

Generation Y's Perceptions of Women's Sport in the Media

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Despite many favorable strides in the march toward gender equality, a deeply entrenched divide continues to cast females as onlookers in a world of sport dominated by males. While progress has been made, research is resounding with sport's deep roots in male hegemony (Davis & Duncan, 2006; Duncan, 2006; Hardin, Dodd, & Lauffer, 2006). Examination of the nature of the opportunities available to female athletes suggests limitations exist. Investigation of the media coverage of female sports suggests a disproportionate quantity and a biased quality of coverage (Duncan, 2006). These findings beget the question of exactly how much societal thought and the perceptions regarding female athletes have really evolved. The manner in which the media treats female athletes is believed to orchestrate society's perceptions, not only of female athletes, but indeed, women in general (Tuggle, Huffman, & Rosengard, 2007). Jeffres, Neundorf, and Atkin (2003) spoke to the importance of the media and its power to dictate how leisure time is spent. They stressed the ability of the media to "cultivate images and perceptions of what is popular and attractive" (p.173). McCombs argued that mass media messages "don't tell people what to think, but what to think about" (1972, p.177). The particular way in which a sporting event or athlete is framed when depicted in the media has the potential to impact its audiences' beliefs and attitudes in reference to that event or athlete (Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf, & Hardin, 2002). With these ideas in mind, it was the purpose of this study to determine the real influence of the sport media through an examination of a Generation Y audience and its interpretation of mediated messages in female sport. Specifically, this study sought to address how the Generation Y audience, in its well-established influence and skepticism, perceives the presentation of women's professional and amateur sport in varying media outlets (Stevens, Lathrop, & Bradish, 2005; Weiss, 2003).

This research employed the use of a focus group methodology in order to elicit a raw database of thoughts and ideas to be analyzed. The representative Generation Y population was composed of Kinesiology undergraduate students from a large, Canadian university. Twenty-four participants were recruited and organized into four gender-specific focus groups. A ten-item interview guide directed the discussions of each focus group. Questions focused on participants' general perceptions of women's sport, perceptions of the quantity and quality of media coverage paid to women's sport, and how the media's current treatment of women's sports impact sport consumption habits. Additionally, a brief written survey was completed by each participant revealing detail of their sport consumption habits. Prevailing perceptions revealed women's sport as being largely unpopular, unexciting, falling short in entertainment value, and for all intents and purposes, taking a perpetual back seat to men's sport. Essentially, participants linked a lack of enthusiasm with their perceptions of women's sport. Though this audience did not appear to view women's sport as inconsequential on a large scale, as per the findings of previous research, they did express their views that women's sport was mostly irrelevant when it came to their personal sport consumption habits. Participants were notably more familiar with female Olympians and women athletes who participate in either professional golf or tennis. Contrary to the superficial appearance that implies a lack of interest in women's sport, this population illustrated that they are in fact consuming women's sport. Beyond the cursory glance, it became obvious that this audience's experience with women's sport was primarily a reflection of the female storylines that had made their way into the sport media. Participants were merely a mirror image of the storylines they had been provided with over the years, with their awareness of women's sport simply echoing the severe under-representation of women's sport in the media. Perhaps inescapably, this analysis of women's sport in the media brought about a comparison to men's sport in the media.

Out of this assessment arose the conclusion that while the sport media nexus in men's sport is thriving, women's sport is scarcely a cut above invisibility, in large part due to their weak relationship with the media. This study illuminated the deep roots of the male sporting tradition in society. Participants agreed that sport coverage today remains notably gender specific/women enjoying sporadic attention at best. In line with much of the research concerning women's sport, this study confirmed that while women have been able to overcome many hegemonic barriers in society, the institution of sport "by contrast has remained a much more entrenched bastion of patriarchy" (Whannel, 2002, p.10). Participants emphasized the role of society in the grooming of not only their perceptions of sport, but also the development of their sport preferences and consumption habits. It would seem that as we have elevated the value of sport in our culture, we have simultaneously breathed more life into traditions of hegemonic value. These findings imply that future growth in women's sport will require both the media and society to embrace a more sophisticated way of thinking about sport. There is a critical need for education in women's sport and a concerted effort must be made to improve the media accessibility of female sporting endeavors.