

**Examining the Effects of the Sports Media on Young Female
Athletes and their Self-Perceptions.**

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ABSTRACT

The intersection of sports media representations and young female athletes' self-perceptions was the focus of this investigation. Content analyses of sports media have documented the trivialization of female athletes. Duncan and Brummett (1993) identified two common assumptions of researchers conducting these studies. The first assumption is that the sexist content of the sports media must disempower female athletes. The second assumption is that the text of the media is univocal, that there are no other possible interpretations of the intended message. This qualitative study sought to examine the validity of these two assumptions by specifically looking at how the sports media affects young female athletes' self-perceptions. The participants in this study were players (N=14) in an under-15 Olympic Development Program girls' soccer team. In-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with each individual. Interview questions were formulated after reviewing the previous research in the areas of sports media and self-perceptions. The analysis involved the identification and interpretation of emergent themes. Findings indicated that this group of young athletes did not feel the sports media negatively impacted their perceptions of their ability, the importance of their participation, the importance of their sport, or their perceptions of females in sport. Instead, they demonstrated an ability to use their "perceived expertise" to intensively critique, or filter, the sports media's presentations of women in sport and particularly soccer. They believed they could discriminate between accurate portrayals and those that were simply untrue. These girls also recognized that most individuals do not have the same level of expertise to filter through this information. The inability of the general public to filter greatly concerned many of these girls. In short, these findings did not support the general assumptions identified by Duncan and Brummett (1993). The sports media did not negatively impact these girls' self-perceptions. Further, these girls were able to find multiple uses and interpretations of sport media. These findings do support the previous theoretical predictions of Harter (1978) and Bandura (1986). The use of perceived expertise as a filter supports theoretical predictions that personal experience supersedes vicarious experience when determining self-perceptions. This study would suggest that a positive participation experience is far more influential on self-perceptions than media portrayals.

INTRODUCTION

American sport culture is slowly making room for its female competitors. However, the perception that "sport is for men" is still prevalent (Ireland, 1993). Female athletes are commonly viewed as inferior and less legitimate when compared to their male counterparts. The male-orientation of athletics is strongly echoed within the sports media (Sabo & Jansen 1992). A plethora of content analyses have shown that traditional portrayals of women in the sports media trivialize the efforts of women through the use of language, amount of coverage, and by the lack of portrayals showing women as "serious" athletes (Leath & Lumpkin, 1992; Boutillier & San Giovanni, 1993; Oglesby, 1978; Duncan, 1993; Messner, 1988). Coverage of the female athlete continually connects the athlete to her femininity. It is rare that women are shown as just being athletes without being shown as also being moms, wives, or models. There have been some recent exceptions such as Nike's "Athletes are athletes" campaign, but the overwhelming trend is towards trivialization.

There is almost a complete absence of research within the sports media literature that directly examines the relationship between the sports media and the audience. In fact, only two studies (Bruce, 1993; Duncan & Brummett, 1993) have investigated previous sports media researchers' assumptions concerning this relationship. Duncan & Brummett (1993) identified two common assumptions made by many researchers. The first assumption is that the sports media *must* disempower women and girls, and the second is that the audience can interpret only *one* meaning from the text. There has been no solid research proving either assumption. Although it is a logical line of reasoning, it is astounding that so much power and influence has been attributed to the sports media, and so little to the viewer.

In the area of sport and self-perceptions, Harter (1978, 1990) proposes that perceptions of competence lead to future motivation and that successful mastery attempts lead to positive self-perceptions of ability. She found that "significant others" were a secondary influence on self-perceptions and perceived importance. Bandura (1986) also found performance accomplishments to have the strongest influence on self-perceptions and that vicarious experience, or significant others, were a secondary influence. Research has consistently determined that although vicarious experiences can influence self-perceptions, self-referenced experiences are far more influential on self-perceptions.

Traditional definitions of "significant other" have included parents, coaches, and peers, but a few media researchers have referred to the media in the same context (Real, 1989; Pecora, 1992). This study

recognizes that a link between sports media and role models has been established. Also, a link between role models and self-perceptions has been established. It would be logical to suggest that a link between sports media and self-perceptions should exist. There is a research "gap" between sports media and athletes' interpretation (Duncan & Brummett, 1993; Fejes, 1992; Duncan, 1993a). Therefore, this study sought to specifically identify the impact of sports media on young female athletes' self-perceptions.

METHOD

Participants

The participants for this study were fourteen 14 year-old female soccer players from an Olympic Development Program soccer team. Organized soccer playing experience ranged from five to ten years. These players were selected for this study because: a) their ODP participation indicates a strong commitment to participate in sport; b) this age group is still influenced by the media; and, c) this is also the age where many girls cease to participate in sport.

Interview Format

The initial areas of inquiry were established by a review of literature. They included: a) personal playing history, b) self-perceptions of themselves as athletes, c) perceptions of role models, d) perceptions of the sports media, and e) their relationship with the media. Recognizing the "discovery" nature of research, it was understood that the first questions were not always "correct", and that the researcher would allow areas of inquiry to evolve. Informal notes also identified possible areas of inquiry.

Procedures

The researcher gained entry and established a relationship with these athletes through coaching them throughout the ODP season. Informed consent forms were obtained from parents and participants. The researcher reviewed literature on interview techniques and conducted two practice interviews with volunteers. The researcher's interview technique was reviewed, and then formal interviews were conducted and audiotape recorded. The majority of these sessions occurred during the final month of team training in a setting as quiet and private as possible.

Analysis

Each interview was transcribed verbatim. The researcher read each transcript several times, became highly familiar with the text, and highlighted areas of interest. The determination of highlighted areas was dictated by themes found in the review of literature or by a sense of salience determined by the researcher. If unsure of a passage's importance, the researcher erred on the side of inclusion. The highlighted areas, or "chunks", of text were then labeled and grouped by theme. Themes were either recurring or singular. The researcher did not "force" a chunk of text into a category. The data was then reviewed and conclusions were drawn.

FINDINGS

The purpose of this investigation was to determine the perceived relationship between these participants and the sports media. Seven themes emerged that defined this particular relationship.

The relationship was more interpretive than previously assumed.

These participants indicated that this was not a one-way relationship. They did not blindly accept whatever message they perceived the media was sending. Instead, they would "pick and choose". They would discard and dismiss messages they felt to be incorrect or inconsistent with their experience and embrace messages they felt would enhance their self-perceptions.

These athletes were acutely aware of the state of the media and the power of media.

The impressions of the participants paralleled the content analyses conducted by previous researchers. They noticed that there was less coverage of women, that the coverage was trivializing, that there was little variety, that more "appropriate" sports were shown, that women's events weren't "prime time", and that the language used was also different. Their attitude about this state of the sports media was one of varied discontent.

These girls relied on their "perceived expertise" to judge the sports media.

These participants felt they were truly experts on girls playing soccer and felt legitimate in judging the media within the context of their personal experiences. More than one participant used the phrase "when in reality..." to dismiss a media portrayal.

They recognized that people lacking expertise also lack the ability to filter.

There was a significant concern expressed that society was internalizing "bad" information from the media because they lacked the expertise to filter. These girls recognized the ability of the media to influence

opinions by citing how they personally were influenced by other types of media when they knew they weren't experts in the topic.

These female athletes identified media as a potential tool because of its influential nature.

Recognizing that the media was probably perpetuating society's luke-warm embrace of women in sports, these participants also surmised that a reversal of content could instigate a reversal of societal opinion. They viewed the media as a potential tool to teach the "uneducated" about the legitimacy of female sport participation.

Despite problems with the content of sports media, these girls were still able to find useful information.

These participants felt they could filter through the text and "pull out" useful portrayals and information. They cited an increase of motivation from watching male soccer player perform skills that they also used. Visual portrayals were seen as more useful because it was easier to pull good information. They acknowledged that portrayals of women would be more useful than portrayals of men in similar situations because a woman's performance seemed more "possible" for them. They also wanted to see more quality coverage of women, but not at the expense of men's coverage.

They viewed their relationship with media as one dictated by themselves.

There was little perceived impact on self by these participants. The general feeling was that the media, "was not going to change how I feel about what I do". Clearly, they relied on their previous experience to determine that feeling and not the media.

DISCUSSION

This group of athletes demonstrated that the influence of the media can be superseded by previous knowledge. This in stark contrast to previous assumptions about sports media (Boutillier & San Giovanni, 1983; Theberge, 1991; Theberge & Cronk, 1986). Apparently, the "message" in the media is not univocal, but rather it is contingent upon viewer's knowledge of that subject. These athletes were "experts" in soccer and young women in sport who clearly demonstrated the ability to "pick and choose". "False" representations were discarded and not "allowed" to influence self-perceptions. This contradicts predictions of sports media researchers. The preferred message is not automatically internalized and the media is not univocal. The assumptions identified by Duncan & Brummett (1993) were not validated by this study.

This ability to filter does "fit" within sport and self-perception research. Specifically, the use of self-referenced criteria to assign degree of influence fits the hierarchy established by Harter's and Bandura's previous research. These athletes used their own soccer experience as the primary influence on their self-perceptions. These athletes' "attempts at mastery" and "personal experience" have created their "filter". The media, which presents vicarious experience, is limited to a secondary influence.

It is apparent that the acquisition of perceived expertise for these athletes is not a result of age, but rather of experience. It is also apparent that this filtering process is a conscious process. This particular audience was astutely aware of the media's potential to influence perceptions, and in turn, was aware that they were actively deflecting this influence when they deemed appropriate. These young athletes were not passive viewers. This is a dramatic shift of control from the media to the audience. Gantz & Wenner (1991) suggested a stronger response by women as they continued to participate in sport, however, these particular athletes were much more interpretive and critical than predicted. There was little hesitation to use labels such as "sexists", "wrong", "unfair", and "untrue".

These young female athletes' belief in their ability to critically examine soccer and more specifically stereotypes about female sport performance may have been influenced by the context of soccer. There is a "sameness" within soccer. The men's game is in most ways the same as the women's game. This "soccer is soccer" perception combined with a high-level participant experience may explain the steadfast self-perception of these athletes as experts on girls playing soccer.

This study suggests that as more female athletes continue to increase their level of participation in all sports, the viewing sophistication of the general female athlete population will continue to increase. This study would also suggest that ensuring a positive sport experience for young female athletes is far more effective in developing positive self-perceptions than trying to send the "right" message through the sports media.