Women in sport media have traditionally faced a myriad of challenges. Those that are employed in the field have long dealt with perceptions that, as a result of gender stereotyping, they lack the qualifications to adequately perform in a male-dominated field (Sheffer & Shultz, 2007). This is illustrated in mainstream televised sport media, as women frequently guide discussion and are not tasked with showcasing expertise or vitality (Deitsch, 2015). In most cases, there appear to be clear gender-role divides, much to the detriment of women. These issues are alarming, considering the growing popularity of sport media productions that prioritize knowledge and argumentative debate (Nylund, 2004). However, some programs, such as ESPN’s His & Hers, have given women opportunities to debate sport in front of a national audience. As such, the purpose of this study was to assess evaluative differences between male and female sportscasters in a popular sport media setting.

Social role theory has been used in the study of perceptual differences involving behaviors between men and women, as types of individual qualities and actions are evaluated in congruence with preconceived notions about gender’s role in the behavior. Standards are thus set for appropriate characteristics and behaviors, depending on gender (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Consequently, gendered stereotypes form. For instance, women may not be looked upon favorably when demonstrating more aggressive or overly confident behaviors, which are stereotypically associated with men (Eagly & Karau, 2002). On the surface, it would appear that such stereotypes would similarly have a negative impact on women in televised media, as the prescription of aggressive and commanding characteristics in a broadcasting setting have been found to be valued by media consumers (Areni & Sparks, 2005). Additionally, women whom embrace athletic participation may be deemed incongruent with societal expectations, given that sport has represented a traditional male activity (Wachs, 2005). Thus, women may be at a significant disadvantage in consideration of preferred behaviors associated with broadcasting, especially related to sport (Etling, Young, Faux, & Mitchell, 2011).

Likewise, source credibility has been applied to the examination of media abilities (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). Messages that are recognized as credible have a greater influence on positive audience attitudes and future consumption intentions (Slater & Rouner, 1996). Source gender though, can impact the evaluation of credibility (Flanagan & Metzger, 2003). Per Slater & Rouner (1996), a message is more likely to be accepted if there is a perceived match between the source and message content. However, a study by Armstrong and McAdams (2009) found male print authors to be perceived as more credible than females, even with topics associated with gender neutrality. Given a traditional masculine topic like sport (Messner, 2004), it is not unreasonable to think that women would be perceived as less credible than men in a televised media setting.

Therefore, it is of interest to assess the impact of traditional gender-role stereotypes on consumer perceptions of male and female sportscasters. While research has examined gender and sport media credibility (Mastro, Seate, Blecha, & Gallegos, 2012), none have used social role theory, in conjunction with a sport televised format. As such, the purpose of this study is to better understand how source gender influences differences in consumer evaluations of sport media source credibility.

Participants (n = 544) were recruited through Mechanical Turk (mTurk). Males comprised the majority of the sample (57.9%). The average age was 35.3. Approximately 51% reported that they consumed at least six hours of sport media content each week. Participants watched a video of a debate between two ESPN sports show hosts, Michael Smith (male) and Jemele Hill (female), which was featured on the program His & Hers. The debate involved former NBA star Michael Jordan and current Oklahoma City Thunder standout Kevin Durant. During the video, participants commented on the arguments made by each host. Afterward, participants were also asked to identify which sportscaster was more persuasive, while elaborating on their choice rationale.
A content analysis was employed to examine prevalent themes amongst the response data, specifically via a comparative analysis between the two sportscasters. Participant comments (n = 1,239) served as units of analyses. Two coders sought to establish inter-coder reliability with the data set (Neuendorf, 2002). A Cohen’s Kappa test assessed the strength of inter-coder reliability. According to Stemler (2001), strong Cohen’s Kappa values eclipse .60. Within this data set, a Kappa of .849 was calculated (p < .001).

The following categories were established: dynamism, expertise, likeability, and trustworthiness. Specific themes within dynamism included emotional display (n = 48), use of humor (n = 49), and aggressive tactics (n = 71). Expertise was coded based on comments involving perceived source knowledge (n = 47). Likeability was coded based on comments relating to general source amiability and physical features (n = 25). Specific themes within trustworthiness included citation of evidence (n = 226) and display of bias (n = 73). Each comment was also segmented by praise (positive) or criticism (negative). Smith received more positive comments (214) than Hill (205), but had 87 negative remarks, as opposed to just 32 for Hill. Smith was seen as the debate winner (59.6%), amongst both male (63.9%) and female participants (53.8%).

Further analyses provided a richer description of participant perceptions of each sportscaster. Smith received substantial praise for displays of emotion, humor, and aggression. These findings support claims that demonstrations of aggression and powerful language may induce perceptions of competence in a male sportscaster (Burrell & Koper, 1998). Thus, adherences to concepts of role congruity appear to boost the perceived credibility of being a male sportscaster. While Smith was perceived as a basketball expert, most comments lacked elaboration for why he was more of an expert, perhaps inferring that simply being male has a greater association with elevated sport knowledge (Ordman & Zillman, 1994). Such subtle sexism may be indicative of implicit bias, to which individuals may not overtly purport sexist attitudes, but, socializing influences or past experiences may trigger retention of such feelings intrinsically (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Participants in this study may subsequently ascribe these feelings while not realizing actual intent. Thus, a woman in a pivotal sport media setting, regardless of performance, may be slighted due to traditional perceptions of being unqualified. As such, findings from this study indicate that, though opportunities in sport media have increased for women, perceptions of women’s competence in sports media will continue to be an impediment to advancement in the field.