
Andrea N. Eagleman, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
Soonhwan Lee, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

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Artistic women’s gymnastics has long been viewed as a sport dominated not by women, as the name suggests, but instead by young girls. According to Grossfeld (2010), the best American female gymnasts are “usually pre-college age” (p. 9). In 1997, the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) raised the minimum age of Olympic-eligible gymnasts from 15 years of age to 16. The increased age limit was the FIG’s attempt at lengthening gymnasts’ careers, allowing for further musculoskeletal development in elite gymnasts, preventing burnout, and to “redirect the image of the sport positively for the public, spectators and media” (Anderson, 1997, p. 14).

Despite this attempt by the FIG to improve the sport’s public image, Rodenberg and Eagleman (2011) examined the minimum age rule in the context of antitrust law, and concluded that the rule brought about two negative developments in the world of elite women’s gymnastics: age fabrication by some countries, which has shown difficult to prove, as well as an imbalanced playing field for the countries that choose to follow the rules. Researchers have not, however, examined this issue from a public relations and marketing lens. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to conduct a qualitative examination of U.S. newspaper coverage of women’s gymnastics during the past seven Olympic Games (1984 through 2008) in order to determine the prominent media frames surrounding the sport at each Olympics, and to determine whether the age minimum increase achieved its desired goal of improving the sport’s image in the media.

Past sport management research has examined media coverage of gymnastics and other Olympic sports in the context of gender differences between male and female athletes (e.g., Billings, 2007; Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings, et al., 2008; Billings & Eastman, 2002; Billings & Eastman, 2003; Eagleman & McNary, 2011; Higgs, Weiller, & Martin, 2003; Pratt, Grappendorf, Grundvig, & LeBlanc, 2008), as well as through the comparison of coverage of traditionally ‘feminine’ sports such as gymnastics with coverage of more ‘masculine’ sports such as basketball (e.g., Jones, Murrell, & Jackson, 1999; Koivula, 1999; von der Lippe, 2002). Few researchers, however, have examined media coverage solely of women’s gymnastics. Borcila (2000) conducted a study focused specifically on gymnastics coverage, and examined print media outlets’ responses to the television broadcast coverage of women’s gymnastics at the 1996 Olympic Games. The study found a strong nationalizing function to be present in the coverage.

This study utilized framing theory, which posits that certain aspects of reality are made more prominent in communication pieces, and these aspects of reality, or frames, can appear in the form of keywords, expressions, sources, sentences or visuals (Iyengar, 1991). Frames presented by the media can cause consumers to “think, feel, and decide in a particular way” (Entman, 2007, p. 164). Frames evolve over time, and certain frames may become more or less prominent in the media as they evolve (Carragee & Roefs, 2004).

A qualitative document analysis methodology was used for this study. Document analysis is defined by Altheide (1996) as “an integrated and conceptually informed method, procedure, and technique for locating, identifying, retrieving and analyzing documents for their relevance, significance, and meaning” (p. 2). The documents examined in this study included articles about women’s gymnastics from U.S. newspapers during the 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, and 2008 Olympic Games. These specific Olympic Games were selected because they provided an adequate number of Games to examine both before and after the FIG’s 1997 age rule change. The 1984 Olympics were the first Games in which the U.S. women’s gymnastics team won medals since the 1948 Olympics in London. Therefore, it was thought by the researchers that the amount of coverage of women’s gymnastics in U.S. newspapers in 1984 was likely much higher than in previous Olympics, and therefore 1984 provides a reasonable starting point for the research. The Lexis-Nexis online database was used to retrieve articles from each of these time periods.

A coding protocol was developed specifically for this study, containing the following measures: date of article, name...
of article, newspaper name, and author name. Once that information was recorded, the entire article was read and notes were taken on various aspects of the article, including words and phrases used by the author to describe the gymnasts, notes of direct quotes from the gymnasts being covered, and other notes to assist the researchers in determining the themes and overarching frame present in the article. Themes can be thought of as “general meanings or even ‘miniframes’” (Altheide, 1996, p. 30), and frames are described as “very broad thematic emphases” that are “similar to the border around a picture that separates it from the wall and from other possibilities” (p. 30).

Coding for this study took place in the summer and fall of 2011, and although data collection is finished, the analysis of results is not yet complete. Preliminary results indicate that the FIG was somewhat successful in its quest for developing a more positive public image of the sport via the age minimum increase, as the themes and frames present in the media coverage reflected a portrayal of gymnasts as older and more mature in the later years of the study, contrasted with the portrayal of gymnasts as little girls in the earlier years. Despite this finding indicating the FIG was successful in its goal of shifting the public perception of gymnastics, the 2008 Olympic Games coverage was riddled with controversy over the Chinese gymnastics team, which was accused by many of entering underage gymnasts into the competition and falsifying their birth documents. The implications of these findings, as well as the complete results of the study, will be further explained and discussed during the presentation. Results to be discussed include the prominent frames from each Olympics, the changes in frames from year to year, and country-specific frames used for gymnasts of differing nationalities.

This research will serve as an important contribution to the literature on media portrayals of athletes, and will be meaningful for marketing and public relations professionals involved in the sport of gymnastics in both the U.S. and on the international level. Additionally, this research will be useful to practitioners of other sports that enact minimum age rules, such as professional tennis, golf, and basketball.