Children's Perceptions of Male and Female Athletes as Portrayed in Sports Illustrated for Kids
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Despite gains made by Title IX in the past 36 years, including increased female participation in high school and collegiate sport, there is evidence that gender equity in sport is not fully achieved. Interested observers need look no further than media portrayals of male and female athletes to find this trend. Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century, the media have encouraged the maintenance of the “ideal” woman by downplaying females’ strengths. Thus, for many female athletes, being strong while maintaining the stereotypical “ideal” traits of femininity has been difficult (Ross & Shinew, 2008; Christian, 2004). Indeed, disparities in media portrayals of male and female athletes have been widely uncovered, from magazines (Fink & Kensicki, 2002) to newspapers (Eastman & Billings, 2000) to television (Billings, Halone, & Denham, 2002). Children are especially influenced by mainstream media, as communication researchers have found support for both social learning (Bandura, 1963) and cultivation (Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006; Gutschoven & Van den Bulck, 2005; Romer, et al., 2003). With early exposure, children begin to develop stereotypes of men and women (Nathanson, Wilson, McGee, & Sebastian, 2002). Since children’s interest in sport is solidified by the media, more work must be done by sport management researchers to understand how they form perceptions about gender in sport through these outlets.

Researchers target the media because they tend to shape social values and disseminate information to the masses (Kane, 1978, in Fink & Kensicki, 2002). Indeed, one of the biggest arguments is that media frame news, presenting information in a specific way (Goffman, 1974; Gitlin, 1980). As sports become more pervasive, framing theory has become particularly relevant. Therefore, an examination of print media coverage of athletes would be the most accurate way to gauge public opinion at a specific time. The Olympics mark a time when both male and female athletes receive national media attention. Millions of men, women, and children tune in. It thus would be reasonable to assume that there would be equal time spent covering men and women. This is not the case, however, as studies of the 1996 Olympics (Eastman & Billings, 1999; Hardin et al., 2002) and the 2000 and 2002 Games found that both stories and photographs dedicated to male athletes greatly outnumbered those of females (Billings & Eastman, 2002; Billings & Eastman, 2003). Further, the media most often cover figure skating, a sport that reinforces the “ideal” woman (Bishop, 2003). This coverage can have long-term effects not only on athletes’ health, but also on children who view athletes as role models (Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). It may in fact perpetuate stereotypes of women in sport and stigmas attached to female athletes. Even when media cover sports that are non-aesthetic, there appears to be gendered perceptions of females (Billings, Angelini, & Eastman, 2005; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Billings, 2003).

The bulk of the literature has found that media outlets tend to focus on the physical appeal of female athletes rather than their professional sports accomplishments, telling viewers how to define women in sport (Carty, 2005; Fink & Kensicki, 2002). Yet, few of these studies examined how children form their perceptions from these media as they are socialized into sport. Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf and Hardin (2002) examined images in Sports Illustrated for Kids during the 1996 Olympics and revealed that the magazine had inequitable coverage for females and relied on gender stereotyping. In fact, 76.3% of all editorial photos in issues were of males (Hardin et al., 2002), itself a strong indicator of how women are valued in sport. By examining Sports Illustrated for Kids and children’s perceptions of the magazine’s content, sport management research can tap into the sport socialization experiences of children. Furthermore, like the mainstream Olympic coverage, Sports Illustrated for Kids includes portrayals of both male and female athletes in each issue. Thus, it is an ideal outlet for comparisons and observations to be made about these gender portrayals.

The purpose of this study is to build on the Hardin et al. (2002) study by examining the relationship among media sports coverage, gender equity in sport and the perceptions young sports fans begin to form about gender and sport based on media consumption. The researcher hypothesizes that since women face discrimination in sport starting from the time that they choose to participate, children will perceive male athletes and their sports as more legitimate. Additionally, the media play a major role in shaping the views of audiences, so the way that they represent male and female athletes, including juxtaposed, may have an impact on children. The goal of the study is to hear straight from the target market of Sports Illustrated for Kids and get their perceptions on male and female athletes, as well as their reasons for these views. It aims to answer how are female athletes and male athletes portrayed in Sports Illustrated for Kids? In addition, how do sport-media portrayals shape young fans’ perceptions of women and men in sport and what effect does sport-media consumption have on the sport socialization of young fans in terms of how they form beliefs about gender roles?
The researcher will conduct a content analysis of 24 Sports Illustrated for Kids issues from 1996 to 1999 and 24 issues from
2006 to 2007. The researcher will analyze the content of photographs (N=3219) by using the definitions determined by Hardin
et al. (2002). The researcher will use codes for the age and gender of the subject, the number of subjects in the photo, the
importance of the photo (whether it is dominant or supporting), the position of the person in the photo (whether that person is
prominent or not), what type of sport the subject participates in, the setting of the photo, the nature of the setting in the photo,
and whether there is a crowd. Additionally, a content analysis of headlines (N=760) in the magazine will be conducted,
examining the author’s gender, the importance of the article, the level of sport played by the subject, whether the story is
focused on the subject’s profession or is special interest, the font used, the color used, the connotation of words (positive,
negative, or neutral), and the language used (traditionally associated with males, females, or neutral). Following the content
analysis, a focus group will be conducted with six children from an after-school program in a northeastern town in the United
States to gather the target audience’s perspective on the magazine and women and men in sport. Their responses will be used as
a supplement to the results found in the content analysis and will be coded for instances of preference for a particular sport.

Results will be discussed relative to appropriate communication theoretical frameworks of framing theory, social learning theory,
and cultivation theory. Suggestions for future research investigating the relationship between sport socialization, gender, media
and children will also be discussed.