

Media Representation of Women in Sports

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Abstract

Background: Throughout history, the media has represented female athletes in ways that promote body image issues among young women athletes looking up to those who are represented. The media is one of the largest platforms of dispersing information, so it is important that what is being presented is correct and appropriate.

Objective: The aim of this study is to determine how these pieces of media affect young women athletes and the ways that these pieces of media can be changed to prevent body image issues.

Design and Method: The research method is based on current literature regarding the way the media misrepresents women athletes, the way Black women athletes are significantly misrepresented, and how the way the media portrays women is damaging for young women who are using these pieces of media for inspiration. Specific journal articles and gathered information from the news media were analyzed and reported in the Results section. The research questions are as followed: *How does race also play into the misrepresentation of women in sports? How is the way we see female athletes in the media right now incorrect? How is the way women are portrayed in the media damaging for young women?*

Results: The significance of this study is that the way the media represents female athletes is both misleading and damaging. Many young women athletes use these media pieces as either inspiration or confidence, and unfortunately, the exact opposite happens. Body image issues are pervasive, especially in young women athletes, and new forms of media representing women athletes must be developed.

Conclusions: Individuals, especially young women athletes, must realize that most pieces of media featuring women athletes are almost always altered in some way, such as sports posters of women being extremely glamorized and sexualized with an unrealistic beauty standard. Pieces of media featuring women athletes in their element with no photoshop or any changes need to become more present in society.

Keywords: *Body image, media representation, women athletes, self-esteem, sports, Black women in sports, false representation, sexualization*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The media is one of the largest platforms for distributing information globally, regardless of whether this information is accurate. One of the most significant parts of media is sports media, and throughout history, there have been issues with the way the media portrays and represents female athletes. Since sports had emerged many years ago, women were forced to take the back seat as men became dominant in almost every sport simply because society thought they were stronger and better athletes. When women started participating in sports, they received lots of backlash, primarily for reasons out of anyone's control. As a result, women athletes started to become sexualized due to the way commentators described women for their build and appearance rather than their athletic ability. This sexualization can be seen in many sporting matches, such as the 2015 Australian Open, where when the men were walking onto the court, they were described as strong titans.

In contrast, the women were described as petite little girls at a sporting match (Quayle, 2019). When examining the reasons behind the misrepresentation of women athletes by the media, some major themes emerge. These themes can be categorized as the way race can play into the misrepresentation of women, the way women are currently represented is incorrect, and the way these representations can damage young women athletes using these pieces of media as inspiration. Further exploring these themes can help the reader understand why the misrepresentation of female athletes in the media can have a negative effect on those who are watching.

The way Black women are represented has added an entirely new issue to the representation of women athletes by the media. Black women in sports such as Serena Williams and Simone Biles have faced hate and backlash simply for their skin color and muscular build. In

reality, these are the women we need to see being represented more rather than glamorized and sexualized images of unrealistic body standards. A study was done to determine what media pieces promote body image issues and what promotes body confidence. The results were that pieces of media with extremely fit and skinny women with glamorized edits and photoshop promoted a higher level of body shame. In contrast, the pieces of media featuring raw, unedited photos of real athletes promoted higher levels of body confidence (Reichart Smith, 2015).

The way women are currently represented in the media is a topic for research as it is very important to show correct and non-damaging pieces of media. It is evident that women take a backseat when it comes to the sporting world, and this can be seen in various sporting matches such as the 2018 Commonwealth Games. This event is an excellent example to understand further the research question as both men and women were given equal opportunity to win awards and receive media attention; however, it was obvious that gender segregation was still present. The female athletes were depicted in shallow ways, and the photos taken of them were more glamorized and beauty-focused than showing their athletic ability (Pavlidis, 2020). This event indicates that regardless of equal opportunity present in sporting matches, there will still be some form of gender segregation giving women a disadvantage.

The fact that the way women athletes are represented can damage the mental health of future young women athletes is enough cause for research. There is no doubt that social media and the media itself have affected young women's self-esteem and body image due to glamorized and sexualized pieces of media being used to represent female athletes. To make this a more personal research journey, I had multiple conversations with my peers, who are also young female athletes, to firsthand see the effects of the media. Each individual I spoke to said that what they see in the media regarding women athletes is misleading and incorrect. Logging on to

social media every day and seeing extremely skinny and fit models with unrealistic body standards promotes a higher sense of insecurity. So how can we find the right way to represent women athletes without being shallow and glamorizing something that should not be glamorized?

I personally chose to study this topic because I have been a victim of body image issues due to what I have seen in the media regarding female athletes. I am an athlete, and most of the women around me are too, so I want women to feel secure and confident and not have these glamorized pieces of media constantly thrown in our face while we work extremely hard to achieve our goals. The number of times a situation like this can lead to depression or suicide is way too high, so there needs to be a change in the way the media decides to represent women athletes. Women should not have to fear looking “too muscular” or “too manly.” These are ideas all promoted by men to keep themselves superior and to have control over women. When the media has a large amount of power and is one of the largest platforms for distributing information, it is important to highlight the issues within the media, so they do not repeat in the future.

It is very hard to determine what is real and what is not when looking at a piece of media; it is extremely simple to get false information out; in this case, the false information is the misrepresentation of women athletes. The media is a very large platform, so it must spur some questions. I have decided to focus on these main three:

RQ#1: *How does race also play into the misrepresentation of women in sports?*

RQ#2: *How is the way we see female athletes in the media right now incorrect?*

RQ#3: *How is the way women are portrayed in the media damaging for young women?*

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The way the media represents women in sports can have a negative effect on young women's self-esteem and body image. The media is viewed as a primary source of information and news, which can lead to skewed opinions. So, how the media portrays women is how society will view women, and the way women are portrayed is usually incorrect.

Femininity and Race

In the media, female athletes are unable to catch a break. Women are constantly under pressure from trying to find a middle ground between too masculine and too feminine, only for the sole reason of the opinion of men. Women have dealt with an extreme social disadvantage throughout history because men have been viewed as superior, causing women to lack the same opportunity as men. If they have feminine personalities, they will be considered a diva; however, if they act more masculine, they will be viewed as 'manly' and 'unattractive' (Quayle, 2017, p. 4). An example of this in Quayle's (2017) research dates back to the early 2000s when Serena and Venus Williams rose to the top of the tennis world. The media would talk about Serena (a Black woman) compared to Anna Kournikova (a white woman) during commentary was very different and racially charged. Kournikova was extremely hyper feminized by commentators because of her slight petite build, while Serena and Venus were compared to Amazons and commented the most on their physical looks (Quayle, 2017, p.6). Serena Williams is one of the greatest athletes of all time, and she has a very muscular and toned build. Her entire career, she has been called a 'monkey' or a 'transgender man' simply because of her build and skin color. Black women across the entire sporting world have received backhanded compliments regarding their build, such as gymnast Simone Biles. Commentators will seem like they are admiring a woman's build while degrading them at the same time. This issue can hurt the development of

young Black women considering that they see the greatest female athlete of all time constantly getting harassed and threatened due to her physique. Women will not want to work as hard, fearing they will become 'too muscular' or 'manly,' ultimately thinking that they need to fall under a man's category of what they believe the perfect woman should be; however, it is not a man's business of what a woman should be. Women constantly trying to find the small in-between of what is 'too girly' or 'too manly' only serves to continue the tradition of men deciding how a woman should be represented.

But We Already Do See Women in the Media?

It is true that women are seen in the media; however, when we compare this amount to men's representation in the media, it is almost invisible, and the way women are represented in the first place is almost always incorrect or inappropriate. This statement can be supported by one single sporting match, the 2018 Golfsixes event in England. This event involved 27 men in the men's European Golf tour and only five women invited by the men's team to compete against one another (Bowes, 2019, p. 664). Just the fact that the women were asked in the first place was a historical moment for female representation in the golfing world as women did not get much coverage in the sport before this match. During this event, the women got a decent amount of media coverage, still nowhere equal to the men. However, every time the women were spoken about, it was always in the spotlight of one of the male athletes, so while they were getting the coverage, it was only because of the male athletes. This coverage is an example of women being represented in the media but the wrong ways.

Additionally, while the commentators discussed why the men and women were at the tournament, there was blatant and inappropriate sexism. The men and women were brought together to play against one another; however, when the commentators discussed the men, they

mainly focused on how much pressure is on the men and why the tournament is so important to them. On the other hand, when the commentators mentioned the women, they talked about them as if they had no expectations and were only there for fun because they invited them (Bowes, 2019, 665).

While on the topic of golf, it is surprising that this is a sport with gender segregation. McGinnis et al. (2008) states that golf would be the ideal sport for gender equality in sports given the fact that there is nothing that gives men an advantage in the sport; it is practically the same across both genders. The basis of the sport of golf does not represent the theme of hegemonic masculinity compared to other sports such as basketball, soccer, and hockey. The reason this sport is gender-segregated is that the community surrounding the sport of golf has become a ‘gentlemen's only clubhouse,’ which has excluded women from practicing golf at certain clubhouses (Bowes, 2019, p. 667). This almost aggressive push to make this sport gender-segregated can even be seen in professional golf tournaments, such as Vijay Singh’s opinion on the inclusion of Annika Sorenstam in the 2003 Bank of America Colonial Tournament. Singh stated: What is she going to prove by playing She’s the best woman golfer in the world, and I want to emphasize ‘woman.’ We have our tour for men, and they have their tour ... I hope she misses the cut ... because she doesn’t belong out here (Associated Press, 2003; Bowes, 2019, p.667). This incredibly sexist comment is one of the reasons golf is a gender-segregated sport when realistically men have no physical advantage at the sport; it is just a way for men to be dominant when they feel as if a woman can do better than them.

Equal Play, Equal Pay

As gender segregation in sports has become very prominent, one must wonder why this happens. Media researchers have tried for years to determine the difference between

discrimination and social disadvantages. To recall an issue where this was brought up, one must read famous tennis player Novak Djokovic's opinion on whether or not women athletes should be paid the same amount as male athletes. Djokovic stated: 'We have many more spectators in the men's tennis matches. That's one of the reasons why maybe we should get awarded more' (Killelea 2016; Archer, 2019, p. 423). While some found his statement inappropriate and sexist, one must also consider that spectators and sponsors are among the main reasons male athletes are paid so much. This statement leads back to the fact that women are at a social disadvantage in the sporting world. Women have hardly gotten any media coverage and attention compared to men, so women athletes are not as popular as most male athletes, which leads to the pay gap between male and female athletes (Archer, 2019). There is a minimal number of female athletes who get paid as much as male athletes, but the ones who do are the most famous and talented athletes globally, such as Serena Williams. Williams has received numerous sponsors and deals, which is why she is one of the highest-paid female athletes; however, men are able to achieve this at a much easier level due to the social disadvantage of women in sports.

Sports and Mental Health

The way women are depicted in the media can have an effect on the mental health of young female athletes, such as collegiate athletes who develop self-esteem issues from what they see on social media, magazines, etc. A study was done to determine the correlation between media and body image. A series of images featuring fit, thin, and most of all oversexualized models were given to female collegiate athletes, and they were asked to report their level of esteem after. They were also given a set of pictures of just performance athletes that were not overly glamorized and focused on the sport itself and were asked to report their levels of self-esteem after (Reichart, 2015). After gathering the results, researchers found that the participants

reported higher levels of body satisfaction and less self-objectification when viewing the images with high-performance athletes that were not glamorized and oversexualized (Reichert, 2015). These results only further prove that there is a need for these types of images in sports, and there needs to be a decrease in the images of women portrayed to be girly and sexy because it only damages the self-esteem of young women.

Chapter 3: Methods

This specific study design can be considered descriptive and qualitative. This study covers a large span of time as I discuss how women have been misrepresented in the media throughout history. Since the moment sports began, this issue has been present; however, I attempted to make my research as recent as possible to provide the most accurate information. The research I obtained for this study was mainly from scholarly peer-reviewed articles; however, I also obtained information from sports journals, magazines, and popular news sources. These articles and other areas of research were found by using the Purchase College online library. The specific sources used are: Gale, Opposing Viewpoints in Context, Academic OneFile, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and the ProQuest Research Library. I also used my social media to see how the media represents women in the present, real-time.

As this is a qualitative study, I decided to develop a few research questions to help further explain my topic. The research questions are as followed:

RQ#1: *How does race also play into the misrepresentation of women in sports?*

RQ#2: *How is the way we see female athletes in the media right now incorrect?*

RQ#3: *How is the way women are portrayed in the media damaging for young women?*

To find the information I am looking for, I decided to put specific terms in research databases to find the relevant scholarly articles, journals, magazines, etc. Some of the terms I used were: *Women and Sports, Black Women and Sports, Media and Mental Health, Misrepresentation of Female Athletes, Gender Segregation in Sports, Wage Gap in Sports, Sports and Mental Health, Social Media and Mental Health, Racism in Sports, Femininity and Sports, Women and Sexism in Sports, Social Disadvantages in Sports, Discrimination in Sports, and Media Representation of Women*. After reading these articles and gathering information for

research, I decided to categorize them into the following three: racism in sports, media misrepresentation, and mental health.

Black Women in Sports - Research in this category focused on how Black women were treated unfairly in sports simply due to their skin color. In addition, the research resulted in revealing the way white women were described and represented compared to the way Black women were represented.

Incorrect Representation - Research in this area resulted in finding information regarding how women athletes are currently represented in the media. The articles in this section all focused on how the ways women are portrayed can have a negative effect on young women who use these pieces of media as inspiration and motivation. One specific study involved showing different images of women in ads (one image of a very skinny and toned fitness model and the other being a more natural, less edited, and glamorized image of a female athlete) and seeing these images' affect women. The results showed that the subjects reported higher levels of insecurity and body image when viewing the image of the skinny and oversexualized model. However, when considering the less glamorized and more natural photos of the women athletes, the subjects reported a higher level of body confidence.

Media and Mental Health - Researching this category resulted in finding articles all quite similar that discuss how the media can damage the mental health of young women athletes. The articles served to explain what pieces of media can negatively affect mental health, one example being the study discussed in the last section. This section was probably the most interesting to research as it is trying to prove that almost all pieces of media that exist involving women athletes are representing them incorrectly, and it shows the effect this can have on the future of women athletes.

I decided to research this topic as I think it is essential for the right pieces of media to exist for female athletes for motivation and inspiration instead of insecurity and body image issues. The history of sports has always either excluded women or tried to highlight their femininity rather than their actual skill. I believe that changing the way women are represented in the media can significantly affect those who view these media pieces. The media is one of the largest platforms in the world and has the power to pretty much show and advertise what they want and when they want. While there is no change, I believe it is possible to change the mindset of women athletes being oversexualized, glamorized, and focus on their athletic ability rather than their level of femininity.

The limitations of my research involved the use of time. As the class I am taking that involved writing this paper is only eight weeks, I probably did not get as much information as possible. Additionally, given the pandemic, it was impossible to go to a library or have conversations with other individuals, so my research is only taken from online peer-reviewed scholarly articles. However, since the history of my topic has been occurring since the beginning of sports, I was able to obtain a lot of helpful information.

I plan to use this research to discover how the media portrays women and the negative effect on those who are watching.

Chapter 4: Results

RQ#1: How does race also play into the misrepresentation of women in sports?

While women athletes altogether face misrepresentation in the media, Black women are put at an extreme disadvantage. They are forced to face both sexism and racism simply for their athletic ability and skin color.

Since Black women had been enslaved many years ago, there has always been a sort of control over Black women and their bodies, giving them no sense of self-determination. White slave owners took control of the bodies of Black women by forcing them to produce crops. Their labor was exploited simply for the gain of their white owners (Martin, 2018). Many slave owners also took advantage of their women slaves sexually and abused and raped them for most of their life.

While slavery is not present in the United States today, Black women athletes still struggle to control their bodies. For this topic, former world number one tennis player Serena Williams will be used as an example. Serena Williams has spent years perfecting her body to make it as powerful as possible to perfect her game. However, groups of people such as officials for tennis matches have found her extremely strong build as a threat and act almost intimidated. This intimidation of her muscular body has caused Serena to be accused of taking steroids and has been forced to take multiple drug tests (Martin, 2018). Since slavery emerged, Black women and Black people were viewed as property, and this theme still lingers in the present day by forcing Black athletes to take drug tests due to their muscular build. Results show that Black women athletes face a large amount of racism and sexism out of their control.

RQ#2: How is the way we see female athletes in the media right now incorrect?

It is no doubt that we do see female athletes already represented in the media. However, just because we see women in the media does not mean that this is the correct and progressive representation. What is seen in the media now regarding female athletes is highly edited, glamorized, and sexualized images of women with unrealistic body standards. This media coverage is why there is an incorrect representation of women athletes, which will be further discussed using peer-reviewed articles.

The theme of incorrect representation in the current media of women athletes can be seen in the 2015 Australian Open men's and women's singles final. First, it will be helpful to compare the entrances of the men and women. When the men were walking on the court surrounded by applause, the commentators referred to the men's match as a clash between two titans and was described as a very physical and powerful game. On the other hand, when the women walked onto the court, the male commentators described the women's 'diva-like personalities rather than their athletic ability. They even asked the girls to give a 'twirl' for the audience (Quayle et al., 2017).

Another event where the women athletes were represented incorrectly can be seen in the GolfSixes event in England, which involved 27 male golfers and five female golfers. The article this information was taken from is extremely useful. This specific event was the first time the European Tour invited women to play and sparked a change in the way women are represented in the media. This writing stated that only seven percent of media coverage in the United Kingdom is dedicated to female sports (Bowes & Kitching, 2019). It is also interesting as one

would assume that golf would be the least gender-segregated sport as it does not require an extreme amount of skill and muscle compared to other sports such as basketball.

During this tournament, the women did receive a large amount of media coverage. Still, some would disagree that this was the correct way to give these women representation because they were in the men's spotlight (Bowes & Kitching, 2019). This situation is a bit of a double-edged sword because while the women did receive a good amount of media coverage, would the same results have happened if the event involved only women? This event drew attention to the way the women were represented and realized that the way the women received media coverage was not correct due to the fact that they were in the spotlight of the men.

RQ#3: How is the way women are portrayed in the media damaging for young women?

The media is one of the largest platforms for distributing information globally, so it is no wonder that young women athletes use pieces of media involving women athletes as inspiration and motivation. Unfortunately, these media pieces are so harshly edited that they provide an unrealistic body standard to those watching. Looking at media pieces involving sports and fitness goals that are almost impossible to reach can create a sense of body image issues and low self-esteem.

A study was conducted to determine the effect these glamorized and edited media pieces have on collegiate athletes. Emails containing surveys of different media parts were sent to both athletic directors and coaches of college women's sports teams, and the coaches were then asked to send these emails to their athletes on the various women's sports teams. These surveys contained multiple pieces of media involving athletes portrayed in multiple ways. The athletes were then given the following statements: "I think it's acceptable for female athletes to showcase

their sexuality in the media,” “Female athletes are respected for their attractiveness,” “I feel as though people judge me for my looks than my athletic ability,” “I would pose for photographs that showcased my body in a sexual nature” (Reichert Smith, 2015). These statements were put on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1-5. The study results showed that when presented with glamorized and sexualized photos, the participants were shown to have a higher level of self-objectification (Reichert Smith, 2015). These results make it very clear that the way women are represented in the media has a negative effect on the self-esteem and body image of young women athletes.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the media's misrepresentation of women athletes and the effect that these pieces of media have on young women athletes. These pieces of media are misleading and present false information to the public that could be potentially damaging. There are multiple subtopics in this theme itself, and they have been formed into research questions used throughout this study. They can be categorized as the way race affects women athletes, the way women are currently represented, and the effects these pieces of media have on young women athletes using them for inspiration.

This study expected to make the conclusion that glamorized and oversexualized pieces of media have an effect on young women athletes and society in general, and the results satisfied these expectations. These results are acceptable as it is consistent with current and previously published knowledge and does not have any outstanding or unexpected findings. Significant patterns in this study were higher levels of body shame when viewing pieces of media featuring women athletes that are oversexualized and edited. A similar study conducted by Auburn University states: "Using several different image conditions of female athletes, the expectations of this study were that photos of athletes engaged in competition would elicit less state-like self-objectification and higher body esteem. These hypotheses were supported" (Reichert Smith, 2015, p. 294). Just about every study I researched had the same hypotheses and results, proving that there is a pattern in this specific topic.

It is difficult to find a counterargument to these topics as I feel like it is a common fact that the media alters the way famous women athletes appear, making the focus on their attractiveness and sexuality rather than their actual athletic ability. I suppose one could argue that

the way women are represented in the media is positive; however, every article I have researched has proven against this argument.

So, What - Future Research

While this topic has already been studied, there is still a significant amount of information regarding this topic that we do not know and potentially could help the mental health of young women athletes who use these pieces of media as inspiration. It is no secret that the media is one of the largest platforms for distributing information in the world, and we as a society need to have more literacy on the media, so we are able to differentiate what is altered and what is not. Additionally, these media pieces can be accessed in multiple ways, and social media apps are one of the most significant ways of being connected and communicating. The exposure shows how much-altered media we probably see on a daily basis, and it is important that correct pieces of media featuring women athletes that are not glamorized and oversexualized are distributed to save the mental health of young women.

Some may believe that these media pieces are not serious and do not affect anyone; however, the results show otherwise, revealing that these media pieces significantly damage mental health and self-esteem.

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