*

When comparing newspaper and Internet articles only on men's tennis in Table 3,

the binomial tests for two proportions revealed online articles were significantly more

likely to use descriptors on psychological strengths and physical weaknesses, while

newspapers significantly used more descriptors on family roles and humor. For articles

solely on women's tennis as shown in Table 4, newspapers were significantly more likely

to employ descriptors on physical appearances, athletic weaknesses, and family roles

when compared to Internet articles. Online articles were more likely to use attributes on

positive skill level, psychological strengths, and psychological weaknesses on women's tennis than those published in newspapers.

Table 3 Total Codes for All Men's Tennis Articles Based on Medium

	Newspapers (57)		Internet (27)			
	Times Used	% of Desc.	Times Used	% of Desc.	Z value	p value
Physical App., Attire	63	5.4%	35	3.9%	1.593	0.0556
Ath. Prowess	73	6.3%	62	7.0%	-0.606	0.2724
Ath. Weaknesses	78	6.7%	47	5.3%	1.365	0.0861
Pos. Skill Level	507	43.7%	392	44.0%	-0.148	0.4413
Neg. Skill Level	143	12.3%	111	12.5%	-0.096	0.4617
Psy. Strength	112	9.6%	112	12.6%	-2.089	*0.0184*
Psy. Weaknesses	62	5.3%	72	8.1%	-2.459	*0.0070*
Family/Relationships	83	7.1%	47	5.3%	1.743	*0.0406*
Humor	40	3.4%	13	1.5%	2.884	*0.0020*
TOTAL	1161	100%	891	100%		

Table 4 Total Codes for All Women's Tennis Articles Based on Medium

	Newspapers (26)		Internet (14)			
	Times Used	% of Desc.	Times Used	% of Desc.	Z value	p value
Physical App., Attire	70	10.9%	21	4.1%	4.356	*0.0000*
Ath. Prowess	40	6.2%	34	6.7%	-0.284	0.3883
Ath. Weaknesses	51	8.0%	26	5.1%	1.959	*0.0251*
Pos. Skill Level	228	35.6%	206	40.3%	-1.648	*0.0496*
Neg. Skill Level	78	12.2%	63	12.3%	-0.082	0.4671
Psy. Strength	47	7.3%	69	13.5%	-3.406	*0.0003*
Psy. Weaknesses	29	4.5%	39	7.6%	-2.193	*0.0141*
Family/Relationships	91	14.2%	48	9.4%	2.511	*0.0060*
Humor	7	1.1%	5	1.0%	0.189	0.4250
TOTAL	641	100%	511	100%		

In articles focusing on both men's and women's tennis, the binomial tests for two proportions showed newspapers were significantly more likely to use descriptors on athletic prowess, athletic weakness, and family roles. As shown in Table 5, Internet sites used significantly more descriptors per article for positive skill level and negative skill level in articles on both genders.

Table 5 <u>Total Codes for All Tennis Articles on Both Genders Based on Mediums</u>

	Newspapers (53)		Internet (15)			
	Times Used	% of Desc.	Times Used	% of Desc.	Z value	p value
Physical App., Attire	107	10.0%	40	7.9%	1.348	0.0888
Ath. Prowess	73	6.8%	23	4.6%	1.814	*0.0349*
Ath. Weaknesses	92	8.6%	17	3.4%	4.086	*0.0000*
Pos. Skill Level	394	36.8%	241	47.7%	-4.087	*0.0000*
Neg. Skill Level	133	12.4%	80	15.8%	-1.814	*0.0349*
Psy. Strength	87	8.1%	40	7.9%	0.143	0.4431
Psy. Weaknesses	65	6.1%	23	4.6%	1.255	0.1047
Family/Relationships	102	9.5%	28	5.5%	2.798	*0.0026*
Humor	17	1.6%	13	2.6%	-1.279	0.1005
TOTAL	1070	100%	505	100%		

Discussion

These results showed newspaper articles on the U.S. Open were significantly more likely to minimize the athleticism of female athletes and delve into their personal lives, thus re-enforcing and strengthening hegemonic masculinity far more than the three outlets representing the newer medium of online journalism.

Prior to undertaking this project, assumptions were made that gender-specific descriptors would be upheld by both mediums based on a plethora of previous sport

media studies, most of which focused on newspaper or television content (e.g., Billings et al., 2002; Vincent et al., 2007). A total of nine of the 10 significant differences that emerged from coding of newspaper articles based on the gender of the subject were expected based on these assumptions. The lone exception was that humor – the most difficult category to code – was significantly more likely to appear in articles on men's tennis than on women's tennis or in articles containing content on both genders.

The other significant differences in the ways newspaper articles framed the men's and women's tournaments, however, were expected. These more numerous differences helped uphold both traditional male-female sport stereotypes and reinforced findings that sport media assist in societal maintenance of hegemonic masculinity. For example, descriptors for physical appearances and athletic weaknesses were significantly less likely to appear in men's tennis articles than women's tennis articles or those on both. Attributes related to positive skill level and physical strength were far more prevalent in men's tennis articles, while those on family roles and personal relationships were significantly more likely to appear in women's articles. Thus, women athletes were portrayed as physically weaker and less-skilled than their male counterparts, with content discussing the females' families and appearances far more prevalent in women's tennis articles. In addition, the three newspapers in this study showed the importance they placed on the men's tournament, since more than twice as many total newspaper articles were published exclusively on the men than on the women. Of course, some of the differences in the overall number of stories could be attributed to the world's No. 1-ranked men's player, Roger Federer, becoming the first player in modern history to win four U.S. Open titles in 2007. Still, no U.S. players advanced to the final of either the

men's or women's singles draw; so the discrepancy between genders in the number of articles was surprising. Overall, newspaper articles on the U.S. Open reinforced traditional notions that males are more dominant, physical athletes than females; and that men's sport is more important than women's sport even when both compete at simultaneous events at the highest level of competition and for the same prize money.

Coding results and pairwise comparisons from Internet articles on men's and women's tennis, as well as from stories on both genders, offered more inconsistent results, several of which were unexpected. As presumed, online articles were significantly more likely to include descriptors on athletic prowess on men's tennis players, but they also included more descriptors on athletic weakness for the men as well. Other expected results included descriptors on family roles or personal relationship were significantly more likely to appear in stories on women's tennis than those on men's tennis or both genders. Unexpectedly, though, articles on both genders featured more references to physical appearances than those on women's tennis. Overall, just five of the 11 significant differences were expected based on the assumptions.

Still, comparisons between gender-related content within Internet articles did not serve as a major challenge to traditional findings, since several of the unexpected differences were from comparisons to articles on both genders, an area that had not been analyzed by previous sport media researchers who did content analyses. The only major surprise among these 11 differences was Internet men's tennis articles were significantly more likely to include descriptors on athletic weakness than those on women's tennis. However, the totem pole for coverage was evident in online articles, since an even higher percentage of the overall Internet articles focused on only the men's tournament (48.2%)

than those in newspapers (41.9%). Of course, the surprisingly few total number of byline articles on the U.S Open published on the three Internet (n=56) sites may have skewed those differences, since all six newspapers and online outlets examined provided more coverage on each of the final four days of tournament play than each of the previous 10 – a time when Federer's dominance became a more significant news story

Overall, neither the content within newspapers nor within the online sport sites greatly differed from previous research; and both obviously placed a premium on men's tennis based on total number of articles published. However, the binomial tests for two proportions revealed startling differences between how newspapers and online sites framed female athletes. In comparing articles solely on women's tennis, newspapers were significantly more likely to use descriptors on perceived athletic weaknesses, family roles or relationships, and physical appearances. Online articles were more likely to include descriptors on positive skill level and psychological strengths.

These results show that online sport news sites for at least the three major outlets examined in this study were more likely to alter and challenge the traditional gender stereotypes that have historically been framed through sport media coverage (Kane, 1996; Higgs, Weiller, & Martin, 2003). In contrast, newspapers were significantly more likely to frame female athletes more negatively, while also delving into their personal lives and elaborating on their appearances more than the online sites. Therefore – at least in regard to the new media outlets – hegemonic masculinity was both support and challenged, and thus remains contested (Connell, 2005). Furthermore, based on these results, online sport media appears far more likely to challenge the status quo for framing female and male

athletes than traditional mediums like newspapers and televisions, although the gendering of online sport media news still lacks lucidity (van Zoonen, 2003).

However, results from this exploratory study should not be generalized, since it only examined three newspapers and three online sites. Plus, all six media outlets are based in the U.S. Moreover, only one sport was examined; and tennis has historically ranked as one of the only popular women's professional sports on a mass level (Rader, 2004). Additional gender-focused research on global Internet coverage on a variety of men's and women's sports is needed before conclusions can be drawn about the medium of online journalism and its potential effect on hegemonic masculinity in sport.

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