

**Lets Get Loud!: The Representations of Cheerleading in the Media**

by

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## Let's Get Loud!

Cheerleading comes with a goal. One team, one dream. Athletes are asked to push themselves past their boundaries to perform some of the hardest stunts permitted. A typical season is full of bruised egos and setbacks, but can also be left with satisfaction. The two minutes and thirty seconds on the mat are made up of long hard practices that go unseen. Athletes are asked to think about the team and not themselves. Cheerleading can be intimidating when watching as a bystander, but it can be the most rewarding experience one can have. A cheerleader can put in the same amount of work as any other sports team, but somehow still falls short in society and popular culture. Cheerleaders are not always viewed as a sport while standing on the sidelines next to the sports game they are cheering on. It is important call attention to how cheerleading moves through the media and space. Cheerleaders are represented without a role of empowerment, so how do we move forward in raising our voice? In this research paper, I challenge simplistic, stereotyped reading of cheerleaders by exploring media that offers a richer description of the lives and struggle of cheerleaders. I go into detail about how cheerleading came to be and how it has been shaped by some media forms. Cheerleading in the media can be seen as underrepresented. However, media can also offer a way to break this binary. The point of view of this research comes from a cheerleader, myself. Throughout my years of being highly involved with cheerleading culture, I have come to notice tropes and stereotypes associated with cheerleading in different media forms such as the internet, film, and television.

Mary Ellen Hanson describes cheerleading as “a staple in American culture” (Hanson, 1). However, where does cheerleading *really* stand in society. The symbolization of a cheerleader is

positive, yet still has negative cultural values leaving many open ended questions (Hanson, 1).

The change of time and socioeconomic status have transformed the mass culture status that have sculpted contradictory values (Hanson, 2). Popular culture has designed an image of cheerleading that reflects upon the sport. The rise of popularity of cheerleading has made the cheerleader an easily recognized symbol that represents, “youthful prestige, wholesome attractiveness, peer leadership, and popularity” (Hanson, 2). While, on the other hand, cheerleaders are also recognized as promiscuous, bimbos, shallow, and sex objects. Discourses of cheerleading in the media range from but, are not limited to sexism, sexual objectification, gender roles, and stereotypes. This research will focus on these discourses of cheerleading and how media forms help to reinforce the richer description of cheerleading in a positive way.

If I told you to full up to a lib grip pull a scorpion dismount with double down would you know what I meant? Forget everything you think you know about cheerleading. It is full of jaw dropping stunts that seem impossible. It carries the qualities of strength and willfulness as competition heats up. I find it is important to understand my background that connects me to cheerleading as there is passion buried within me behind this research.

As a child, I always knew I wanted to be a cheerleader. However, I was never given the opportunity until I reached high school. I used to practice all day and night with my next-door neighbor on her front lawn. I would attempt skills that left me sore the next day. But I was determined to make the cheer team when I reached high school. My freshman year, I remember when the try out date was released and I was so excited talking to other girls who were going to try out. I had a little doubt but, I believed that my self-trained skills would pay off. It had finally reached the day of tryouts. When the final school bell rang the locker room started piling up with

students ready to try out. Nervously, I step out into the gym where the varsity coach gave a friendly, but strict hello. The varsity coach was a strong woman without a filter. She told you what she saw and you had to fix it. These coaches were as tough as nails. After two hours of being judged based off skills and experience, the tryouts were over. At the end of the tryout, I thought I did pretty well and little doubt I wouldn't make it. I tried new stunts and tumbling that I've never tried before and for me, this alone was a dream come true.

The students that made the would be announced the following day. There it was, the paper that stood between me and my dream of finally becoming a cheerleader. I slid my finger down the paper to find out my name was not on the list. I was heartbroken and my confidence level shot right down. However, I had a backup plan. I was able to join a sideline cheer team that was local and didn't require tryouts. I took any opportunity I could in order to get on the competitive team at my high school the following season. I pushed myself and the team to best we could be. I ended up growing an unbreakable bond with this team.

The following season I tried out for my high school's competitive team again. These tryouts fell in the spring, I was still a freshman. The tryouts were mainly focused on the Varsity team. Although I knew it was a long shot I tried out, again to find out that I would not make the team. This time it was told straight up to my face. I remember feeling so hurt and almost shed a tear in front of the head coach. I stayed strong through the disappointing news and still felt that I need to make this team. Finally, fall rolls around and the cheer tryouts are once again announced. My mother was very skeptical to let me try out in fear that I would fail again. I knew that was just my mother's way of nurturing my feelings. At the tryouts this time I felt even more confident because this time I've had a real team experience. I showed my face for a third time at the

tryouts. I knew that this time I was going to make it. I fought to be the best spirited and hard working that year. That hard work paid off. I made the team. I made the JV cheer team. I was the only sophomore on the team that year, but I did not care at all. I was so proud to have become part of a highly competitive team. It granted the greatest satisfaction of completion and acceptance.

The following year I made varsity as a junior. This year was particularly difficult and tiring. Practices were more often, longer, and tougher. The goal for that year was to compete at the National High School Cheerleading Championship held at Disney World in Orlando, Florida for the first time in over 10 years. This is every competitive cheerleader's dream. It is one of the most prestigious cheerleading competition in the United States. The finalists are, “nationally televised on ESPN2 and ESPNU to over 100 million homes and 32 countries nationwide each year” (*About #UCAnationals*). The first national championship was held in 1981 and by 1983 it was being televised (Adams and Bettis, 77). Our team didn't end up making it past prelims that year, but it was a wake-up call for the program.

My senior year finally rolls around and I was named the captain of the team. Our goal again was to compete at nationals and place. I couldn't help but notice that our practices were always so late in the evening. I attended a private school where students came from places over an hour away. My teammates and I brought up this issue to our coach. She was just as annoyed as we were. She was in an ongoing debate over which sports get priority over the gym. This mainly meant volleyball players or basketball players. The cheerleaders were always pushed back to least priority. This angered my teammates and me, unfortunately, it was out of our hands.

After I graduated I couldn't let my cheer career end there, so I found a job on Craigslist that was hiring a cheer coach at an All-Star gym. All-Star cheerleading is quite different from typical school cheerleading that is more often shown in the media. Rather than cheerleaders using poms, signs and other props to lead the crowd, all-star cheerleading perform a two minute and thirty-second routine using only music. All schools have the option to compete, however, are not required to. All-star cheer was solely created to be competitive (*What is Competitive Cheerleading?*). I applied and immediately got a response that they would love to have me. This turned out to be a job I had for three years. It granted me traveling and leadership opportunities that I would not trade for the world.

I transferred to SUNY Purchase my junior year happily knowing they had a cheerleading team. To my surprise, not many people knew about it. My sister, alumni from Purchase, strongly urged me not to join the cheer team because she and her friends would mock them. I couldn't understand why. I have been a cheerleader for a few years now and understand the hard work and commitment it requires, just like any other sport. I decided I will join the team. The cheerleading team at Purchase is not considered a sport, but an intramural sport. The difference meaning that funds for the team are much less than the sports. This also means that it is less competitive than the sports teams at the school. Intramural sport teams do not hold tryouts so anyone can be on them. The practices are held three times a week for 2-3 hours which involve stunting, tumbling, and conditioning. Normally, these practices are held after classes, so after 10 pm. The reason being that there are no excuses for classes or other activities because it is not classified as a sport. Practices at this time add on extra exhaustion but shows the true dedication that some cheerleaders have.

## The History of Cheerleading

Surprisingly, cheerleading started as a male-dominated activity as it was seen as an inappropriate for women (Mortiz, 662). Teams were originated in colleges and universities. During this time institutions were made up of all-male student bodies so women weren't yet introduced to cheerleading. Up until the 1940s, cheerleading was seen as, “unsuitable for women” (Mortiz, 662). It wasn't until 1942 when women began to dominate cheerleading. During this time, men left to fight in World War II and much like baseball as portrayed in the film *A League of Their Own (1992)*, women took over. The film is the journey of a group of women who were hand picked to be apart of a national baseball team. They had to have a certain look, or potential, and skill. We follow their journey as they are made up to be bombshells. However, the female players had pure passion for simply the game itself. In relation to this film, we can look at cheerleading under a similar lens. Before the sport became feminized it was exclusively an activity for males, in which it represented normative masculinity (Adams and Bettis, 76). It was reported that cheerleading was one of the most valuable things a boy can take away from college. (Adams and Bettis, 76) Females began to enter colleges in a small number during the early 1900s. Still, by 1930 the cheer squads were still solely made up by males and were associated with masculine characteristics of athleticism and leadership (Adams and Bettis, 76). As men went off to fight in World War II women were introduced to cheerleading and were offered entrance into the sport (Bettis and Adams, 76). By the 1950s almost every high school and college had brought cheerleading to their school. At this point, it had been completely feminized. Although female cheerleaders had become more common, with feminization came sexualization (Adams and Bettis, 122). However, when the men returned from war they tried to

reclaim their spot which resulted in some colleges banning female cheerleaders in the late 1950s (Adams and Bettis, 77). Certain qualities and attributes were required for women in order to remain on a cheer squad. These traits included, "...manners, cheerfulness, and good disposition -- traits traditionally associated with women (Adams and Bettis, 77)." By the 1960s as a result of the second wave of feminist activism and the passage of Title IX in 1972 the traditional needs of women began to change. The common themes associated with the idea of cheerleading began to change with it. The aims of cheerleading began to take a turn and national cheerleading organizations dropped the pom poms and began incorporating acrobatic skills and stunts that required more athleticism than ever before ( Bettis and Adams, 77). This is more of what we see today. Tight motions, coordination and agile movements that also required strength to perform a highly ranked routine.

During the late 1900s there was a split that amplified a fetishization of cheerleaders due to two distinctly different forms of cheerleading we see in the media today. No longer was cheerleading scholastic or privately owned, but cheerleaders began entering in a professional field. This type of cheerleading moved into attractive dancers performing for professional sport teams, such as American football (Jane, 266). One of the first teams to receive a substantial amount of media attention was the Dallas Cowboys. The football team used female dancers as a form of crowd leading. The team's general manager, Tex Schramm, brought together a dance team that was professionally trained by a Broadway choreographer (Jane, 266).

These women had to meet the standards of the "American Sweethearts". As Emma A. Jane states, "...this new type of cheerleading was explicitly designed to provide visual pleasure in a



masculine domain...(Jane, 266),” and by the 1970s the cheerleader became a recognizable symbol in sex media.

By the 1990s cheerleading became more competitive and cheering on the sidelines was no longer necessary to be a cheerleader. As a result, competitive teams known as All-Star cheerleading, began arising. Traditional cheerleading was completely eliminated as Amy Mortiz says, “Cheerleaders still cheer at high school and college basketball games (for teams of both genders), but more now additionally participate on All-Star teams which solely exist for the purpose of going to local, regional and national competitions (663).”

However, this still did not change the outlook of sexualizing a cheerleader’s appearance. Girls born after the 1980s are considered to be apart of the third-wave generation. Mortiz goes on to describe in her article that after the third-wave generation shift began to happen in cheerleading and femininity and athleticism began to be framed differently (663). Before the third wave it was, “demeaning as aspects of femininity that underlie the aesthetic” (663). For cheerleaders, or any female athletes in this matter, there was the desire to extract femininity from the sport. With the anxieties women in an athletic setting, in order to be taken seriously as an athlete, females must disengage themselves from beauty while playing. However, much like figure skating, cheerleading maintains this feminine side. This was seen as problematic because, “In order to be considered a serious athlete – either by men or women – there was a desire to take beauty and femininity out of the sport” (Mortiz 663). Therefore, cheerleading was seen as a stereotypical feminine activity and the endeavor for a cheerleader to be taken seriously as an athlete was out (Mortiz 663). By the third-wave generation, there was no harm or guilt that toying with the traditional ideas of beauty and femininity while playing a sport and what was

constituted as a sport (Mortiz 663). Today cheerleaders are still presented as feminine, but this does not shape the sport itself. In 2016, cheerleading was in the early contract for provision to be recognized as a sport by the Olympics, however, it will take a few years to be fully recognized.

### **Cheerleading Broken Down**

Is it the lights and the glamor or is it the high level of athleticism that attract people? There isn't just one type of cheerleading. Cheerleading can be broken down into four genres or disciplines as The International Cheer Union describes it. These developments include high kick, pom, hip hop, and jazz. These different categories of cheerleading can range from a more informal form of cheerleading like clubs to highly competitive teams. These teams all have different styles but stem from the same technique and skill. Club teams are more laid back, whereas, All-Star cheerleading is more competitive. Other types of cheerleading include scholastic, which stems from schools and universities. National are teams made up with the best of the best that are hand picked by different countries. Teams vary by quantity, age, and gender. For the most part they are similar but are broken down into different categories and styles. It's time we look past the the big bow and short skirt and focus on the hard work and determination of a cheerleader. Cheerleading is for the most part is highly competitive. Whether one is competing for a spot on the team or their team to place on the mat. This clearly goes to show that there isn't just one type of cheerleader.

### **How Gender Affects Performance**

Sports offer physical, mental, and social benefits to children and adolescents. Being physically active can improve one's health reducing chances of obesity and chronic diseases. It has also been reported that sports help with mental health by improving one's mood, increasing

energy, decreasing systems associated with depression and more. As Appleby and Foster outline, People also have more opportunity to socialize during sports and social skills such as teamwork, leadership, sportsmanship, and respect that carry on later in life. (Appleby and Foster 3) However, although there are many benefits to a sport there are also many negative outcomes. “It has reinforced damaging and dangerous social patterns such as racism, gender inequity, homophobia, and excessive violence.” (Appleby and Foster 1) Specifically, focusing on cheerleading and how gender roles affect the participants and the sport within itself.

Cheerleading is seen as a feminine sport to the public eye therefore, when a male cheerleader is added to the mix they are automatically viewed as being an outsider. This can be due to the fact that when one thinks of cheerleading they often associate it with the expression of female femininity. Gender is created through repetition and it performs, cheerleaders are often perceived as peppy females who cheer for the men's sports teams. Priyadharshini and Pressland argue that mixed-sex sports involve, “issues of sex, gender and sexuality” that unavoidably hold a prominent position in this discourse (1235). Mixed-sex sports offer a pedagogic way of teamwork to help regress the ideas of traditional male superiority and, in this sense how men perform in an arena that is considered feminized. Cheerleading is highly based on performance, not only through athleticism such as tumbling and stunting skills, but also requires one to express enthusiasm. The performance in cheerleading is also defined through appearance. Grindstaff and West argue that, “female cheerleaders have absorbed the lessons of a culture that strongly emphasizes the display of sexy, athletic bodies.”

The high demands of performance in cheer do not only undermine the realness of the sport but also “expose male participants to homophobia” because the sport is coded as feminine

(Grindstaff and West, 510). Instead male cheerleaders are not asked to have such a high spirit performances as females are, they perform through their athleticism in stunt building and tumbling to avoid being labeled as “gay” (Grindstaff and West, 510). Although females execute the same skills that coed teams do, it is due to the cultural norms that males are not required to show such an image. Cheerleading is coded as feminine and for men, femininity is integrated with homosexuality. Male cheerleaders are led to be concerned about their gender image (Grindstaff and West, 511). It is not that males are against performing their own personas while cheering, but that they seek out different ways that seem to be more gender appropriate in the mode of performance. Grindstaff and West also outline that, “The doing of masculinity in cheerleading is therefore no less a conscious production than the doing of femininity, despite the greater emphasis on artifice and sexual attractiveness for female cheerleaders” (Grindstaff and West, 512). It is because cheerleading is a highly performative sport, females and male cheerleaders are set to a certain standard of gender performance. It is not to say that all male cheerleaders exert their performance in such a “masculine” way, however, it suggests that due to the feminization of the sport, males tend to express their gender in a way different from female cheerleaders do thus, labeling cheerleading as homophobic due to the males fear of being labeled as “gay”. Through the research of Grindsatff and West they were able to connect this to a term commonly used by male cheerleaders known as, “the gay cheerleader syndrome” (510). Meaning that performing such as a female cheerleader would may put them at risk as being labeled gay. However, the tension does not only affect straight males, but also gay men to perform in a way that is considered conventionally tropes of being heterosexual. However, in some ways men

projecting masculinity can be beneficial to the sport by adding the aspect of “toughness” and athleticism that often are unseen in females.

Grindstaff and West suggest ways in which males cope with the common stereotypes that are placed on male cheerleaders. Male cheerleaders find many different ways to manage “the gay cheerleader syndrome.” The typical ways in which reinforce masculinity for example expressing physical fitness naturally goes together as being straight (511). It is unlike females in this sport in which their feminine gender identity is confirmed, males have something to prove (Grindstaff and West, 511). However, masculine gender performance is no less difficult than feminine performance due to the, “sexual attractiveness for female cheerleaders (Grindstaff and West, 512). Finding masculinity is difficult to obtain when cheerleading is a feminine terrain. However, the obvious differentiation of male and female serves to both masculinize and feminized the sport within itself (Grindstaff and West 514). Grindstaff and West state, “Yet these two tendencies clash when it comes to legitimation as a sport: while masculinization helps cheerleading gain credibility, feminization renders it vulnerable to trivialization and ridicule (514).

An example of the stereotypical heterosexual gender roles are exhibited in the film is *Fired Up! (2009)* IMDB describes this movie as “The two most popular guys in school decide to ditch football camp for cheerleader camp and for the glory. (IMDB *Fired Up! (2009)*)” By referring to glory in this description, it implies that hot cheerleaders that will also be at this camp and the men might get lucky. Nick comes up with the idea of attending cheer camp after overhearing a conversation by the cheerleaders at a bonfire. When Nick relays the idea to Shawn, Nick says,” Oh my God, are you coming out to me?” Shawn answers that he is too straight to be

gay. Shawn describes the camp as being a woman haven. We can tell these boys are seen as players when they go up to the cheer captain and she merely brushes them off. Nick tries to persuade Shawn by saying that they could have, “300 hunnies on our biscuits” (*Fired Up* 2009). I find this to be protecting the masculinity of the two male characters. As the movie proceeds the two friends play the role of the heterosexual superior male. The movie is full stereotypical male themes of the outlook on cheerleading. This can help support the idea of Grindstaff and West as Nick and Shawn are protecting their masculinity by rejecting the reality of going to cheer camp for true skill. Their infatuation with women are present throughout. This film seems as though it’s meant to point out the stereotypes involved with cheerleading. It goes to show a fantasized version of cheerleading camp. Films like these help show the stereotypes of cheerleading. However, I question how beneficial this is to cheerleading culture. Popular culture films tend to be the most successful in this style of films. Much like many other cheerleading movies it is the “under dog story” where the characters find the love of the sport and become part of the team. The males, however still protect their masculine qualities. Nick and Shawn are able to work up into becoming a vital part of them team. Megan Abott refers to these characters to fall under the Cheerleader Ironic. Movies such as *Fired Up!* (2009) or *Bring It On!* (2000) (discussed later in the paper) are films that are made with irony. As we watch theses films we feel as though we are in on the joke (Abott Looking Past the Smile and Sheen).

### **Cheerleading in the Media**

The perfect body, pretty face, short skirt, and peppy personality. Are you thinking what I'm thinking? Cheerleader. Throughout time cheerleaders across media have been known to carry

all of these traits. She's the popular girl in school, the All-American girl next door and the girl every man wishes they could have. Media has created the image of cheerleader that is specified by these characteristics. What some forms of media fail to do is show the hard work and dedication. Although there have been documentaries that do attempt to portray the blood, sweat, and tears that go into the sport, fictionalized films and television shows tend to stray away from reality. The media creates the perfect sexualized barbie figure of a cheerleader. However, on the other, some fictionalized films help to reinforce the cheerleader as an individual. Although these films might not always show the true reality behind cheerleading, they use other forms of explanation to do so.

There are many different ways cheerleaders are used in media discourse. As Emma A. Jane describes, "Cheerleaders are used as semiotic shorthand for sluts, bimbos, and alpha teenaged girls, and are derided" (271). She goes into detail on how cheerleaders are visually represented in non-pornographic media forms that is "reminiscent of soft pornography." It is constituted by a prejudice that has been laid on to cheerleaders by a, "widely-held belief that cheerleading is not an activity requiring athletic skill and that cheerleaders are first and foremost sex objects" (275). There will be a constant battle with cheerleaders in the media due the sexualized representation of cheerleaders due to feminization of the sport.

An example of cheerleaders being used as sex objects in film can be seen during a scene from *American Beauty* (1999). Lester is a sexually frustrated 42-year-old husband and father of a cheerleader on the squad. He becomes infatuated with one of the members on the team. The scene first begins with the high school cheer squad entering the basketball court. The cheerleaders at this point are clothed in jackets and skirts above the knee. As they perform,

Lester begins to become infatuated with one of the cheerleaders. The team then separates from the screen, where a spotlight is only on the appraised cheerleader. Lester watches her as he begins to imagine the performance to become more scandalous. The male gaze is present as she makes direct eye contact with him while rubbing her body and shaking her butt. It is as if she is seducing him. The shots begin to come closer and closer to her body as she slides her fingers down her bust. She then gives a smirk to him as she is unzipping her jacket revealing her bust that flow out with rose petals that is implied to be left up to the viewers imagination. This could be interpreted as deflowering a term used to describe as “loss of virginity”. It then quickly cuts back to the whole squad in their ending pose. The cheerleader is being used as a sex object in this scene because she is highly sexualized and fantasized by a man who is well in his forties, whereas the cheerleader is young, fit, and beautiful. The themes outlined by Jane are coherent throughout this scene. From the way it is filmed to the reaction of Lester is sexualized in a way that is spread throughout all forms of media. Megan Abbott describes in her article that the goal in movies involving cheerleaders as main characters such as, the film *American Beauty*, “is in skewering stereotypes, rather than illuminating the reality underneath” (Abbott, *Looking Past the Smile and the Sheen*).

I find it is important to mention Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze from *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. In her essay, Mulvey states that “the gender power asymmetry is a controlling force in cinema and constructed for the pleasure of the male viewer, which is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies and discourses.” Oftentimes cheerleaders are performing for men. Although films have improved since Mulvey’s theory that has been applied to many films, somehow cheerleaders are still fall behind. In the television series *Riverdale* the



cheerleaders of the school are only the most prestigious. They must fit the look and have a feisty attitude. One scene in particular from *Riverdale* shows the cheerleading team performing for their heroic friend Archie who is currently locked up in jail. It does not go unseen the cheerleaders provocative motions that encourages the objectification of their bodies for men. The only reason the cheerleaders show up for this occasion was to perform using their bodies. They used this as a form motivation for Archie to win a football game between his rivals in the prison. As this coincides with Mulvey's theory that the women were not put there to control the situation. It was something they could not get themselves into. Therefore, they were simply put there to be observed.

As referred to earlier, The Ironic Cheerleader is a way that films are able to not worry about falling under reality, but find a way to puncture reality and fantasy in order to find the truth (Abbott, *Looking Past the Smile and the Sheen*.) Often time films that use cheerleaders as main character are sexualized and exploited in which they have embedded the idea that a cheerleader should have a certain body type. Slim, fit, and tight. We can look at the film *Bring It On!* (2000). While this film is not seen as proposing the sexualized image of a cheerleader in a demeaning sense, the film is vital to note in my research. The idea behind this film is to not fantasize or deride cheerleading, but to make it obvious and in your face. The film series is praised by the cheerleading community because it is relatable. It is meant to be satirical, but helps signify the societal expectations of cheerleaders. The whole movie is filled with examples of how cheerleading is mocked and ridiculed through the squads ups and downs throughout the season. In particular, the director Peyton Reed does a fine job of taking control of a scene that is completely out of the ordinary. This scene points out the obvious. Although almost every scene

of this movie is over the top and in your face, this one clearly identifies the body expectations by society. The scene begins when the head captain brings in a professional choreographer for the benefit of a team. At this point, he has every cheerleader lineup while he judges every part of their body from the smile to their butt. The choreographer even makes a comment about gender while passing the male cheerleaders and says, "Male cheerleaders, enough said." While the choreographer is judging and criticizing every nook and cranny of their bodies he makes it clear what the ideal body image for a cheerleader is. This can put into the minds of the audience that if it is said by a "professional" then it must be true. *Bring It On! (2000)* is a satirical movie, in which, the cheerleaders have their setbacks, but always end with a happy ending. This movie is rather an example of how society and the media see cheerleaders through a film because it hits the main points explained throughout my research. The film series never fails to show the hard work that is embedded in the cheerleaders, but is also able to mix it with the reality without serious sexual innuendos.

This film also helps to reinforce the fight for cheerleading. It was one of the first movies that was highly recognized that moved cheerleading from sidelines and into a different light. Although this movie doesn't always show the reality of cheerleading it helped to nationally recognize cheerleading as something different. It showed cheerleading as an athletic sport rather than a social standing. It was able to present to the public an appreciation for cheerleading. In this movie, we were able to get behind the scenes of practices and what the team endures during one season. *Bring It On! (2000)* was a monumental step in cheerleading being represented in a better light.

Another film that shows the love and passion for cheerleading is *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999). This film is essential to mention in this research because it breaks the binaries of a cheerleader. Megan, the main character of this film, is a cheerleader. At first she falls right into the perfect description of a cheerleader. She is popular, beautiful, and girly. As the movie progresses, fantasies of Megan begin to unravel. We are left with many shots cheerleaders breasts bouncing up and down and glimpses from underneath the skirt of the cheerleaders from Megan's point of view. Cheerleaders are being sexualized in these scenes, however I do not believe it for the pleasure of the viewer like other films.

We come to find out that Megan is a lesbian that is being sent away to True Directions. This is a program that tries force homosexuals into being heterosexual. At first, Megan is in denial that she is gay and even uses the excuse, "but I'm a cheerleader!" during a group session. The head director tries to convince her that not everyone looks at girls the way she does. During this session, Megan has a realization and shots of cheerleaders spring across the screen, of again, breast bouncing and crotch shots. With the help of another girl in this camp, Graham, she begins to discover herself while still staying true to her roots. Graham and Megan develop a close relationship and become intimate. Megan describes the love that she share with Graham as something she has only felt once before. Megan says to Graham that she, "Never felt that love before except for, don't laugh ok, for when I was cheerleading. It sounds stupid to you, but I love it". Graham is someone who at first thought that Megan would fall under the stereotypical cheerleader. As she learns more about Megan and hears this statement she lets go of her initial belief. She even says that she would love to see her cheering one day. Unfortunately, Megan and

Graham's meet up is prohibited by True Directions, and Megan was kicked out of the program. Graham stays as she tries to fulfill her parents' wishes to becoming straight.

In the final graduation ceremony, Megan tries to stop Graham from graduating disguised in army gear. Graham pushes her away and decides to go through with the ceremony. Megan realizes that to truly show herself to Graham she has to show herself for what she truly is, a cheerleader. I believe through this scene the director is trying to suggest is that through the love and passion of cheerleading, Graham will be able to see how much Megan loves her. The Pom poms drop out of car and Megan come dressed in uniform. Graham is able to connect the love they share because she sees her desire in cheer that relates to the desire and love they share together. I believe that this is something remarkable for cheerleading in film. It shows that a cheerleader could fit the image, but not the standards. Especially in this scene, we are able to see the true desire and love for cheerleading that Megan has. This helps break the known cultural symbol that is often portrayed. It reinforces the positive ways media helps push the cheerleader icon to the next level. It is a film that is an innovative way to break the tropes associated with cheerleading. It is interesting how it relates the love of the sport to the love of a person. The significance of this film is that it uses cheerleading at first as a sexual symbol, however, by learning about the individual Megan we realize that cheerleading has nothing to do with it. Instead of using the cheerleading team we are given the individual in which it challenges the typical stereotypes by breaking down the wall of the perfect American icon.

The films *Bring it On!* (2000) and *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999) are two examples of how the stereotypical cheerleaders in films are being challenged. However, we still find ways in which cheerleading is being derided. A female athlete may carry a lot on her back. Emma Tom

discusses, "...feminine athletic endeavor provokes such intense cultural anxiety and sexual obsession..." (Tom, 53). Unlike most respected sports portrayed in news media, often times a large portion of contemporary cheerleading themed news is coverage based off unrelated topics to the sport. These include, "... sex scandals, crimes, entertainment taxonomies debates; and accidents and injuries that are associated with external events such as car crashes rather than cheerleading practice" (Tom, 54). Following the movie *Bring It On!* (2000) and the early 21st century it was very uncommon to find reliable news media as Emma Tom discusses (Tom, 54). She goes on to say that "The glut of other types of cheerleading-related material suggests that the media representations of cheerleading is one of fetishistic fixation in addition to neglect." So what is it about cheerleading that makes society twist it's athleticism to sexism?

The news media does not seem to be much help in moving forward as a respected sport. Tom goes into the idea of fetishization of cheerleading and ultimately makes a connection between types of cheerleading-related material to the relationship it shares with the media. The result of the common stories the news puts out about cheerleading can be seen as one of the "...fetishistic fixation in addition to neglect" (Tom, 54). Much like other sports, the uniforms worn by cheerleaders are form fitted to their body, however there is not much backlash connected to those sports. Tom describes the relationship cheerleading shares with other related activities and sports from their attire to their actions that are controversy free. However, the media still under-represents cheerleaders. Sometimes stories non-related to cheerleading still feel the need to express the victim as a cheerleader. The example used by Tom was a murder that happened in 2002. Newspapers used the opening paragraph describing the victim as a cheerleader. The victim was a thirteen year old that was described as "promiscuous internet

Lolita” (Tom, 56). Tom describes this to be typical media coverage as her promiscuous behavior was linked her cheerleader status. Through these text Tom suggests that the way the media puts out text that the stereotypical factors of cheerleaders may be to blame for the attacks against them (Tom, 57).

I believe it is important to recognize the roots in which the style of cheerleaders being represented in soft pornographic and promiscuity may stem from. Emma A. Jane uses porn to relate to how, “the way sexualized representations of cheerleading in pornography circulate alongside related representations in non-pornographic media domains” (Jane, 264). The promiscuity of cheerleaders is present in pornography as well and rarely extends beyond the stereotypical form of cheerleaders. The common style of uniforms, as well as props and locations that are associated with school cheerleaders. The style includes youthful women, educational institutions, and extends as far to faculty of schools to drunk teen parties (Jane, 268). With the stereotypes of cheerleading also merges with the tropes of porn such as, “...lesbianism, group sex, anal sex, spanking, and transgender-themed action” (Jane, 268). These examples can be linked between the fantasy of porn and the image related to cheerleading. However, this does not go to say that cheerleading is inherently “sexy”. The images of a cheerleader plays into the arousal that porn is promised to have. The youthful female along with the female body in motion, that includes flexibility and physical fitness, ties into the attraction of porn. As Jane emphasizes in her article, the cheerleader represents the innocent young women, that is often associated with being a virgin, innocent, and vulnerable (Jane, 269). Pornography and cheerleading are linked in a way that the ideal women is the best of the best. It is not to say that other cultural symbols are not exploited, but to specifically look at cheerleading.

## People Love to Hate Cheerleaders

As much as cheerleaders are fantasized and liked there is still a side of hate. This is important to bring attention to because the unreality of cheerleading in media becomes deeply rooted into the popular culture. Emma A. Jane discusses the idea of antifandom associated with cheerleading. She draws from Johnathan Gray's case study that involves "mediated vitriol targeting cheerleading," in which she identifies as the "problematic aspects of the media studies concept of antifandom (Jane, 175)." Cheerleaders are often sexualized throughout media and is a sport that society loves to hate (Jane, 175). For example, I remember vividly as a child I watched a Youtube video that was titled something along the lines "Funny Fat Cheerleader." It was a high school cheerleader cheering on the basketball team. The video was filmed without the student knowing. In the background, you could hear male voices laughing and making fun of this girl who was simply doing what a cheerleader is supposed to do. When thinking back to this moment I remember feeling remorse for this girl rather than embarrassment because I didn't see the cheerleading image as one certain look. I believe that anti fans are derived from media images that people love to hate. Particularly cheerleading and the ideal image associated with media image of what they should look like. Societal expectations for the sport are highly sexualized, fantasized, and derided. When the perfect cheerleader is represented in a way that doesn't match the ideal image seen on screen it can pave the way for hatred and anti fans.

Anti Fans can affect cheerleading moving forward in the sports world because it can put a pause on the world's push for recognition and respect. The mockery that society puts on cheer can lead to ways in which it is unable to advance. It puts a pause on the advancement because coordinators and regulators are unable to decide whether it is worth pushing for. Due to this it

can cause serious injuries to occur. Unlike most sports, cheerleading rules and regulations are not up to par. Due the highly criticized sport by some it, “links cheerleading’s high injury rates to safety and regulatory inconsistencies resulting from confusion and disagreement over the definition of cheerleading, namely whether it is an activity to lead cheers or a sport.” Media can have strong effects on how people judge and see the world. The confusion can stem from the stereotypes that are placed on how cheerleading is projected on a screen. However, it may not be that these findings are exact cause of why cheerleading is not truly recognized as a sport. As Emma A Jane states, “In America, for example, cheerleaders are not protected from injury via the usual sports-related safety mechanisms partly because the sport is simply not taken seriously as a sport. While some American cheerleading regulations do exist, these are ad hoc and wholly inadequate.” She explains in her article this is solely due to the irrelevance that cheer has in America due to the media distinctions and expectations. Health and safety regulations are a very important factor for the sport. Could this be that the pop-culture view of the american cheerleader icon truly be hurting the cheerleader herself. If rules and regulations are not being pushed and staying stagnant, how could the cheerleader be able to push passed the cultural symbol?

## **Conclusion**

Cheerleading is cultural symbol embedded in American pop-culture. What I am trying to suggest in this research is that cheerleading has taken many low blows, but has also has had many advances in media that are helping move it forward. However ,what is left to be done to push passed the point of the stereotypical cheerleader that comes to mind? Media representation hold a big role on how cheerleaders are perceived. A cheerleader is an identity. It is something



that carries many stigmas and stereotypes on their back. My suggestion here is that there is more than one type of cheerleader and due to most media representations, some people who are not aware of the cheerleading culture fall into the stereotypical beliefs. I believe it will be beneficial to the sport if more films such as *But I'm A Cheerleader* (1999) that show the cheerleader as someone who expresses qualities that typical teenagers go through, then it will be heading in a positive direction.

It is interesting that throughout my research I have been trying to find the harm and reasoning behind all of this. Beyond television and films there are sub groups of cheerleaders that own social media accounts that show the real cheerleader. Fans of nationally ranked teams purchase merchandise to support a gym, much like one would do for football or baseball. Cheerleading is something that has lacked recognition for a long time. There have been countless movies that involve other American sports like football and baseball that are not ironic and have more of a true look inside. In this day and age it is time that cheerleaders are seen as less of a cultural symbol and shown for what they strive to be, athletes. Right now, media is failing to push for respect of cheerleaders, instead it is a mashup of jokes and sexual exploitation. The cheerleader as a cultural symbol needs work and reshaping.

In conclusion, I found this topic to be vital to the research using media studies methods because it is simply not talked about enough. I find the main issue to be here is not only found in cheerleading, but with the sexualization of women in sports in general. I chose cheerleading in particular because as I have mentioned I'm able to relate to the struggles. The true symbolism of cheerleading, from my point of view, is team work, dedication, and commitment. The majority of media damages the potential of the sport by the tropes laid upon them. The cheerleader is

growing and through the production of films that challenge the stereotype it could help to strengthen the symbolism of the cheerleader. It is important that more innovative movies that break common ground are being produced. Because media plays a huge role in society today, in order for cheerleading to advance media must work on producing less of what a cheerleader looks like and more of what a cheerleader is capable of.

### **Creative Project**

I decided to chose the topic of cheerleading in the media because being a cheerleader for over eight years, I found a passion to unfold the media representations and see how this can affect views in the real world. To my surprise there were many more issues related topic than I had originally thought. I always found that cheerleading represented something that was an American icon, but through my research I was able to extend these ideas more widely. It made me think of why I wanted to become a cheerleader in the first place. I remember I always just looked up to them, like they were a role model. Somehow, a cheerleader always had it all. After all, I mostly learned about cheerleading through watching YouTube videos and television. However, once getting involved with the sport it was definitely hard. It wasn't about the uniform or the pretty smile. Practices focused on conditioning and a hungry fight for a win.

The creative aspect of this research is a compiled video of the cheerleading team I was on during the process of this project. I took a camera into the inside look of how the Purchase College Cheerleading Team trains, performs, and competes. I find this video to hold elements that are not seen in irony of cheerleading produced in pop-culture media. Nothing in this video is planned as it unfolds naturally. It opens with the the team stepping on the court to perform for their peers at a basketball game. At this game in particular, the announcer completely forgot to

announce our team on court. We stood on the sideline for about three minutes before the Captain could wave him down to do so. The video flashes back to before where the team is in the schools gym, training and weight lifting with their coach. There is a time crunch as the team begins to not hit stunts as solid as usual. Team members are slotted into new positions in order to make up the routine. The goal of this video is avoid the common themes associated with media forms of cheerleaders.

I found the short film I created to be successful in the sense that it went for the fly on the wall style I was going for. Nothing was played up to be dramatic it was how the practice and performance happens. In a way, I found it not to be exactly what I was going for. It was hard to film while participating in practices. Therefore, some shots are off or cut off. The idea behind this was simply place a camera and let things happen as they do. This adds to my argument that this is not what you typically see in movies, and television.

Link to Video: <https://youtu.be/-ypxWWnbvJY>

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