

*Full Length Research Paper*

# A content analysis of pictorial content in entertainment and sports programming networks (ESPN): The magazine's body issue

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The purpose of this study was to examine the pictorial content of entertainment and sports programming networks (ESPN) The Magazine's Body Issue to determine the type of coverage sportswomen received in the annual special edition. The Body Issue was intended to celebrate the physical characteristics of athletes through visual representation that honored diverse human elements such as body shape, height, and weight. A total of 276 photos were examined. Although it was hypothesized that female sport competitors would be overrepresented on the Body Issue pages, male athletes garnered more photographic coverage than female athletes. Though it was not a significant difference ( $\chi^2=3.365$ ,  $p=0.162$ ), female athletes were photographed more in non-athletic poses than their male counterparts. Gender did not play a role in photo prominence, as a Chi Square test revealed no statistical difference ( $\chi^2=14.176$ ,  $p=0.077$ ). Female athletes who competed in individual sports received more pictorial coverage than female athletes in team sports ( $\chi^2=36.010$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ). Though it appears the special issue's mission was upheld and the study found some advances made in how female athletes were represented in comparison to their male counterparts, much work is still needed before we can truly celebrate progress.

**Key words:** Consumer behavior, sport media, gender, sport management.

## INTRODUCTION

ESPN, Inc., which 80% is owned by ABC, Inc., an indirect subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company and 20% owned by The Hearst Corporation (ESPN Ownership, 2016) is considered the powerhouse and primary mode of delivery for most U.S. sports fans.

In 2009, the company launched entertainment and sports programming networks (ESPN) The Magazine's The Body Issue that was intended to celebrate the physical characteristics of athletes through visual representation that honoured diverse human elements

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such as body shape, height, and weight (Smallwood et al., 2014). The Body Issue was created in part to counter declining advertising sales in the publication, which has proved to be a successful endeavour. The special issue(s) generated more than double the magazine's traditional sales, and approximately 35% more advertising sales than other issues (Lee et al., 2012).

ESPN's celebration of the body aimed to feature aspects that included representations of gender as a way to position the sport media outlet as a champion of social acceptance. At this point, very little is known about the special issue's portrayals of female athletes.

### ESPN television and online coverage

Previous research has shown ESPN historically trivialized the athletic activities and endeavors of female athletes (Adams and Tuggle, 2004). Some studies found that female sport competitors were rarely covered on *SportsCenter* and the amount of coverage on the flagship program had even declined over the years (Cooky et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2016; Turner, 2014). For example, according to Cooky et al. (2013), just 1.4% of *SportsCenter* coverage highlighted women's sport.

According to Fink et al. (2011), "the lack of coverage and differential coverage further institutionalize notions of male dominance, gendered practices, and female inferiority" in sport. Wolter (2015) examined *espnW*, ESPN, Inc.'s product designed for its female sport consumers. One of the two major themes from Wolter's research concluded that "divergent dialogues appear in articles on *espnW* in the forms of descriptive language used for female athletes, mention of non-sporting topics that have little or nothing to do with athleticism, and direct references to physical/personality attributes".

ESPN's website perpetuated inconsistencies in female athletes' coverage and challenged the notion that the reporting advanced social acceptance with respect to gender.

### ESPN's print publication

In terms of its print publication, researchers suggested *ESPN The Magazine* visually minimized sportswomen on the cover page and throughout the magazine as they frequently pictured female competitors as nonactive, sexualized objects (Eagleman et al., 2009; Martin and McDonald, 2012).

According to Jim Brady, Public Editor for *ESPN*, "The Body Issue is a significant revenue driver for The Magazine, and has generated more advance buzz every year since its debut" (*ESPN Ombudsman*, 2016). Cranmer et al. (2014) examined The Body Issue, and results indicated that "athlete sex is associated with de-

emphasized athleticism and sexualized frames, and sport gender is associated with context frames".

In another study of the magazine where photos were examined over a five year period comparing coverage differences in gender of athletes, images of female athletes were predominantly passive failing to highlight athleticism (Hull et al., 2015). A recent study of the publication found that black female athletes were also subject to this same framing in a stereotypical manner.

### Media portrayals of female athletes

Often described as the female/athlete paradox in academic literature, athletic women must carefully balance their inherent athleticism with societal expectations regarding femininity (Kane et al., 2013; Krane et al., 2004).

Clasen (2001) highlighted the socially accepted masculine principles that exist within sport and noted that it was the requisite nature of women to showcase their feminine qualities rather than their athletic merits. Other studies suggested the media's presentation of sport played a significant role in the construction of social arrangement and served to justify and uphold dominant cultural thoughts, practices, values, and ideas (Kane and Lenskyj, 1998). According to Harrison and Secarea (2010), sexualized images of female athletes decreased their perceived athletic prowess among viewers.

Overall, previous media portrayals of sporting women and the limited research on this publication indicate that the publication has reinforced media trends while still stereotypically depicting and trivializing female athletes. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the pictorial content of *ESPN The Magazine's* Body Issue to determine the type of coverage sportswomen received in the annual special edition. While the special issues were intended to celebrate and honor differences, this study sought to ascertain whether or not the print publication's imagery continued to undermine the merits of women in sport.

This research was conducted to also determine if the magazine's reporting warranted a celebration of the progress made in female athlete coverage.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Agenda setting

In their research on agenda setting, McCombs and Shaw (1972) examined the concept of issue salience in the media and the perceived issue salience of the undecided voters in North Carolina for the 1968 presidential election. Their findings revealed a significant correlation between what the undecided voters stated as important topics in the presidential election and the information covered in the media.

In a follow-up study of the 1972 presidential election, Shaw and McCombs (1977) discovered an agenda setting effect in terms of issues covered in the media and how salience was transferred from the media to voters. Subsequently, McCombs and Shaw (1993) proposed media effects served a dual function in that they had the capability to tell consumers what topics to think about and even how to think about information disseminated by the media.

According to McCombs (2005), the continued growth of agenda setting afforded researchers the opportunity to apply the core ideas of the theory beyond political science scholarship into new research areas that added to the literature in other academic disciplines. Sport studies began utilizing agenda setting theory to advance the understanding of this media effect on consumer behavior. Researchers have examined the media effect of agenda setting from various lenses in sport such as Olympic Games coverage (Angelini and Billings, 2010; Angelini et al., 2012; Frederick et al., 2013; Zeng et al., 2011) to issues related to race in sport (Eagleman, 2009; Kozman, 2013; Wachs et al., 2012).

Eastman and Billings (1999) discovered female athletes compiled far less media coverage during several major sporting events than their male counterparts. Media scholars reported that the media trivialized the athletic accomplishments of sportswomen with focus being more on physical characteristics (Denham et al., 2002).

Another inquiry found that female athletes received more media coverage for the first time in Olympic Games history in sports such as gymnastics and beach volleyball. The researchers concluded that coverage likely increased because female athletes represented traditionally accepted roles and participated in gender appropriate sports (Billings et al., 2014).

## Framing

Frames have been categorized as learned mass media schemas that significantly impacted consumers' knowledge and understanding in regard to reported information (Goffman, 1974).

Pan and Kosicki (1993) asserted that schemas assisted in the interpretation of media messages that shaped, structured, and made sense of the reported information for individuals, and in turn, society. The researchers further explained frames as a way to position media content so that certain aspects of a message garnered the attention of the audience.

Thus, "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993). Furthermore, the way events and information were presented in the media systematically influenced how audience members

understood reported news (Scheufele, 1999). In sum, frames helped to shape public opinion and ultimately cultural norms.

In terms of framing photographs, research purposed pictorial content assisted observers in understanding cultural ideas based on the reflected imagery (Rowe, 1999). Scholarly examinations that included photographic media frames created the opportunity to better understand how these messages influenced consumer behavior in regard to sport and gender (Hardin et al., 2002).

Other research in this area found the photographic coverage given to female athletes reinforced sexual difference (Hardin et al., 2005). Additional research discovered that females received significantly less pictorial content than did males and females were also much more likely to be photographed in a sexually provocative manner (Clavio and Eagleman, 2011).

According to Fink (2010), when female athletes were photographed in a sexualized manner, it led to the perception that women's sports were less exciting and trivialized the athleticism of women. In addition, when sportswomen received coverage, it aligned with normative feminine frames of the past (Martin and McDonald, 2012).

Interestingly, findings by Krane et al. (2011) indicated college female athletes preferred photographs that reflected athletic prowess, strength, and physical power. Kane et al. (2013) discovered elite female intercollegiate athletes' favored photographic representation that highlighted their sport competency and images that effectively characterized the sport. The researchers' revealed overly sexualized content often captured in female athletes' photographs was a stark contradiction to what the examined elite athletes preferred. In addition to female sport competitors desire to be represented accurately, media research also determined sportswomen had a much higher regard for themselves when photographs featured their athletic competence as opposed to glamorized or sexualized representations (Smith, 2015).

The researcher further suggested sexualized pictorial representation of female athletes continued to plague the advancement of women in sports. Consequently, since framing was considered an integral part in understanding how the media created relevance and importance (Fink and Kosicki, 2002), this framework was utilized in this study to determine if *ESPN The Magazine's* Body Issue maintained the status quo of representation of sportswomen

## Hegemonic masculinity

One of the primary reasons women have received less media coverage than their male peers has been attributable to hegemonic masculinity. Originally, a concept developed by Gramsci (1971), research has added to the development of the theory over the years.

According to Donaldson (1993), “heterosexuality and homophobia are the bedrock of hegemonic masculinity and any understanding of its nature and meaning is predicated on the feminist insight that in general the relationship of men to women is oppressive”. In addition, it was also asserted that “hegemonic masculinity is based on the practice that permits men’s collective dominance over women to continue” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Other disciplines have utilized hegemonic masculinity, as the theoretical framework has been well documented in sport management scholarship. Kinkema and Harris (1998) discovered that women have been historically underrepresented by the sports media, primarily due to hegemonic masculinity.

Pedersen (2002) determined that female athletes were underrepresented in the number of pictures and total column inches devoted to their sport participation in newspaper coverage. Pedersen et al. (2002) found that “male journalists wrote over half (53.2% or 953 articles) of the 1,792 articles while female journalists authored 93 (5.2%) articles”.

In their analysis of media coverage of the NCAA’s March Madness coverage, Kian et al. (2008) found coverage of women’s basketball to be inferior to men’s basketball, further highlighting the divide between attention and respect devoted to men’s and women’s athletics.

Furthermore, female athletes tended to receive the most media coverage when the content was “heterosexually appealing and sexually available” (Kristiansen and Broch, 2013). While the lack of coverage of women’s sports was thought to be a complicated phenomenon, it was at least in part attributable to the historical dominance of male sports reporters.

### Female athlete images

While the photographic coverage of female athletes in sport print publications overtly alienated their athletic accomplishments (Eagleman et al., 2009; Pedersen, 2002; Weber and Carini, 2012), it was proposed that the depiction of those published images helped to influence consumer behavior (Jones, 2006).

Photos serve to advance the general consensus and even support the socially constructed gender hierarchical order. For instance, Sherry et al. (2015) suggest images are powerful symbols cloaked in cultural meaning that capture a particular event, object, and individual within the confines of a photo’s border. When the visual representation of females featured in print publications are narrowed and focus on stereotypical characteristics, Azzarito (2009) noted that these images help to construct consumers’ ideology. In addition, it was suggested that distorted imagery of females’ impact young media observers in terms of their thoughts, ideas, and how the observed content was supposed to be received (Krane et

al., 2011).

In terms of sport, media scholars discovered photographs of sportswomen typically portrayed in a far more passive, sexually suggestive, inferior, and emotional way— visible tears or consoled post-defeat – than sportsmen (Duncan and Messner, 1998). Female athletes had historically received far less prominent placement and disproportionately less color photographs in print publications (Pedersen, 2002). The amount of pictorial content was also examined, and it was determined that female athletes were underrepresented on the pages of an influential print periodical (Eagleman et al., 2009). Further, Jones and Greer (2011) found the level of femininity displayed impacted the rate at which men maintained interest in the content.

In addition to the infrequent photographic representation of sportswomen, misreported imagery of women in sport has persisted for many years in the print media. Duncan (1990) suggested the pictorial coverage of female sport participants resembled that of soft-core pornography and the primary focus of these athletes centered on their physical beauty. It was also later asserted by Daddario (1992) that photographed female competitors were trivialized and marginalized in annual special editions and general interest issues of a popular sport publication.

Bishop (2003) revealed that female athletes played a secondary role in the photographs – wives or girlfriends - which relegated any of their athletic achievements. Researchers examined the pictorial coverage of sportswomen pictured in two print outlets and discovered the majority of the photos was not representative of their athletic prowess (Fink and Kensicki, 2002).

Scholars discovered the images of female athletes had been misrepresented in sport publications for collegiate athletic programs as well (Buysse and Embser-Herbert, 2004). Women athletes received significantly less photographic coverage that featured them in uniform, field of play, and action shots. Weber and Carini (2012) found sportswomen were largely photographed in sexually suggestive positions and tended to participate in culturally constructed gender-neutral or feminine sports.

Media scholars also revealed images of women in sport were more aligned with fashion models than athletes (Kim and Sagas, 2014). While some of the previous portrayals of sportswomen were upheld by Kim and Sagas, there was increased representation of the athletes in active sport roles, which provided a small victory in the print publication in terms of multiple depictions of femininity displayed in the visual coverage. Given *ESPN The Magazine’s* Body Issue was intended to embrace and celebrate athletic bodies of all types, it was necessary to study how gender played a role in photographed content in the annual issue.

### Gender-appropriate sports

Previous research had suggested consumers developed

perceptions about gender-related roles based primarily on socially constructed thoughts and ideas (Messner, 2002).

Individual thoughts and ideas were often shaped and formed by cultural designation placed on concepts such as gender and these appointed characteristics allowed the public to act in accordance with social rules (Hargreaves, 1994).

Examples of the rules included what color clothing was acceptable for females and males, and the selection of an appropriate sport to participate in under these tacitly accepted guidelines. Scholars suggested that the media played a substantial role in many of the public's opinions in regard to the notion of gender-appropriate sports (Buisse and Embser-Herbert, 2004; Hardin and Greer, 2009; Jones and Greer, 2011; Kane et al., 2013; Knight and Giuliano, 2001). Thus, women who participated in sports deemed gender suitable or gender-neutral typically garnered more coverage in the media.

Past research studied consumers' perceptions to determine how they rated specific sports based on gender (Koivula, 2001). According to Koivula (2001), participants identified sports such as rugby, football, and boxing as masculine. They characterized feminine sports as synchronized swimming, gymnastics, and figure skating. Swimming, golf, and tennis rounded out the gender-neutral sports. Hardin and Greer (2009) found several factors emerged in regard to how consumers defined sports. The researchers discovered the participants identified sports as hyper masculine (for example, basketball, weightlifting, rugby); action sports (for example, skateboarding, snowboarding, wakeboarding); neutral sports (for example, tennis, soccer); and feminine sports (volleyball, gymnastics).

The scholars suggested these factors derived from repeated images in the media and how imagery influenced consumers' understanding of gender roles in sport. Thus, volleyball and gymnastics portrayed as feminine sports further detailed the influential nature of the media and its ability to strengthen consumer ideas about gender-appropriateness. Davis and Tuggle (2012) added "for female athletes to garner media coverage, they must be involved in socially acceptable individual sports and/or sports that highlight body type".

Additionally, research has found that female athletes that participate in team sports struggle to receive media coverage. Inquires in this area discovered female athletes received far less media attention than their male counterparts in terms of team sports because of team sports association with masculinity (Koivula, 1999).

Cooky et al. (2013) in their examination of female and male athletes in team sports, revealed that female competitors were essentially ignored on local media outlets and provided limited coverage on a national media outlet. According to the researchers, conventional logic does not apply to females in terms of the media coverage they receive. Shugart (2003) asserted female athletes in individual sports tend to garner more attention than female athletes in team sports.

Therefore, this study examined the photographic coverage of female athletes in comparison to their male counterparts in *ESPN The Magazine's* Body Issue. It examined the annual issue's celebration of sport athletes' bodies, as the study evaluated the treatment of women on its pages. Thus, the following hypotheses guided the investigation:

H<sub>1</sub>: Female athletes would be likely to receive more photographic coverage than male athletes.

H<sub>2</sub>: Female athletes were more likely to be photographed in non-athletic poses than male athletes.

H<sub>3</sub>: Female athletes were more likely to garner more prominent coverage than male athletes.

H<sub>4</sub>: Female athletes that participated in individual sports were more likely to receive photographic coverage than male athletes from individual sports.

H<sub>5</sub>: Female athletes that participated in team sports were more likely to receive less photographic coverage than male athletes from team sports.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative content analysis and examined the pictorial representation of both female and male athletes in *ESPN The Magazine's* Body Issue from 2009 – the issue's inception year – to 2015.

The Body Issue was used for the investigation because of ESPN's powerful presence in the sport marketplace and its ability to influence consumer behavior (Martin et al., 2014). *ESPN The Magazine* ranked among the top-25 circulated magazines in the country ("Alliance For Audited Media," 2014). In addition, the Body Issue was positioned in the market as an alternative to traditional print content because it represented change in how sport athletes received coverage.

The content analytic methodology was intended to examine communicated messages such as visual imagery through a systematically designed process (Singleton and Straits, 2005). Riffe et al. (2014) noted that the research tool organized mediated content according to designated rules in an attempt to determine if any relationship existed between categories through numerical assignment. It is an unobtrusive (that is, does not affect examined subject) and a non-reactive (that is, communicated message had already occurred) research instrument.

For this analysis, 12 measures for each respective photograph was developed and coded. First, the coders identified themselves on separate coding sheets to illustrate the data was autonomously observed. The month and the year of the magazine followed.

Next, detailed information that pertained to the photos was coded. The coders then recorded the gender of the athlete. That was followed by the primary focus of the photograph (that is, individual athlete, multiple athletes, coach). Photo location was the subsequent measure coded (that is, front cover photo, between the staples, back half of the magazine).

Coders then provided the page number where the photo started. This was followed by the type of picture (that is, action shot, non-active shot). The next measure was the photograph size (for example, small, large). The primary sport of the photographed athletes was coded (for example, soccer, MMA, golf, WNBA). Gender of the photographer was the next measure recorded. A Google search assisted in the confirmation of the photographers' gender. The final measure recorded was the type of sport (for example, team sport, individual sport).

Two trained coders with a background in sport communication independently coded the data for the study. Before the data collection commenced, the coders were trained over the course of several training sessions to ensure familiarity with the codebook protocols, clarified any ambiguity, and minimized differences in the data coding. None of the examined *ESPN The Magazine* The Body issues (that is, 2009 to 2015) for this study were included in the coder training. The training sessions were designed to increase coder confidence and comfort level with the investigated content (Riffe et al., 2014).

A total of 276 photos were coded for the study. This examination only included pictorial content listed in the magazine's Table of Contents that was explicitly defined as The Body Issue. Items that appeared in the Table of Contents without this distinction were excluded from the study. Of the 276 pictures, the investigators coded 58 of the same photographs to test for intercoder reliability.

Reliability examined the consistency of decisions made by the coders in the data collection process. The reliability of properly designed content analyses hinge on intercoder reliability, for it determines whether coders autonomously measure the variables consistently. According to previous content analyses, scholars (Wimmer and Dominick, 2003), proposed that between 10 and 25% of the content should be tested for coder agreement.

For this study, there was a 21% overlap in the data coded by the investigators. The minimal acceptable agreement level of 80% guided this examination (Riffe et al., 2014). Consequently, the coder simple agreement in the overlap area for the examined photographic content resulted in percentages that ranged from 94 to 100%. Scott's Pi was employed to correct for chance agreement between coders and the scores ranged from 0.859 to 1.

Thus, the intercoder reliability tests all landed in the acceptable range and confirmed the coders had thoroughly carried out coding protocol, observed the data consistently, and the application of the definitions and procedures were represented accurately. Lastly, the researchers reported descriptive data and Chi Square test results for the measures included in this study.

## RESULTS

The first hypothesis assumed that female athletes would likely receive more photographic coverage than male athletes. A total of 276 photos on *ESPN The Magazine's* Body Issue were coded. From the entire population of photos, there were 130 (47.1%) female athlete photos, 135 (48.9%) male athlete photos, and 11 (3.9%) photos featured both female and male athletes.

The results did not support the first hypothesis. The second hypothesis focused on whether gender played a role when athletes were photographed in non-athletic poses. Of the 175 non-athletic poses photos, 50.9% (89 photos) featured female athletes' photos, 46.3% (81 photos) featured male athletes' photos, and 2.8% (5 photos) were coded as "other". A Chi Square was utilized to determine if a difference existed between gender and athletes featured in non-athletic poses. Although sports-women were photographed in more non-athletic shots, it was not statistically significant ( $\chi^2=3.365$ ,  $p=0.162$ ).

As a result, the hypothesis that female athletes were more likely to be photographed in non-athletic poses than male athletes was rejected. The third hypothesis focused on prominent photographic coverage as it related to the athlete's gender. Of the 29 front cover photos, there were

12 (41.4%) female athlete photos and 17 (58.6%) male athlete photos.

A Chi Square test was used and determined the difference was not significant ( $\chi^2=14.176$ ,  $p=0.077$ ). The fourth hypothesis stated that female athletes participating in individual sports were more likely to receive photographic coverage than male athletes from individual sports. Of the 137 photos of athletes from an individual sport, 56.9% (78 photos) were females, 38.7% (53 photos) were males, and the remaining 4.4% (6 photos) were categorized as "other".

A Chi Square test revealed the difference was significant ( $\chi^2=36.010$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ). Given this finding, the hypothesis that female athletes who participated in individual sports were more likely to receive photographic coverage than male athletes from an individual sport was supported.

In hypothesis five, it was proposed that female athletes who participated in team sports were more likely to receive less photographic coverage than male athletes from team sports. Of the 138 photos of athletes from team sports, 37.7% (52 photos) featured females, 59.4% (82 photos) were devoted to males, and the remaining 2.9% (4 photos) were coded as "other".

A Chi Square was employed to analyze if a difference existed based on the photographic coverage of female and male athletes that participated in team sports. The Chi Square test showed that the difference was significant ( $\chi^2=36.010$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ). Therefore, the fifth hypothesis that female athletes participating in team sports were more likely to receive less photographic coverage than male athletes from team sports was upheld.

## DISCUSSION

This study sought to determine how *ESPN The Magazine's* Body Issue celebrated athletes' bodies in its annual special issue and whether or not differences existed in the coverage based on gender.

The Body Issue was intended to pay tribute to female and male athletes' physical features that highlighted various aspects of the body, and all they are capable of achieving. This study explored the magazine's pictorial content to develop a better understanding of how sportswomen were represented on the pages of the popular special issue and if their representation warranted a celebration in terms of the overall coverage.

Two of the hypotheses were supported and the results of the study provided some interesting findings. In comparison to their male counterparts, female athletes were allocated similar photographic coverage during the timeframe of the investigation. Given the nature of the Body Issues, the researchers thought that sportswomen would be overrepresented in their coverage. However, the results did not support this assertion. The magazine

was fairly balanced in regard to the total number of female and male athletes photographed for the special issue. Scholars have suggested the value media adds to sport products when they receive favorable coverage (Pedersen et al., 2017). While researchers noted that minimizing the coverage of female athletes sport accomplishments may shape consumers' opinions about females in sports (Yoo et al., 2013), some of the findings in this study proved to be a step in the right direction in terms of reshaping media agenda to include more frequent coverage of female athletes that could aid in eradicating hegemonic masculinity ideology. Sports-women were somewhat fairly represented throughout the duration of the investigation.

The results indicated *ESPN The Magazine's* Body Issue made progress in the frequency in which female athletes were covered. Therefore, some celebrating is warranted. Photographically, sportswomen nearly received the same amount of attention, garnered similar prominent coverage and were photographed at virtually the same rate as sportsmen in non-sport related portrayals, which challenged previous research in this area (Eagleman et al., 2009; Martin and McDonald, 2012).

Although some progress was discovered in the findings of the first three hypotheses, the final two hypotheses conveyed a similar narrative from past research. Female athletes participating in individual sports continued to garner media attention, while female athletes in team sports continue to trail their male counterparts in terms of the amount of coverage they are afforded in the media (Adams and Tuggle, 2004; Cooky et al., 2013; Hardin and Greer, 2009; Shugart, 2003).

This was rather perplexing given the increased participation of females in team related sports. The popularity of women in team sports (for example, soccer) continues to increase, and ESPN has a longstanding contractual relationship with women's team sport leagues (for example, WNBA). The hope is that reporting increases and articles and images capture the true essence of female sport competition yet this has not fully occurred and some of the findings revealed they have not kept pace.

Previous research indicated that ESPN tended to deliver favorable coverage to sport properties under contract with the sport media company (Martin et al., 2014). That was not the case for female athletes in team sports. Results from the study indicated sportswomen in team sports still struggle to receive analogous coverage to men in team sports, which falls in line with the media's power to frame reported information for the public. The lack of media attention allocated to women in team sports also aligned with hegemonic masculinity in that it strategically subordinated a large portion of female athletes.

Although it was previously mentioned that some of the results offered an opportunity to celebrate the

improvements in coverage for female athletes in the Body Issue, the merriment has several associated reservations of concern. The findings of this study supported Davis and Tuggle (2012) work that suggested the media primarily reported on female athletes when they participated in individual sports deemed socially acceptable that also highlighted their physical attributes. Female athletes only received equal coverage in comparison to their male counterparts because they fit into an established sport media role. The idea that the special issue is intended to embrace differences, diversity, and a tribute to athletes and their bodies, the Body Issue perpetuated some longstanding stereotypes of women in sports.

The results of the study revealed the power that the media have in regard to agenda setting. In terms of previous research that examined the amount of pictorial space allocated to female athletes in *ESPN The Magazine*, their coverage paled in comparison to males (Eagleman et al., 2009; Martin and McDonald, 2012). What was evidenced by the findings of this study was that that the magazine made a concerted effort to deliver consumers similar amounts of coverage between sportswomen and sportsmen. Thus, the magazine determined when it was important for its readers to consume sport activities by female athletes.

While female and male athletes were framed at nearly the same rate during the investigation, the proclivity of the media to position sportswomen photographed in non-athletic poses remained. Women want their athletic skills and competence to be showcased more than anything else (Kane et al., 2013; Smith, 2015).

Given that female athletes received fairly equal coverage in comparison to their male counterparts, the findings lend support to the idea that equitable coverage for sportswomen is attainable in the media. Moving consumers beyond the fictitious ideology of female athletes as second-class sport citizens must start with how they are portrayed in the media. It undermines sportswomen achievements, accomplishments, and activities when they are depicted as "other" in sports.

## Conclusion

The intended idea of *ESPN The Magazine's* Body Issue was to honor and commemorate the diverse physical features, attributes, and characteristics of all athletes. While the special issue's mission was maintained and the study even revealed some advances made in how female athletes were represented in comparison to their male counterparts, there is still much work needed before a true celebration commences.

Although, sportswomen nearly received equal photographic coverage as sportsmen in the Body Issue, this only happens once a year, and women are otherwise largely ignored in the bi-weekly print publication

(Eagleman et al., 2009; Martin and McDonald, 2012). Thus, it is reasonable to assume sportswomen likely garnered similar coverage to sportsmen because the annual issue focuses on the body.

Conversely, it is plausible to surmise that ESPN has actively worked to differentiate the Body Issue from other competitors in the marketplace. Showcasing diverse body types of female and male athletes can have a powerful impact on advancing cultural understanding. In addition, honoring various body types of athletes may play a critical role in building self-esteem and self-worth of impressionable young readers.

There were a few limitations to the study. The findings of the study are not generalizable beyond the *ESPN The Magazine's* Body Issue. This study only examined pictorial content in the special issue from 2009-2015. In addition, this inquiry solely focused on female and male photographic coverage and cannot generalize beyond gender.

To build on this research, future studies should examine how female athletes are represented in print publications devoted to an individual sport. Specifically, race and ethnicity of female athletes should be analyzed as well as female athletes with disabilities.

Future research in this area might consider examining if coverage differed in terms of gender by even or odd page numbers. Scholarly endeavors in the future should also consider examining this topic from an evolutionary psychology lens to determine the role evolved interests play in consumer readership and viewership. More research is needed to further develop this important topic of female athletes coverage in the media.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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