

The Role of Women in Sports Media & Media Representations of Female Athletes

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The media plays a significant role in shaping public perception as a tool that can either reinforce or challenge social views on sportswomen through its representation of them. Toffoletti & Thorpe (2018) examine the “athletic labour of femininity” as they look at how elite women in sport are presented in the online world, specifically, the non-sporting efforts that sportswomen go to in order to keep up with their online image of femininity (p. 312). The ways in which females present themselves through social media platforms, as Toffoletti & Thorpe (2018) note, “reveal the power of gendered regimes of visibility to influence sportswomen’s self-presentation choices” (p. 312). With the growing recognition of female athletes, the media’s representation of them continues to intensify as we raise questions of equality and inclusion. Messner et al. (2000) discuss how boys are much greater consumers of televised sports than girls (p. 380) and describe how the “Televised Sports Manhood Formula reflects and promotes hegemonic ideologies concerning race, gender, sexuality, aggression, violence, and

consumerism” (p. 391). When female athletes are portrayed, often it is in ways that draw attention to their bodies, sending the message that they are solely something to look at. Kane et al. (2013) discuss how their heterosexuality and femininity is highlighted to display what a woman should be, and often this is of greater importance than their athletic abilities (p. 271). As a female athlete, in a world where men receive more praise despite being at the same level, it is difficult to feel a sense of belonging when you grow up with societal messages screaming that you will never be enough. Heineken (2015) examines how internet group *SoccerGrlProbs* has become a safe space for female athletes as they challenge normalized misogynistic views surrounding femininity and redefine what it means to be a female athlete in a humorous, relatable way (p. 1035). Heineken (2015) states that “girls’ identification with SoccerGrlProbs enables a form of self-branding that is disconnected from commercialized celebrations of ‘hegemonic female sexuality’” (p. 1047). The change in self-representation illustrates the growing movement of female athletes challenging stereotypes, using their voices, and fostering an empowering culture for future generations.

Old Milwaukee Swedish Bikini Team Commercials:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-c2NEFPqTwY>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtnMtrEB1-I>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKcW0ljTg4I>

These commercials were created in the early 1990s, advertising Old Milwaukee with the help of the Swedish Bikini Team. In all three of these clips, the story is a group of men spending time outside, drinking unbranded beer, who don't think life can get any better when, suddenly, they are gifted with Old Milwaukee and the presence of the Swedish Bikini Team (ASO Advertising, 2008 & Adam N, 2006). The way that women are framed as hypersexual beings – through the use of nudity, submission, and assigning them powerless characteristics – is representative of how male-centred values exist and dominate female representation in sports media. Dominant ideologies such as these encourage and support behaviour that objectifies women by defining their role in sport as a source of sex appeal intended to engage the male audience and boost viewership.

The “Televised Sports Manhood Formula” (Messner et al., 2000) describes how misogynistic views are used as tools of design as media is created; they note that “the idea that sports is a man's world is reinforced by the gender composition and imagery in commercials” (p. 383). This notion of how imagery is used to create sex appeal is consistent with the message portrayed in the Old Milwaukee Swedish Bikini Team

commercials. The “dream life” portrayed in these ads is attractive and appealing to its male audience, supporting and reinforcing ideas regarding how men and women should be viewed; it often being that the woman is to be viewed as an object who serves the man. Messner et al. (2000) describe that “women almost never appear in commercials unless they are in the company of men” (p. 383) and also write about how when women are depicted in the media, it is through a male-serving lens (p. 384). This concept is illustrated by these commercials where the women are seen as submissive objects valued based on their beauty. The emphasis on physical appearance and excessive attention to women’s bodies clearly exemplifies what Messner et al. (2000) discuss regarding the role of women in sports media where they are perceived and valued based on how they appeal to societal standards (p. 383).

“Here’s to Football” Coors Light Commercial
<https://youtu.be/UuEkdPcf2wY?feature=shared>

“Here’s to Football” (Longo, 2010), is another example of a text that illustrates the ways in which women are portrayed in sports media and popular culture. Coors Light produced this commercial in 2002 to promote their product by tapping into football fans’ sense of nostalgia through moments in sport like sharing beers with friends and family, being a part of a crowd, and also traditions such as tailgate parties (Longo, 2010). While

“Here’s to Football” (Longo, 2010) does express values such as these that come from a place of passion, belonging, community, and love for sport, this commercial also reflects certain beliefs about the role played by sexually appealing women in the world of sports media. The commercial features two blonde girls throughout and shows many cheerleaders as well, all of which are dressed to appeal to the male gaze; as Messner et al. (2000) discuss, women in sports media are often characterized in ways that stereotype them to fit in the background of the male subjects (p. 383). The way that women are included in this ad as “props” with the purpose of engaging the male audience is consistent with the ideas of Messner et al. (2000) as they describe how “women are sexy props or prizes for men’s successful sports performances or consumption choices” (p. 383).

While ads like “Here’s to Football” (Longo, 2010) and the Old Milwaukee Swedish Bikini Team commercials (ASO Advt., 2008 & Adam N, 2006), boost and foster peoples’ interest in the sports world by creating appeal to things like nostalgia, group identity, and connection, they also – intended or not – demonstrate values that are rooted in drinking beer, watching sports, and being surrounded by beautiful women. The values presented in these commercials are not just revealed by how women are portrayed, but also the way that men are expected to exceed certain expectations of what it means to be a strong,

“manly” man who watches sports, will get in a fight, drinks with his buddies, and consumes media appealing to male-centred heterosexual tendencies. Messner et al. (2000) note that research suggests that “heroic framing,” the portrayal of the body of a male athlete, and emphasis on physical dominance are crucial in understanding the role of sport as influential in the social construction of beliefs and attitudes regarding masculinity (p. 386). Messner et al. (2000) write about how “aggressive players get the prize” and “nice guys finish last” (p. 385) as they use examples of sports commentators praising athletes for their aggressive abilities (p. 386). The song lyrics in the commercial summarize these ideas flawlessly: “I love quarterbacks eatin’ dirt / Pom poms and short skirts... And those twins!” (Longo, 2010). These lyrics reflect that what’s valued is football, football players who display “toughness,” and women with sex appeal.

Messner et al. (2000) look at how the exposure to media – where the focus is exceeding expectations of masculinity by belittling women and harming both yourself and others – affects young boys who consume more sports television than girls and, therefore, more commercials like these as well (p. 380). As they outline the “Televised Sports Manhood Formula,” Messner et al. (2000) describe that one becomes a “real man,” when the “voices of authority – white males – say he is” (p. 390). They write that even when a man achieves the perfect life of a beer commercial

– cold beer, nice car, game on, and a beautiful woman – “he will be reminded by these... voices of authority just how fragile this real manhood really is” (Messner et al., 2000, p. 390).

Don Cherry on Women at Hockey Games.

https://youtu.be/yRm_K9OpYbo?feature=shared

“Don Cherry on Women at Hockey Games” (Natureboy24, 2006) is an early 2000s Sportsnet broadcast segment where Don Cherry perfectly exemplifies the ways in which dominant groups control social discourse, muting certain groups in the process. He receives a dirty look from his co-host as he begins the segment with “you women are going to get mad at me...” (Natureboy24, 2006). He goes on to explain that female fans are always the ones to get hit during games as he tells the story of seeing a “poor lady” get hit with a puck, and then states “when you come to the games, keep your eyes on the puck” (Natureboy24, 2006). This relates to the theme of the role of women in sports media, where they are looked down upon and stereotyped because of their gender. The way that Don Cherry describes how it is “always a woman yapping away” (Natureboy24, 2006) comes from a misogynistic place, as he blames women for getting hit with balls and pucks rather than framing it as a risk that comes with being a fan, no matter your gender. His co-host attempts to correct him by saying it’s not just women who get hit, and that both genders enjoy the game so you

can't solely blame women. Don Cherry responds to this by calling him a "wimp" (Natureboy24, 2006), further proving the traditional values of masculinity and femininity that are present in his broadcasts, which can be looked at through the lens of the "Televised Sports Manhood Formula" (Messner et al., 2000). Both Don Cherry's blame towards women, as well as the words he uses to describe these female spectators, illustrate morals that are rooted in place of gender inequality. He blames women as a whole for not paying attention, describing how there is something characteristically wrong with them that causes them to get hit with pucks. Don Cherry exhibits the ideas put forward by Messner et al. (2000) that describe physical play and culture as a "man's world" (p. 382) where women have no role unless they're providing sexiness and desirability.

*Hockey Night in Canada broadcast: **Sportsnet Announces 2024-25 NHL Broadcast Schedules for Canucks, Flames, Oilers, and Maple Leafs | Rogers Sports & Media***
Jennifer Botterill on HNIC:
<https://youtu.be/Z3wpATDqY8s?feature=shared>

The first link of this entry takes you to the schedule posted on Rogers Sports & Media for the broadcasting of the 2024-25 NHL season. The Canucks, Oilers, Flames, and Leafs have no women doing the play-by-play announcements, game analysts, or host; there are 14 men and zero women in

these jobs. According to the Televised Sports Manhood Formula article from Messner et al. (2000), “white males are the voices of authority” and, once again, “sport is a man’s world” (p. 382). It is common in the world of sports broadcasters to have the majority of the “face” to be primarily made up of white men, as Messner et al. (2000) note that sports commentary and analysis in the NFL, wrestling, NBA, Extreme sports, and MLB were performed solely by white men (p. 382). This broadcast schedule reflects these same issues – a lack of representation of women in sports media; the reason for these problems is the male-dominated culture pushing false ideas that sports are exclusive to men and that women aren’t welcomed in the world of sport. Messner et al. (2000) state that “images or discussion of women athletes is almost entirely absent in the sports programs that boys watch most” (p. 382). Female athletes receive far less time devoted to broadcasting their games than men, making it more difficult for them to be recognized and compete with men who play the same sport (Messner et al., 2000, p. 382).

Not only do women have to fight to be seen by their male counterparts at a professional athlete level, but at a professional workplace level too. For example, there are very few women on the pre-game/ post-game/ intermission expert “panels” in the NHL; Jennifer Botterill is one of the only women on Hockey Night in Canada and can be seen on the Sportsnet broadcast

where she is the only woman at a table of her male peers. This ties in with “The Televised Sports Manhood Formula” article (Messner et al., 2000) as it is clear that male voices steer social discourse within sports media.

The Cavinder Twins, Livvy Dunne: The Cavinder Twins, the NCAA, and NIL Policy

This article published by *The Free Press* takes a look at the lives of twin basketball athletes Haley and Hannah Cavinder and the brand they’ve created across social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram (Strauss, 2023). The author talks about NIL (name, image, and likeness) which was previously barred from the NCAA, it refers to the right of college athletes to make money from utilizing their name, image and likeness. Strauss (2023) discusses NIL and the marketing of white blonde girls – such as the Cavinder Twins – over more “masculine” (and successful) black players. Strauss (2023) states that the “athletes now profiting are not necessarily the ones with the most athletic prowess. Or at least that’s the case when it comes to female athletes” (para. 9). This draws attention to the type of femininity that is marketed through sports media; it’s no longer about athleticism and skill, instead the focus is on very traditional, idealized white femininity. Strauss (2023) also comments on Louisiana State University gymnast Livvy Dunne, drawing comparisons between her and the Cavinder Twins’ similar “girl-

next-door” look and questioning if being a “button-nose blonde” (para. 51) is the secret to successful NIL deals – with Dunne having the second highest NIL money for a college athlete next to Bronny James (Strauss, 2023, para. 52).

While the attention drawn by athletes like the Cavinder Twins and Livvy Dunne certainly generates income and is an important part of their identity, these women also receive backlash for the way they present themselves. The Twins responded to comments of disappointment from Stanford women’s basketball coach Tara VanDerveer, stating that “in this world, we need more powerful women empowering women... So why are you knocking girls that are being successful?” (Strauss, 2023, para. 58). VanDerveer’s opinion is valid considering the battles women have had to go through in order to be a part of the world of sport we know today, it would be hard not to render that progress as meaningless. The topic of how sports women should be portrayed is complicated because there are powerful and empowered female athletes working to create their own athletic identity, but to some extent, they lean in into the male gaze and sexualize themselves in order to sell their “brand” to male consumers and gain “power.” Another point of difficulty is the lack of choice these female athletes have; Toffoletti & Thorpe (2018) discuss the “athletic labour of femininity,” illustrating the extent that female athletes go to in

order to uphold an image where they are painted in ways that highlight physical appearance and their femininity is emphasized (p. 312). The strategies and aesthetic labour behind how female athletes portray themselves online are described by Toffoletti & Thorpe (2018) as they note the exhaustion that comes with adhering to gendered notions regarding what femininity looks like (p. 312). Similarly, Kane et al. (2013) discuss expectations of how female athletes should be portrayed, and the danger of emphasizing certain beliefs as to what femininity “should” look like; it discredits women who worked hard to become professional athletes, not to be judged based on appearance.

“Sh*t Soccer Girls Say” -

<https://youtu.be/YivPJnsoe9c?feature=shared>

“Sh*t Soccer Girls Say” was posted on YouTube by *SoccerGrlProbs* in 2012; the video humorously imitates relatable moments such as using the “I can’t – I have soccer” excuse or, blaming teammates for using your shorts, just to end up finding them in your own locker. *SoccerGrlProbs* is a group of D1 female soccer athletes who began posting humorous content for their Twitter audience to connect with. The attention they received led them to expand and produce content on other platforms like YouTube, podcasts, and starting their own merchandise line. Through their light-hearted, authentic,

relatable content, *SoccerGrlProbs* promotes the wellbeing of these young athletes, encouraging and reminding them of the sense of belonging in the world of sport. This content serves as an outlet for young female athletes who are navigating themselves through a sports world that often misrepresents them. It is necessary for these athletes to have a sense of autonomy, online platforms like SoccerGrlProbs create a space where triumphs and struggles are recognized and normalized.

Heineken (2015) discusses how *SoccerGrlProbs* fosters and supports athletic identity, as social networking spaces (SNS) provide a place to map and solidify self-concept through self-expression and social comparison (p. 1036). Similarly, in the textbook, O'Brien & Szeman (2018) note how the rise of social media and new communications methods create endless opportunities for people to engage with content and other people that they can relate to (p. 339). This is crucial in the context of female athletes, who already struggle with representation in mainstream media. By providing an authentic, positive, relatable platform where young athletes are validated, *SoccerGrlProbs* not only fosters a supportive space, but also challenges conventional attitudes towards sportswomen. The success of *SoccerGrlProbs* illustrates how online presence helps to support young female athletes and also encourages them to own their experiences with pride

The role of women in sports media is explored throughout these entries as I began with commercials from the 1990/2000s and describe how the same values – despite the time period, country, etc. – are projected in different ways through examples such as sports media and broadcasting, identity issues and portrayals of femininity, as well as the rejection of these stereotypes that redefine what it means to be a female athlete. This project considers the ways women are represented through examples in popular culture where it's clear that the portrayal of women is consistent with the themes of the “Televised Sports Manhood Formula” discussed by Messner et al. (2000). This concept is relevant when we consider present in examples of sports media like questionable comments made by Don Cherry, the lack of female representation in the Hockey Night in Canada broadcast, or commercials such as the Old Milwaukee Swedish Bikini Team (ASO Advt., 2008 & Adam N, 2006), or Coors Lights “Here's to Football” (Longo, 2010). The themes Messner et al. (2000) describe draw attention to the heterosexual white-male-dominated perspectives that dictate how athletes and sport are expressed and perceived; these concepts can be used to understand sports media such as the ones I've discussed.

Moving on from misogynistic commercials and broadcasters, while progress has certainly been made for women in the world of sport, female athletes still struggle to find their

place. Kane et al. (2013) examined how professional female athletes establish their self-concept in sports media, specifically focusing on the ways the “selling sex” aspect of women’s sports disregards who they are as athletes (p. 274). Likewise, Toffoletti & Thorpe (2018) defined the “athletic labour of femininity” (p. 312) that athletes such as the Cavinder Twins and Livvy Dunne experience as they navigate their self-concept through a world where they are automatically disadvantaged because of their gender; through these representations and expectations of female athletes, they are pushed to adhere to traditional attitudes of idealized femininity.

As female athletes battle stereotypes and reject the standards placed upon them, these athletes find new outlets for self-expression, *SoccerGrlProbs* for example. This platform is discussed by Heineken (2015) as a safe place that fosters the identity of female athletes through humour and compassion. The theme of media representations of female athletes is extremely relevant to popular culture as it directly has to do with gender equality, body image, self-concept, and the evolving role of women in sports and the media. A brighter future would involve more representation of non-white female athletes in the sports world, journalists or analysts who are women, and more platforms portraying realistic looks into the lives of these athletes. While there is room for growth for the role of women

in sports media, female athletes have begun to push back against these restricting stereotypes, redefining what it means to be feminine and an athlete in their own authentic way.

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