

How College Students Perceive the Representation of Women in Sports Media

by

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Honors Thesis

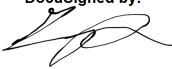
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Abstract

This study seeks to discover the attitudes of college students regarding the framing of women in sports media through the use of focus groups. The research showed that college students have a clear understanding of the misrepresentation of women in sports media, what groups this impacts, and what the future of sports media will look like in regards to the framing of women.

KEYWORDS:

FRAMING

SPORTS MEDIA

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COLLEGE STUDENTS

How College Students Perceive the Representation of Women in Sports Media

Background/Introduction

Sports journalism began in the early 1800s, and as the world of sports expanded from a regional pastime to a national industry, the *New York World* became the first newspaper with a dedicated sports department (Moritz, 2014). The world of sports media has continued to evolve in many ways over the years, but unfortunately with one striking omission. In the early years of sports journalism, women were not included in coverage. However, this was due in large part to their exclusion from sports and athletics generally. While the latter has changed— as today almost just as many women are participating in sports as men— the coverage of female athletes has not improved and a gender gap for female athletes still persists.

Women still receive drastically less media coverage in comparison to men, and when they are covered they are commonly framed negatively by the media. For instance, women are often oversexualized in sports coverage. The negative framing and misrepresentation of women in sports media today is a product of its inception in the 1800's, but there is a chance positive change could be seen in the future.

This study analyzes how college students perceive and assess the coverage and representation of women in sports media. Through this study, the attitudes of college students regarding the coverage of women in sports media were made clear. Students recognized the negative framing and underrepresentation of women that exists, its negative impact on different groups of people, and what the future of sports reporting should look like. Throughout this study, the term 'sports media' will commonly be used as a way to represent coverage that goes beyond

traditional journalism (print, radio, broadcast, etc.) and cover the constantly evolving world of both sports and different mediums of communication.

Youth voices are an important aspect of society change, particularly with regards to advancements in equity issues, such as the presence of women in sports, and the perfect bridge between youth and adulthood can be seen with college students. The engagement of college students in the democratic process is increasing, as suggested by the doubling of college students who voted in 2018 (Nietzel, 2019). This implies that college-aged students are increasingly active in envisioning their own future and working to change society, and if they recognize and value the negative framing that occurs to women in sports media, there is a chance in seeing this multigenerational marginalization of women in sports media potentially come to an end.

Literature Review

Women in Sports Media

Since the inception of sports media in the early 1800s, there has been a significant lack of female athlete coverage. According to the Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport at the University of Minnesota, 40 percent of all athletes are women, yet they only receive four percent representation in media coverage (2013). After the passage of Title IX in 1972 the number of women participating in sports increased drastically at the high school, college, and even eventually the professional level (Adams & Tuggle, 2004). Despite there being more women than ever before participating in sports, the media coverage of these female athletes remained scarce. The rise in the number of female athletes has not been matched by their media coverage, and this has been shown across multiple media mediums, including television and social media.

In television, ESPN dominates sports coverage worldwide, yet their coverage of women's sports has never exceeded 2.5 percent of their overall coverage (Cooky et al., 2015). Television has historically been a staple in sports coverage, but the evolution and rise of the internet has brought another medium to prominence as well. In today's society, social media is also one of the most relied on sources for news, especially in the world of sports. Seventy percent of Twitter users and 55% of Facebook users said they saw the reporting of sports news on these platforms (Barthel et al., 2015), and the rise of the internet and social media has created many "connected fans" who use the internet daily to follow their favorite players and teams through different phone applications and social networking sites (Hull & Lewis, 2014). Despite this fairly recent rise in prominence in the world of sports, social media is no different than other media outlets in regards to its lack of women's coverage. A study by Hull (2014) tracked the tweets of 201 local sports broadcasters over two separate two week periods, and of the tweets 77.3% were about men's sports with only 4.3% being about women's sports (1% contained both men's and women's sports and 17.5% were not related to sports). The study also found a correlation between the locality of the reporter and the inclusion of women's sports, with larger markets having significantly less tweets regarding female sports in comparison to smaller markets.

Print is the oldest medium in the world of sports media and, like its counterparts, it continues to fall short in regards to the coverage of women in sports. In 2016, *ESPN the Magazine* and *Sports Illustrated* reached close to 6 million subscribers, yet on the covers of these magazines women only appeared 10% of the time compared to their male counterparts according to a study conducted between 2012-2016 (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2016; Frisby, 2017). Not only is there a documented disparity in coverage of female athletes in print media, but also,

when included, the coverage is highly gendered. This contributes to misrepresentations and misconceptions about the value and prestige of female athletes.

It is clear that women only receive a small amount of coverage in sports media, but within this small amount of coverage women are commonly sexualized, placed in a supporting role, and portrayed as too “ladylike” to sweat and compete (Eastman & Billings, 2000; Schmidt, 2018; Tuggle, 1997). A study by Fink and Kensicki (2002) found that in *Sports Illustrated* between 1997-1999 women were depicted in non-sports settings 55% of the time and were depicted performing a sport 34% of the time. A similar study was done between 2012-2016 and showed that women on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN* the magazine were shown in more sexual, non-active poses and were more commonly shown out of team uniforms and in “provocative, scantily clad outfits” in comparison to men (Frisby, 2017). Unfortunately, masculine hegemony has existed in sports for many years, associating narrow characteristics like toughness, competitiveness, and aggressiveness exclusively to male athletes and exclusively commending them for this (Schmidt, 2018). The narrow characteristics attributed to male athletics are also problematic in sports coverage, widening an already vast arena for stereotyping of both sexes. Sports media has only reinforced this idea through their coverage of female athletes. The lack of attention and the framing of women in sports creates a gap between them and athleticism, resulting in them as athletes being some sort of anomaly or different from their male counterparts (Schmidt, 2018; Tuggle, 1997).

Framing

Framing in media is essentially how a story is presented and told. According to Entman (2007), framing is “the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a

narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation.” On the surface, framing may seem like a product of chance or coincidence; every story has to be told in a certain way to be told at all. But according to McQuail (1994), mass media uses framing in predictable and patterned ways that constructs social reality for audiences when employed repeatedly in media stories and content. Media framing involves a selection process where certain ideas and information are highlighted and magnified while others are excluded and minimized (Entman, 1993). According to Entman (1993), framing can not only affect public opinion surrounding the topics being reported on, but also an individual's consciousness and how they interact socially. This is when the media’s presentation of a message influences one's outlook on the world they live in, and also how they interact and make personal decisions in this world.

The effects of framing on an audience can be seen in the coverage of many different topics from local policy to international crises (McLeod & Detenber, 1999; Allen et. al, 1994). During the Gulf War, for instance, public opinion about America’s involvement in the war shifted depending on media coverage framing, where some stories used a more patriotic lens versus others using dissent by highlighting human loss (Allen et. al, 1994). Most members of the public cannot travel around the country or world to see, experience, and analyze all that happens firsthand, and because of this, they rely on the media to convey these stories. Journalism has a responsibility to its audiences to inform the people objectively about the world they live in. Yet, the picture that they paint, as well as *how* they paint it, has a deciding impact on their world view.

Perceived Effects of Framing in Sports Media

According to Knight and Giuliano, the heavy imbalance between men's and women's media coverage in sports can sway the audience into the belief that women's sports aren't as significant or exciting and are inferior to men's sports (2001). This is particularly important in regards to framing; if women in sports are receiving significantly less coverage, then how they are framed is even more crucial. With a general lack of coverage, every article, every photo, every social media post, and every other form of media about female athletes counts more in regards to how audiences perceive them, and unfourtunately sports media has not made the most of these limited opportunities they've given themselves. As previously mentioned, when women are included in their small amount of media coverage, they are often sexualized, placed in a supporting role, and portrayed as too "ladylike" for rigorous, physical competition (Eastman & Billings, 2000; Schmidt, 2018; Tuggle, 1997). Female athletes are commonly depicted in ways that emphasize their attractiveness and femininity over their athletic achievement, with descriptions often focused on their appearance versus men who are described for their athleticism (Knight & Giuliano, 2001; Eastman & Billings, 2000; Kinnick, 1998). It's also been shown that women's mental health is framed negatively in sports media. According to Kinnick, when men lose in athletic competition, journalists focus on their opponent's intelligence and strength. Yet for women, if they lose, the coverage focuses on mental flaw and error, emphasising emotionality (1998). Even the language used by journalists negatively frames women, with stereotypes and sexist attitudes being passed down for years that negatively impact the audience's perception of female athletes (Nicely, 2007).

Sports media has been setting the agenda against women and framing them negatively for so long that these frames frequently go unnoticed by audiences. The narrow portrayals of

women, if included at all, may seem so common in the world of sports media that they are generally accepted. This is problematic because it can not only have a negative impact on sports fans' perception of the sports world, but also on their world outside of sports (Nicely, 2007; Eastman & Billings, 2001). The group that may be the most heavily affected by the representation of women in sports is young adults and children. According to Ward (2004), what makes children and young adults the most vulnerable consumers of media is their lack of social experience and weaker critical thinking ability in comparison to adults. This combined with the unrealistic media framing of female athletes and the emphasis on appearance over athleticism gives youth an unattainable image to achieve; which can discourage them from participating in sports and hinder their potential (Ward, 2004; Nicely, 2007). When young girls become familiar with the stereotypes that put men above women in the realm of athletics, it can make them feel discriminated against, leading to them choosing not to participate in sports fearing that they will fail (Johnson et. al, 1999). Additionally, the framing of female athletes can cause younger female athletes to focus on their appearance more than their ability, hindering their potential to become successful athletes (Nicely, 2007). There is a clear relationship between how the media portrays female athletes and how these portrayals affect young female athletes. Children and young women should not be hindered in their aspiration to be athletes (or whatever else they want to be). According to a survey of high school students conducted by Harrison and Lynch (2005), only nine percent of girls wanted to be remembered as a star athlete when compared to 36% of boys. This statistic may be a direct reflection of the environment created by sports media, and undermines the power of sports to raise up the potential of young athletes.

Research Context

For this study, the subjects will be college students. The effects of framing on youth were clearly stated previously, but I am interested to see how framing may affect those transitioning from their youth and to adulthood. Two-thirds of college students consider themselves adults in “some respects but not others”, with one of the most important criteria being deciding on personal beliefs and values independently (Arnett, 1994, p. 216) . College serves as an important transitional period where the youth become adults and start to think independently. In regards to the women in sports media, it will be important to know how this group is affected by framing as they are starting to think for themselves. Additionally, college students are generally active in crafting the future of society. According to Pew Research Center on 18-21 year olds that were no longer in high school, 57 percent of them were enrolled in a two year or four year college (2018). With Generation Z being the most educated generation yet, year after year college students from this generation will go on to shape and influence society. In the 2020 election, roughly 24 million members of Gen Z will be able to vote, making up for one in every ten voters (Pew Research Center, 2020).

In this way, the current group of college aged people are having an impact on policy and on shaping the world we live in, especially regarding a variety of political and social issues, such as gender representation (Pew Research Center, 2020). This ties into the misrepresentation of women in sports because just like any other issue, if enough people notice and have initiative to change it, positive change can occur. The effect of framing on college students alone could potentially help or hurt the future of sports media in regards to their depiction of women; if college students are unphased by these frames, then they could continue to function and undermine women in sports for many years. But, if students notice them and decide to take some

sort of action, then positive change could be made that could improve sports media as a whole and positively affect audiences of all ages.

To study college students perceptions of framing with regards to the representation and coverage of women in sports media, I seek to answer the following questions:

RQ 1: How do college students perceive womens' sports to be framed?

RQ 2: How do college students assess the impact of the framing of womens' sports?

RQ 3: What are college students' attitudes regarding the future of the coverage of women in sports media?

Methods

For this study, I used focus groups consisting of college students with an interest in the world of sports. Focus groups comprise a collective interview process where participants are encouraged to ask questions, exchange anecdotes, and comment on each other's point of view (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999). Further, in regards to framing, focus groups are particularly useful in allowing participants to generate their own frames, as well as their own questions and concepts (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999). Focus groups enable participants to interact in a discussion space where a variety of different thoughts, ideas, and viewpoints can be expressed, which is extremely important in regards to understanding media framing. Framing is all about perception, and within any given group of people, each person could perceive one subject in a variety of different ways. From there participants can analyze and discuss these perspectives, creating dialogue between participants about their similar or different viewpoints that can go on to further understand the subject as a whole.

Due to the restrictions of COVID-19 on gatherings between October 9th through 14th of 2020, these focus groups were held over Zoom, the teleconferencing application that allows people to remotely communicate through video and audio. At first thought, conducting focus groups virtually may seem like a disadvantage, but in this particular case it could be advantageous. College students are more than comfortable on the internet and, according to Pew Research Center, 95 percent of undergraduate students have home broadband access; even of the 18-24 year olds who do not attend college, 92 percent of them are internet users (2011). With this generation growing up online and using it more than any other generation, some college students may be even more comfortable on the internet than in person. Particularly in the year of 2020, students nationwide have had to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic in a number of ways, including attending school courses online. Eighty-five percent of students said online courses were the same or better than those taken inside a classroom, with 37 percent feeling that online was superior to in person (Learning House Inc., 2018). Zoom is commonly used in many education curriculums and other contexts and many college students are familiar with the application. Together, these factors make virtual focus groups via Zoom a dependable option for college students to participate in this study.

Focus group participants were invited through social media, specifically the application Instagram. The moderator of the group posted a brief message about the topic and requirements of the focus group, asking those willing to participate to directly message if interested. From there, the college students were asked to provide their email, and multiple focus groups were scheduled based on the availability of the students. The focus groups were held via Zoom and were conducted between October 9th through 14th of 2020. Each focus group lasted 30 minutes

long. There were three separate focus groups with between three and five members each, contributing to a total of 12 participants. Each group was shown a variety of examples of sports media coverage that depicted both male and female athletes in various frames. Participants were then asked a series of open ended questions about what they saw. While open ended questions were offered, the members of the group were encouraged to participate in open dialogue about the subject at hand. This natural and conversational dialogue is effective for eliciting a variety of perspectives and for attending to the previously mentioned research questions. Each focus group conversation was recorded on Zoom and thoroughly analyzed for similar themes and patterns related to the research questions. For the purpose of presenting these findings, each participant will be represented by a number that indicates which group they were in. Group 1 had 4 participants, group 2 had 5 participants, and group 3 had 3 participants.

Results

RQ 1: Perception

Research question one asked about the perception college students have on the framing of women in sports by the media. Across the three groups that were held, each group demonstrated awareness about negative framing of women in sports media . Specifically, participants discussed the oversexualization of female athletes, the common comparison to male athletes, along with sharing some personal anecdotes to express their attitudes regarding the negative framing of female athletes.

As previously mentioned, women in sports media are commonly oversexualized with strong focus on their appearance, versus men who receive more notoriety for their athletic ability (Eastman & Billings, 2000; Schmidt, 2018; Tuggle, 1997; Frisby, 2017). This framing

convention was noticed by many of the participants as multiple people brought up observations of female athletes being portrayed with a focus on their bodies instead of their athletic ability. One participant said, “I think it’s pretty obvious that female athletes are objectified or sexualized when it comes to athletics compared to men, and they’re more focused on their appearance rather than what their talents are— like how good they are at sports or how good they are in their certain field of athletics.” This was the first statement made by any participant in this particular group and it was met with agreement by other participants. Other groups also discussed this idea; in group 1, participants 4 and 2 commented that male athletes are valued more for their merit and ability within their sport versus women who are shown for their bodies and described this as degrading. Participant 3 of group 3 added to the idea of female athletes being objectified saying, “Sometimes women are meant to be seen as a certain object instead of being dominating or fierceful.” This participant highlights the masculine connotation towards dominance and the fierce competitive nature of athletics that is often exclusively used when describing male athletes.

In group 2, while discussing this topic, a back and forth exchange arose regarding why sports media portrays women in this sexualized manner. The discussion suggested that sports media programming is trying to appeal to an audience that they believe is male dominated.

Consider the exchange between participants of group 2:

Participant 2: “I think a lot of times what you see is organizations, whether it be sports media or some other type of media, tries to market directly towards men. Men are their main, primary audience so they try to use this to try to get men more involved with women’s sports, which is done negatively over the years, but I think that’s ultimately kind of what’s ended up happening. They don’t realize they’re causing an issue when they do that.”

Participant 1: “That’s an interesting point. I agree, I feel like these companies feel like since it’s sports they feel like men are the main market, that they need to appeal to and I

guess from a marketing perspective these companies think portraying them as attractive is more interesting than showing them for their actual athletic abilities, which is sad, but that's what I think.”

Participant 5: “They're using sex appeal to try to get views or clicks on an article instead of using their athletic ability as the appeal of why you would want to watch that or read that.”

The idea introduced by participant 2 provides a unique and different perspective on framing – one that puts the focus on those creating the content. According to a survey conducted by Gallup, 51% of women described themselves as sports fans (2015). With this being the case, why would sports media decide to use these hypersexual tactics to appeal to only half of their audience? This question is complex and multifaceted, but that answer may lie within the makeup of the newsrooms across the world of journalism and, specifically, sports media. According to a Pew Research study, 48% of newsroom employees are white and male, compared to 34% of workers overall (2018). Multiple studies also show that this number is even higher when in regards to sports journalism, with many female sports reporters sharing negative workplace experiences based on their sex (Hardin & Shain, 2006; Smucker, Warren et al., 2003; Hardin & Whiteside, 2009). With all of this considered, the gender makeup of newsrooms across the world should definitely be examined in regards to answering the question of how or why sports media frame women hypersexually.

Another theme that emerged was that of female athletes being compared to their male counterparts versus being covered independently. According to Schmidt, in the rare instances that women do receive coverage in sports media, they're most frequently mentioned in a domestic role like a wife, girlfriend, or mother (2018). This is commonly seen with female athletes in sports media regardless of how highly accomplished they are, and the focus group

participants were fully aware of this. After being shown an article titled “Why Simone Biles Is the Michael Jordan of Gymnastics - And How She’s Still a Typical Teen”, participant 5 in group 2 said, “They (women) are always compared to men in whatever sport, that always seems to be the standard no matter what, like the Michael Jordan of whatever sport you play. I think for gymnastics why can’t she just be the Simone Biles of gymnastics, and maybe even set that new standard and try to frame the narrative that way.” Participant 4 of this same group followed this statement by saying this specific type of coverage undermines the work of female athletes. Similar dialogue happened in groups 1 and 3. In group 1, participant 4 said that there's always some comparison that's drawn between men and women in sports versus “letting them (women) have their own limelight”, and participant 3 in group 3 said female athletes are often compared to male athletes instead of being their own athletes, often disregarding their training, hard work, and accomplishments.

An important sub theme shared in the focus groups was the coverage of athletic couples. Participants noticed that when a couple consists of two professional athletes, more often than not the female in the couple takes a backseat in sports coverage. Participant 1 of group 1 noticed this between the married couple of Julie and Zach Ertz, noticing that Julie (women’s soccer player for the United States national team) was often asked about her husband (an NFL player) during the World Cup, despite the context of the interview as related to the World Cup. Participant 2 of group 2 also noted this with another soccer and football couple, Kealia and JJ Watt, saying, “... JJ Watt’s fiance gets it all the time, that she’s JJ Watt’s fiance and not that she’s a superstar soccer athlete. So it’s getting at that undermining reality that media markets try to put women as something different.” Participant 1 of this group said they see this a lot and shared multiple other

examples that included two more professional women's soccer players – Lauren Holiday and Mallory Pugh– who are in relationships with professional basketball and baseball players. This participant said, "... it's definitely kind of normalized to refer to women athletes that are in relationships with male athletes as the male athlete's girlfriend before talking about the female athlete's accomplishments in her own right. It doesn't seem fair or right to me." Whether being commonly referred to as the wife or girlfriend of the male athlete or having to answer more questions about their significant other than themselves, female athletes in this scenario are often placed in a shadow behind their partner, which undermines their individual athleticism and overemphasizes their role in the relationship. Participant 4 in group 4 magnified this idea by mentioning a common custom of female professional athletes saying, "A lot of female athletes like to keep their last name they were born with so that way they don't lose their identity per say. So that way when they do have their accomplishments it's not done under their husband's name, it's done under their name so it's really something that they earned."

RQ 2: Impact

Research question 2 assesses the impact of the current framing of women in sports media. It was made clear during the focus groups that college students are aware of the framing of women in sports media, and the purpose of research question two was to determine how they believed this framing and coverage affects others. The participants mainly focused on the potential impact that this type of media coverage could have on sports fans and younger audience members, but also touched on the implications of the normalization of gendered sports coverage.

Each focus group described how the negative portrayal of female athletes has been happening for so long that it has become the norm and the standard for sports media. Participant

1 in group 3 may have said it best when they said, “I definitely think that on the consumer side of it everyone’s just used to it, and they think it’s a norm of this is how it’s supposed to go because we’re always surrounded by media constantly and the way that women athletes are talked about in media I definitely think it’s become a norm and everyone’s used to it, which is sad.”

Each of the groups not only expressed their sentiments about the overall consumer apathy of how women are perceived in sports media, but also they discussed what impact this has on the audience. Participant 1 of group 2 said,

“All of this stuff combines and makes an overall negative perception of women in sports that isn’t really deserved ... I’ve definitely noticed sometimes jokes are made between dudes just talking about a WNBA game or something that I’ve always thought isn't really necessary, a lot of people in this country see the way stuff is marketed and it feeds into a negative mindset.”

Participant 3 of group 1 also made a similar point saying,

“To an extent it’s just going to keep perpetuating what’s already happening if the networks and the media outlets don't switch up about how they talk about women in general. The more you talk poorly on women, the more people see it, the more that idea is going to spread. It’s definitely not doing them any favors in terms of speaking of them in a positive light, yeah you’re highlighting the things they did but that's still not subconsciously the main focus and that shows.”

Both of these quotes refer to the negative sports environment created as a result of the constant negative framing for female athletes. When women are not treated equally through sports media, this can automatically trickle down beyond media and into the audience's everyday lives. This creates the “negative mindset” referred to by participant 1 where audiences can become uninterested in women participating in sports and make them feel unwelcomed.

The participants' attitudes on the landscape that has been created by sports media are legitimate. According to Scheadler and Wagstaff (2018), the misrepresentation of women in sports is directly related to sports fans' lack of interest in women's sports. Whether fans and consumers notice or not, the combination of the lack of women's sports coverage and the framing of women in sports has created a sports environment where negative attitudes towards women are reinforced and accepted (Tuggle et al., 2007).

Further each focus group mentioned how misrepresentations of female athletes by sports media could have a specific negative impact on younger consumers. Multiple participants shared that they didn't notice these gendered differences and misrepresentations until they were older. For example, participant 4 of group 1 said, "I mean now as an adult I can view these things and I know that they are very clearly sexist and it makes me more angry than anything else. But, when I was younger I wasn't as aware of things like sexism so I would view females in sports and I would see whatever the media is giving me, which in a lot of cases is extremely misogynistic, or sexist, or just objectifying." Participant 3 of group 2 added to this train of thought saying, "I feel like when I was younger I didn't notice it as much just because I never really paid attention and I just knew I liked watching the female athletes and I didn't really care what everyone else said about them, but as I've gotten older and now that social media is a lot more prevalent I think it's a lot more noticeable ..."

This reveals that even college students, who aren't too far from their childhood, have a clear distinction between when they truly noticed and understood media versus when they didn't. As previously explained, children and young adults are more vulnerable to media influence (Ward, 2004). This belief was backed by the focus group participants as many noted the impact

sports media's framing has on the younger generation of athletes and consumers of sports. Participant 5 of group 2 said, "I think it also has an impact on the next generation of athletes, there could be some little girls out there that don't have that that role model because they never see them, they never hear about them so I just think that's another really important thing that should be talked about." Participant 3 agreed and shared an anecdote about her introduction to sports saying that she wouldn't have even known about or participated in sports as a child if it wasn't for her brother and father's influence on her because she wouldn't have known about women in sports existing. Participant 3 of group 3 added to these notions saying, "I think younger people are affected by it because they're going to grow up in a world that this is a norm, and it shouldn't be a norm, and that it's always going to be this way no matter how hard that people try to change it. I just think we've always been raised in a male dominant sport world."

The participants extended the discussion, commenting on how other groups of people— from female sports journalists to even themselves— are adversely affected as a result of the framing of women in sports. Participant 1 of group 3 said in regards to women working in sports media, "I would watch and read tweets of women that were reporting about sports and the awful awful feedback that they got that they didn't know anything, so it went even further than women athletes, it's women who report on sports themselves, they get so much hate and that's when I really started noticing past the world of sports as well." Participant 2 of this group agreed saying, "I think that women a lot of times get overlooked, especially in the sports world, for their expertise and it's a shame if you ask me. There's a lot of women out there and a lot of females who know a lot about sports and just media in general and do a great job if they get the opportunity to."

A handful of female participants specifically shared anecdotes about how some of them were personally affected by this male dominated sports environment. These situations being a direct, guaranteed product of the framing and misrepresentation of women in sports media is uncertain, but should be noted. One participant, who is a female college athlete, said she's been dealing with this her whole life as an athlete and seen how this has affected herself and her teammates negatively. Another female participant said that when she would attend games, people would ask why she was there saying, "Even as a spectator, not just an athlete, people don't take it seriously when a girl wants to watch a sport, they're like 'oh who do you want to see' and I'm like 'no I just want to see the team'. I want to work in this industry and it's kind of just frustrating." A participant who is a female and studying sports photography said she has been to plenty of games and been questioned as to why she was there, adding that there is a negativity and a stigma around not just female athletes, but also women in sports generally.

RQ 3: Attitudes about the Future

The final research questions asks about how college students feel about the future coverage of women in sports media. In regards to this question, the participants not only shared their attitudes towards how they think the sports media landscape will look in the future, but also their beliefs on how different generations look at this problem, offering multiple solutions. Participant 2 of group 2 articulated the context of this topic adequately saying, "Everybody kind of realizes that this type of portrayal is happening, yet it still continues to happen, like there's not been too much of a change in it. Some media has tried to do better, but it's not anything compared to what it should be, this shouldn't be something we talk about but it is."

A majority of the participants were hopeful and optimistic that the sports media landscape would change for the better in regards to the coverage of women. Multiple participants felt this positive change would occur because they have already seen steps in the right direction. Participant 3 of group 3 said, “I’m very hopeful because honestly even though this is a male dominant world, I just look at how much progress women’s sports has made since then. I think that anything and everything can be always changed so I’m very hopeful, especially with the progress we have made now, and if we keep making progress I think that future generations will end up having the equality that should have happened now, but since this generation is helping that out, hopefully they’ll get it and not have to deal with stuff like this.”

This participant presented a popular point amongst many other participants regarding generational differences. Many expressed that, as their generation and upcoming generations enter society, they expect more positive change in this area. Participant 1 of group 1 said, “I’m definitely more optimistic just because we have such a different outlook on different things, we’re way more open minded than the past, like our grandparents and parents they were so closed minded ... we’re just really opened up to so many different things and different types of people so I’m very optimistic. I think that we can make the change but we just have to have the right kind of people.” Participant 3 from group 2 even felt that this younger generation has already started to make a difference despite their age saying “... as a woman I am hopeful that our generation will be the change and start to push that, but I also think we’re making the older generations rethink how they view sports media in general.”

It should be noted that while there is some truth to the points made by participants regarding generational differences and perspectives, there are also many who have researched

and advocated for change in regards to the framing of women in media as a whole. Actor Geena Davis started her own institute on gender and media in 2004 dedicated to the research, education, and advocacy to reimagine the overall media landscape to better reflect society in regards to gender (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2020). Ann Moore is also a trailblazer for women in media as the chair and CEO of *Time Inc.*, the largest magazine publisher in the United States. Moore has not only made it a priority to publish magazines that appeal to women, but also paved the way for other women to appear in prominent roles in media (Aragon & Miller, 2012). There are others who have shown dedication to properly representing women in media, but it will take a lot more in order to shift this narrative.

Along with hopefulness about the future coverage of women in sports media, participants shared various solutions that they believe would help improve the framing of women in sports media. A popular opinion across all groups was the idea of hiring more women in sports media in order to change the narrative and representation of women. As previously mentioned, female journalists are already in the minority in the newsroom, at around 39%, and this number drops to around 11% specifically in sports departments (Hardin & Shain, 2006). With women in journalism and sports news being so drastically outnumbered, combined with a negative workplace environment, change can be difficult. However, the focus group participants believed balancing these numbers could make it possible. Participant 1 of group 3 said, “I think the key is having women in these sports outlets, like in the room making the decisions with the men and deciding how they’re going to market or what headlines.” This participant added that women should be in the room for any decisions about women’s or men’s sports, and that the easiest way to stop this is to have women participate in those decisions. Participant 2 of group 3 agreed

saying, “I think somebody’s got to step up and give females the opportunity to showcase that talent in the media world, or in the sports world, or in life in general. I think somebody’s got to stand up and step up and say just because she’s a female doesn’t mean she can’t be as successful as males can and can’t do just a good of a job ,if not better, than some males can.” Participant 3 of group 1 believes that it will take a “massive overhaul” in sports media to change it’s deeply rooted ways in how they portray women, and displayed some concern about people’s willingness to do so.

Participants believed that athletes themselves could have a strong role in this change, feeling they could use their power and influence to impact both the amount of media coverage women receive and how they are covered. It’s safe to say that professional athletes in 2020 have more power than they ever have had in the past and could make changes in this area. In the past few years, athletes have been speaking up and making a difference regarding social and political issues more than in the past, and some have started their own media production companies to increase achieving this reality (Towler et al., 2020; Carson, 2020). Participant 3 of group 3 mentioned that professional athletes could push for more women to be in sports media, and participant 1 from that group added that specifically male athletes could help ignite that change. Participant 1 said, “I think that men athletes can use their platform as well because they are huge, I feel like every time Lebron (James) says something everybody notices every single word that comes out of his mouth ... young girls and young boys look up to these male and female athletes and they should all be using their platforms, but when men are on the side of it too I think that would really help.” Members of group 2 briefly discussed how they’ve noticed male athletes

supporting female athletes more recently and how this could help female athletes and leagues receive more positive attention from the media as well as fans.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze college student's attitudes towards the framing of women in sports media and understand how they conceptualize this subject matter through focus groups. Research question 1 asked how college students perceive womens' sports to be framed. Overall, research revealed they had a clear understanding of how women are framed and saw their under-representation and misrepresentation as issues. As mentioned before, the coverage of women in sports media is absurdly low, around four percent according to the Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport at the University of Minnesota (2013), and when women are receiving coverage, they're often hypwexualized, placed in a secondary roles to men, and portrayed as too "ladylike" to sweat and compete (Eastman & Billings, 2000; Schmidt, 2018; Tuggle, 1997). The focus group participants had a strong knowledge about this matter, noticing the negative framing of women in sports and the overall lack of coverage. Further, the participants mentioned that the sexualization of female athletes and constant comparison to male athletes was commonly observed in sports media, and questioned the decision making of those in charge of setting these narratives.

Along with a strong knowledge of the framing of women in sports media, participants had strong opinions about what affects this framing has on specific individuals and the landscape of the world of sports as a whole. Many participants spoke on the fact that this framing and lack of coverage has been happening for so long that it has become the norm, and that many members and audiences of the sports community have become accustomed to these ways. Students added

that these long standing, unfortunate attitudes have affected a variety of people surrounding the world of sports, including the athletes themselves, sports fans, younger audiences of sports media, and reporting sports media journalists.

This study showed that college students do have a thorough understanding of the negative framing that occurs regarding women in sports media and the impact this framing has on others. Despite being younger, college aged students demonstrated their keen insight on this issue, and their insight could have the potential to advocate for change surrounding this issue. The tone of the participants throughout the focus groups showed that they had frustrations towards this topic and the unequal treatment of women in sports media, and with this frustration came a desire to see change. The participants had many ideas regarding what changes could be made, such as recruiting more women in the sports media workforce and having influential athletes advocate for change. But the sheer nature of this generation and their willingness to see change happen may be the strongest force against the misguided norms of the past that have been established in sports media against women for so long. As Generation Z continues to get older, members of this generation will start to make more and more of an impact on the world we live in. This has already been seen in a variety of ways. According to Pew Research Center, Generation Z is more racially and ethnically diverse than any other generation, is more technologically savvy, and is on track to be the most educated generation yet (2020). Their presence was even felt in the 2020 election where one in every ten eligible voters were from this generation, and this number has the potential to grow (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Many focus group participants were hopeful in regards to changing how women are framed in sports media, and much of this confident optimism seemed to stem from the idea that

their current generation will have a role and responsibility to change this narrative. As time passes, older generations will leave the industry, perhaps along with the ideological framing of the past, while more and more college students enter the workforce with new perspectives. Year after year, young journalists and media makers who are educated about sports media's restrictive framing will be in positions of power within the industry and as audiences, and with their knowledge combined with their readiness to see positive change, visibility for the rigor and prestige of female athletes may finally be celebrated.

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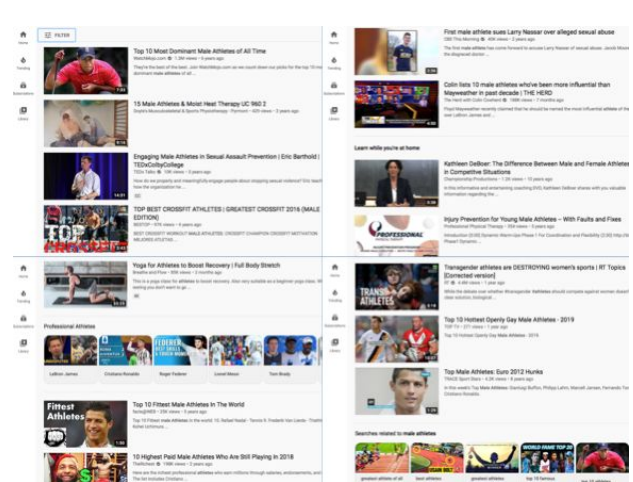
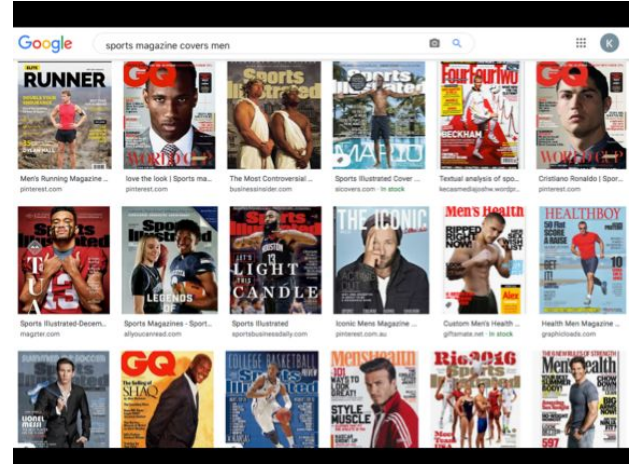
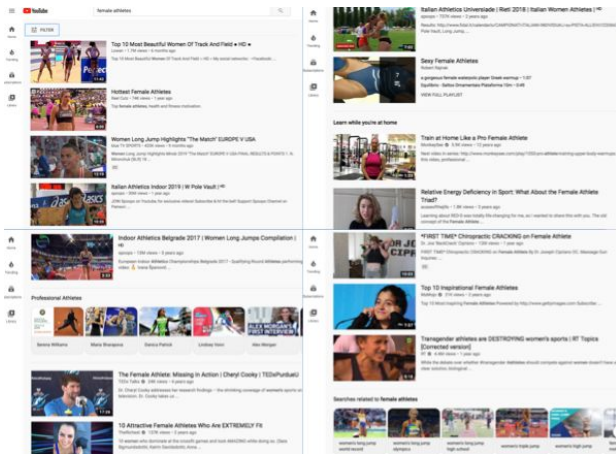
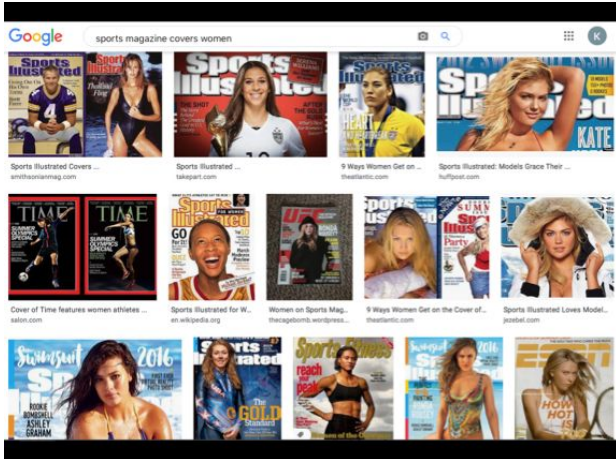
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Appendix

Below are pictures of the presentation shown to the participants during the focus groups conducted for this study.



RIO DE JANEIRO — Corey Cogdell-Unrein, the wife of Bears lineman Mitch Unrein, won the bronze medal in women's trap shooting Sunday.

Competing against Spain's Fatima Galvez, the two finished the 15-target round tied with 13 each, in the shoot-off, Cogdell-Unrein won, claiming her second Olympic bronze.

"You can't compare an Olympic shootoff to any other," she said in Rio late Sunday. "The pressure is unlike anything. You want it so bad."

This is Cogdell-Unrein's third Olympic games, but Unrein, a defensive end in his second season with the Bears, was unable to get away from training camp to join her in Rio and see her in the Olympics for the first time.

At Saturday night's Bears Family Fest at Soldier Field, many of the Bears wore "Team Unrein" T-shirts that also showed the Olympic flag. Cogdell-Unrein later tweeted: "Thank you @ChicagoBears and @RobbieGould09 for your support! So awesome!"

Corey Cogdell, wife of Bears lineman Mitch Unrein, wins bronze in Rio

By Tom Iversen
PHOTO BY AP/WIDE WORLD

Aug 28, 2016 AT 1:13 AM

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LATEST OLYMPICS

Cogdell-Unrein, from Eagle River, Alaska, won the bronze medal at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. She placed 11th in London four years ago.

Australia's Catherine Skinner won the gold, edging New Zealand Natalie Rooney in the final, 12-11.

Cogdell-Unrein and Unrein, who met on a blind date the day before Super Bowl XLV in 2011, enjoy hunting together, but football generally prevents Unrein from joining his wife in her pursuit of elk and deer. They try to arrange waterfowl hunting trips during the bye week each season.

"He was super excited" when they talked Sunday after she won the bronze, she said. "He has been there every step of the way the last six years."

"We both support each others' athletic careers."

Women in Sports Media

Honors Thesis 2020

Biles works hard to maintain her talent, though – and her rock-solid frame.

"I train 32 hours a week and get Sundays off," she said. "On Tuesday, Thursday, Friday I do two-a-days, which is two workouts. Then the other days I do one workout."

Her dedication may have landed her three straight world championships – and status as the first female gymnast to do so. But the schedule has cost her an important milestone: her high school prom.

"I was homeschooled and whenever you're doing gymnastics you're doing 32 hours a week," Biles said of training at the elite level. "I have friends, but I missed all of it because I was at a meet."

Despite her hours of training – and being a world champion – Biles is still a regular teenager.

The athlete said she goes on "girl dates" with her friends and loves [Justin Bieber](#). But her love for the Biebs pales in comparison to her affection for another heartthrob.

"I have a celebrity crush on [Zac Efron](#). He has very good looks and I've heard he's nice," she said, noting what she would do if she ever met the actor.

"I would say 'Hi, I'm Simone' and then pass out!"

The 2016 Olympic Games kick off on Aug. 5 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Genie Bouchard's Dream Date Is Justin Bieber But The Australian Open Crowd Didn't Approve (VIDEO)

Genie Bouchard is both a finalist at the Australian Open and a Bieber fan. The crowd in Melbourne has rightly booed her in protest for that accomplishment but didn't seem particularly happy when learning the second bit.

Following her quarterfinal win over Ana Ivanovic, the 19-year-old Canadian tennis player was asked – among of nothing – about her dream date. Bouchard named a fellow Canadian, pop star Justin Bieber. After an initial laugh at Bouchard's nervous reply, the crowd responded with some light boisterous cheering.

She Won Soccer's Most Prestigious Award — And Then Was Immediately Asked If She Could Twerk

Ada Hegerberg's winning of the first women's Ballon d'Or was marred by sexist comments from GZ Martin Solving.

Ada Hegerberg
Best Women's Player


Last updated on December 2, 2018, at 5:49 p.m. PT
Posted on December 2, 2018, at 5:24 p.m. PT

Monday was a big day for sports fans, as France Football issued its first Women's Ballon d'Or award. It named **Ada Hegerberg** the best women's soccer player in the world.

Serena Williams and Eugenie Bouchard asked to 'give a twirl' at Australian Open

World number one refused to comment on whether fan Cohen's request was sexist.

By PAUL NEWBERRY
12/11/18, 10:15 AM EST



Genie Bouchard reacts after winning a point in her second-round match against Vera Zvonareva. Photograph: Chris Wedel

Phelps ties for silver in 100 fly

Ledecky sets world record in women's 800 freestyle

By PAUL NEWBERRY
12/01/18, 10:15 AM EST

RIO DE JANEIRO — The most decorated athlete in Olympic history tied for silver in one of his greatest