Examining Effects of the LPGA's Promotional Strategies Via a Longitudinal Study of Media Coverage of Men’s and Women’s Golf

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Golf is one of the few sports in the Western World competed by both men and women at the highest level that also receives mainstream media coverage. The men’s Professional Golfers’ Association (PGA) and Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) have contracts with major television networks in many countries and both have four international Grand Slam tournaments.

However, the LPGA has long lagged well behind the PGA in media contracts, television ratings, sponsorships, and generating interest among the overwhelmingly male-dominated golf fanbases in the United States and United Kingdom (e.g., Dixon, 2002; Robinson, Trail, & Kwon, 2004). Some critics have attributed these differences at least partially to LPGA problems in marketing and promoting its product (Thomaselli, 2006).

Accordingly, the LPGA has responded by making their athletes more accessible to media, trying to make the LPGA the most fan-friendly league in sports, and – most controversially – primarily marketing what its officials perceived to be their most physically attractive athletes, as well as those who speak English as their native language in English-speaking countries (e.g., 1995; Fink, 2012).

As a result, the LPGA has seen a slight increase in sponsorships, much more exposure through its television partners (i.e., 33 of its 34 events in 2015 are slated to appear on U.S. television), and higher prize money for its events (DiMeglio, 2014). But how does that translate to coverage from independent media, especially when compared to the more popular PGA?

Hundreds of published research studies over the past 35 years showed that sport media generally devote the majority of space and provide greater emphasis to male athletes regardless of the type of sport, form of medium, or host country of media outlet (e.g., Bruce, Hovden, & Markula, 2010). In the rare instances when women’s sports do receive mainstream attention, female athletes’ athletic accomplishments are often compared unfavorably with their male peers and are trivialized (Vincent, Pedersen, Whisenant, & Massey, 2007).

These differences have led many scholars to conclude that sport and mass media are two of the main cultural institutions helping to preserve hegemonic masculinity in the democratized world (e.g., Vincent et al., 2007). Connell (2005) defined hegemonic masculinity as the configuration of gender practices that strengthen the dominance of men who conform to and exhibit desirable expressions of masculinities.

However, professional golf has not been the subject of an academic study comparing coverage of female and male athletes. Further, there remains a lack of international, comparative studies in this realm (e.g., Bruce et al., 2010). This study attempts to add to the literature in both of those areas.

The primary purpose of this longitudinal study was to compare gender-specific descriptors in British and U.S. newspaper coverage of the 2011-15 British and U.S. Open men’s and women’s golf championships. Also examined were the amount of articles allotted to each men’s and women’s tournament by major newspapers in the United States and Great Britain. The LPGA’s marketing and promotional strategy to become more of a mainstream, popular sport will be examined in lieu of the results of how much and what types of media coverage it received.

The online versions of newspapers examined were Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, and USA Today in the U.S., and Daily Mirror, Daily Telegraph, and The Sun in Great Britain. Approximately 91.5% of the 1,086 articles published from 2011-15 on these four golf tournaments in all six newspapers focused on the two men’s tournaments. 95% of all articles in British papers focused on men’s tournaments, whereas 86% of articles on these four tournaments in U.S. papers focused on men’s golf.
Working independently, two researchers read and coded all articles published in the six media outlets for the presence of nine descriptive categories developed off coding schema used by previous researchers (Kian & Clavio, 2011; Vincent et. al., 2007) to study differences in media content used to describe female and male athletes.

Where appropriate, chi-square tests will be calculated to compare differences between observed and expected frequencies between newspaper articles devoted to men’s and women’s golf. Additionally, binomial tests for proportions will be calculated to compare differences between categorical descriptors devoted to men’s and women’s golf in British and U.S. newspapers. (Data analysis in process)

Findings from this study impact the sport management profession in two primary ways: Results will show the success of the LPGA promotional strategies in garnering international media coverage. Results will also reveal if hegemonic masculinity in the coverage of and framing of women’s golf in sport still exists through the coverage by these British and U.S. papers.

References
Fink, J.S. (2012). Homophobia and the marketing of female athletes and women’s sport. In G. B. Cunningham (ed.), Sexual orientation and gender identity in sport: Essays from activists, coaches, and scholars (pp. 49-60). College Station, TX: Center for Sport Management Research and Education.