Masculinity and Sexuality in the Women’s Sports: A Comparison of Body Images between the Lingerie Football League and the WNBA

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Abstract 2012-316

According to Krane (2001), heterosexual and male-centered media construction of reality as well as the historical marketability of femininity still exists in the current media industry. Previous research in the sport industry has examined how sports media deals with the traditional portrayal of femininity and masculinity (e.g., Duncan & Sayaovong, 1990; Duncan, 1990; Elueze & Jones, 1998; Matteo, 1986), hegemonic masculinity (e.g., Kian, Vincent, & Mondello, 2008; Pederson, 2002) and the heterosexually attractive appearance of female athletes (e.g., Hargreaves, 1994; Kolnes, 1995). In particular, research has examined the objectification of women (e.g., Daniel, 2009; Daniel & Wartenla, 2011; Fredrick & Robert, 1997), and the sexualized body images of female athletes (e.g., Daddario, 1992; Davis, 1997; Duncan, 1993; Kim, et al., 2011). However, scant empirical studies have focused on investigating the gendered portrayal of an entire sport or league (Fink at al., 2011; Kane, 1988).

The Lingerie Football League (LFL) targets marketing and promotion toward the physical attractiveness of the female body, with players wearing lingerie in the masculine sport of football. As such, it is argued that this league may fall in line with the fundamental point that athletic images in female sport are often replaced with images of sexuality (Glenny, 2006; Kim, et al., 2011). Moreover, traditional long standing female professional sport leagues (Women’s National Basketball Association [WNBA]) are lumped into the same category as the LFL based on this gendered image classification; yet, systematic comparison between female sport leagues’ portrayal of women is relatively limited. As such, it is worthwhile to look into the content and context in which the LFL and the WNBA portray female athletes to determine if the nature of representations of the female body in women’s sports images differ by context. The purpose of this study was to investigate how game highlight videos framed women’s sport images from the LFL and the WNBA by conducting semantic sports video analysis (Duan et al., 2003), especially focused on shot classification. Second, we further examined how women’s sport images were portrayed within the perspective of masculine sports based on a gender display (Wallis, 2010) framework. Objectification theory (Fredrick & Robert, 1997) and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) served as the theoretical frameworks for analysis.

To distinguish women’s sport images, the LFL was compared with the WNBA by conducting quantitative content analysis of the game highlight videos from each league’s official website. Both the LFL and the WNBA are team sports featuring twelve squads located throughout the country. Unlike the WNBA, which focuses on fundamental skills and is featured on ESPN and other major sports outlets, the LFL may be considered a strictly entertainment broadcast as pay-per-view events appear on MTV2 and focus on aesthetic images.

A content analysis of the game highlight videos were quantitatively analyzed based on 30 second unit with semantic sports video analysis (Duan et al., 2003) and gender display (Wallis, 2010) in the LFL and the WNBA. Despite the different season schedules between the LFL and the WNBA, 24 game highlight videos were randomly selected (LFL=11, WNBA=13) and a total of 206 units (LFL=103, WNBA=103) were analyzed. Each video was coded for presence (1) or absence (0) of shot classification and gender display by two independent coders. Cohen’s Kappa coefficient was calculated to measure agreement between coders. Inter-coder reliability coefficients included shot classification (k= .859) and gender display (k = .816).

The findings revealed that semantic shot classification (Duan et al., 2003) and gender display (Wallis, 2010) were indeed a salient feature of the game highlight videos in the LFL and the WNBA. Specifically, the LFL focused on the player centered views such as player-following view (LFL=62, 60.2%, WNBA=46, 44.7%, x²(1) =4.983, p < .026) and player-close view (LFL=100, 97.3%, WNBA=86, 83.5%, x²(1) =10.854, p < .001). In addition, the audience view, which is a component of the game/event centered view, was featured more often than the court/field centered views (LFL=62, 60.2%, WNBA=28, 27.2%, x²(1) =22.810, p < .000). There was no statistically significant difference in the...
court/field centered views.

Regarding the second purpose of the study, gender display was significantly different in terms of stereotypical notions of masculinity and sexuality between the LFL and the WNBA. Specifically, overly masculine images such as showing masculinity (LFL=44, 42.7%, WNBA=3, 2.9%, x²(1)=46.338, p < .000), screaming/shouting (LFL=51, 49.5%, WNBA=20, 19.4%, x²(1)=20.654, p < .000) were present, while there is little femininity images such as make up and dress up (LFL=53, 51.5%, WNBA=19, 18.4%, x²(1)=24.682, p < .000) in both sport leagues. Moreover, the LFL frequently featured un-sport man like conduct such as swaggering (LFL=43, 41.7%, WNBA=0, 0.0%, x²(1)=54.344, p < .000) and taunting (LFL=28, 27.2%, WNBA=0, 0.0%, x²(1)=32.404, p < .000), while the WNBA did not featured these behaviors.

By comparing traditional women's sport (WNBA) and commercially sexualized entertainment women's sport (LFL), this study supports hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) and objectification theory (Frederick & Robert, 1997) by providing empirical evidence of women's sport images. Basketball is viewed in U. S. culture as a masculine sport, the WNBA players are often challenged with cultural assumptions regarding their lack of femininity, and thus their lack of heterosexuality (Banet-Weiser, 1999). In addition, sports media reinforces masculine hegemony in society by reflecting societal attitudes that are negative toward female athletes, particularly those who compete in what historically have been considered masculine sports such as basketball and football (Urquhart & Crossman, 1999; Vincent, Imwold, Johnson, & Massey, 2003). In the LFL, the LFL players play men’s sport football, yet they wear lingerie instead of traditional sports uniforms for entertaining male audiences; this creates a juxtaposition between overly masculine and overly feminine images. Furthermore, objectification theory explains that media outlets routinely sexually objectify the female body. Here, the LFL players’ bodies specifically were examined as objects for the pleasure and evaluation of entertainment sport consumers, specifically males.

Given the surface level differences of these two leagues, the support of sexualized images across both settings – whether implicit or explicit – is somewhat surprising. In addition, the findings of this study also empirically confirm the current phenomenon of sexualized marketing in women’s sports. Further research that continues to assess the impact of these messages on both male and female populations is necessary. Finally, from a practical perspective, this study highlights potential dilemmas that may create a sizeable divide between marketability and athleticism of women’s sport images. Further implications for research and practice will be presented.