

# Comparative Analysis of Female and Male Coverage on ESPN's *SportsCenter*

Tywan G. Martin, University of Miami  
Young Ik Suh, University of West Georgia  
Antonio S. Williams, Indiana University  
Jennifer Locey, Jennifer Ramirez, & Maria Alea, University of Miami

## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study was to examine whether gender differences existed in the coverage on ESPN's flagship program, SportsCenter. This study was grounded in the theoretical frameworks of hegemony and agenda setting. The researchers collected data over the course of seven days during the 11:00 p.m. show. A comparative analysis was performed on the content of the popular one-hour television program that investigated the amount of coverage devoted to female and male sports, respectively. The findings of the study indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between the amount of highlights devoted to female athletes in comparison to their male counterpart. The results of this study challenged the notion that a symbiotic relationship existed regarding to all sports and media. While the findings suggested this relationship prevailed for male athletes, the opposite occurred for female athletes.*

## **Introduction**

For several decades, it had been suggested that sport and the media shared a symbiotic relationship (McChesney, 1989; Pedersen, Miloch, & Laucella, 2007). Media outlets relied on sport for content and sport enterprises relied on the media for their platforms that showcased sport offerings, which led to a considerable amount of success in the financial and commercial sectors of business (Coakley, 2007; DeSchraver, Mahony, & Hambrick, 2014). Sports popularity tended to accelerate with increased media coverage, while media generated substantial revenues from circulation and advertisement sales as a result of their extensive relationship and coverage of sports (Galily & Tamir, 2014).

As an example, the Walt Disney owned and operated cable and satellite television channel, ESPN, dominated the sport media marketplace. According to a report, ESPN's market power was evident in the \$6.04 monthly transmission fee cable and satellite providers paid to the network for programming, which was significantly higher than the next closest major sport entertainment provider, Turner Sports (i.e., TNT), at \$1.48 (Molla, 2014). The report suggested ESPN's estimated monthly subscription fee was likely to increase to \$8.37 per month by 2018 for subscribers. In addition, fans ranked ESPN the highest among its peer sport media competitors in critical areas such as deployment of innovative live content and production value ("Reader Survey," 2014). *SportsCenter*, the network's flagship program, has entertained viewers over the years with sport highlights, scores, analysis, information, news, headlines, and game recaps. With essentially no sustained challenge, the signature ESPN program dominated the sport news television genre for more than 30 years, an accomplishment that some industry representatives had proposed was the greatest historical television achievement since the advent of cable and satellite distribution (Bucher, 2012). While other cable and satellite

networks launched rival programming (e.g., FOX Sports Live), *SportsCenter* remained the top sport highlight show in the industry.

Given that success hinged on the amount of coverage media organizations devoted to sport enterprises, leagues, and athletes, it was important to examine the content of an influential program such as *SportsCenter*. Sport media scholars Pedersen et al. (2007) suggested, "A lack of media coverage results in a lack of awareness, and this can make it difficult for a sport entity to achieve sustained success" (p. 151). Mainstream media helped to add and strengthen credibility with sport consumers (Bishop, 2003). Media outlets played a substantial role in the value of sports and even shaped audience interest in a particular sport (Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013). Therefore, this study examined the coverage devoted to female sports on ESPN's *SportsCenter*.

## **Review of Literature**

### ***Hegemonic Theory***

According to previous research, sport and the mass media were two of the most prominent societal institutions that helped to preserve social dominance (Hardin, Lynn, & Walsdorf, 2005; Kane, 2013; Pedersen, 2002). Throughout the years, the entrenched relationship afforded both institutions commercial access and financial gains in the competitive marketplace. While sport and the media had mutually benefitted from their partnership, Pedersen (2002) proposed the two social institutions also combined forces to manufacture ideology related to gender through the production and presentation of hegemonic content. The concept of hegemony was described as the ability of elite societal groups to construct authoritative power over other groups through the practice of ideological norms (Fink, 2014). These social organizations served to assist the agenda of the dominant groups, while they synchronously undermined the advancement of other groups. Additionally, media scholars proposed that members of the ruling class was able to exact power and dominance through non-coercive symbols constructed through social institutions (Patrick & Thrall, 2007). Moreover, status quo ideas and concepts tended to be subliminally fostered and often unrecognized by media observers (O'Neill & Mulready, 2014).

### ***Hegemonic Masculinity***

Previous research had suggested that media outlets made a conscious decision to deliver content to audiences that preserved male power and privilege (Kane, 2013). Some studies postulated that media deliberately arranged messages for consumers to receive information that maintained the cultural power structure and thus generated the appearance that what they read, heard, and saw was "normal" and "natural" (Fink, 2014; Hardin et al., 2005). Media had demonstrated over the years the penchant to strengthen male superiority, while simultaneously marginalized female accomplishments (Cooper, Eagleman, & Laucella, 2009; Eagleman, Pedersen, Wharton, 2009; Turner, 2014; Vincent, Pedersen, Whisenant, & Massey, 2007). The maintenance of hegemonic masculinity in sport had been perpetuated through unforced, subtle activities by the mass media. Pedersen (2002) asserted that the two powerful institutions of sport and media jointly conspired to sustain male dominance and control. The researcher further revealed that this was achieved through the amount of coverage devoted to male sport achievements, while at the same time minimized and trivialized media coverage focused on female sport activities. Furthermore, Cooky et al. (2013) discovered sport news and highlight programs provided narrow reporting and the bulk of their coverage was devoted to male sports.

### **Agenda Setting**

Given that earlier research found mass media narrowed what they reported (Kane, 2013), it was important that this study employed agenda setting theory to further extrapolate on the media's coverage of female sports. The seminal work by McCombs and Shaw (1972) asserted that mass media was unable to tell us what to think; however, they had the power to infer what we should think about. Other media scholars postulated that the agenda setting framework served to provide an understanding as to how the media facilitated meaning and value to certain issues and how those issues became salient to the general public (Kioussis, McDevitt, & Wu, 2005; Tedesco, 2005). As coverage on a topic increased, so did public awareness in many instances (Wanta, 2013). The author further suggested that the amount of attention afforded an issue generally created a perception of importance and thus a transfer of salience ensued from the media to consumers. Principally, the mass media served as a transmitter of dominant social ideologies and beliefs (Wachs, Cooky, Messner, & Dworkin, 2012). This had also been found to be true in sport coverage. McCombs (2005) noted that sports were characterized and branded by the coverage they received. Media wielded its power that often shaped and influenced consumers' perceptions related to a particular sport (Eagleman, 2011). Furthermore, media value was typically garnered by the rate in which a topic was covered and it was difficult for sport leagues, teams, and athletes to experience commercial success when coverage was limited (Pedersen et al., 2007).

### **ESPN**

Previous research examined the coverage across various media platforms offered by the self-proclaimed worldwide leader in sports, ESPN. Martin, Williams, Whisenant, and Dees (2015) discovered *ESPN's The Magazine* extended preferential treatment to sport properties (i.e., the National Football League, X Games) that had a contractual agreement with ESPN/ABC family of networks. The organization (i.e., the Ultimate Fighting Championship [UFC]) with no contractual relationship received significantly less coverage even though mixed martial arts was considered the fastest growing sport in America at the time of the study. Moreover, the researchers revealed that the magazine only devoted 17 articles to the UFC during the time frame of the study.

In terms of the media conglomerate's Internet offerings, Coche (2013) examined the Australian Open's coverage of both women and men on ESPN.com. Of the 2,155 stories on the Grand Slam tennis tournament, only 20% was devoted to women, 72% to men, and 8% included both women and men or historical information about the sport of tennis. Given the significant difference in the amount of coverage, the investigators suggested ESPN.com framed men's tennis matches as more important than the women. Furthermore, the researchers proposed ESPN.com expanded the gender gap in media coverage between sportswomen and men.

Previous research examined ESPN's gender gap in terms of its television coverage on the network's flagship program *SportsCenter*. Early research that examined the highlight sport program to a rival sport show revealed only 5% of the stories included in the telecasts were devoted to female sports (Tuggle, 1997). The results also revealed coverage dedicated to female athletes and sports decreased over the investigated time frame, as less than 2% of the reported information was allocated to female sport stories. Eastman and Billings (2000) analyzed ESPN's *SportsCenter* compared it to another sport highlight program and two print publications to determine the amount of attention given to female athletes in comparison to their male counterpart. Although the authors found that gender bias was present in all of the outlets

included in the study, *SportsCenter* illustrated the greatest inequity in coverage. Moreover, the researchers discovered the popular sport show typically used the last five minutes to cover female athletes, trivialized female sport accomplishments with comical, sexual, and sarcastic overtones. Adams and Tuggle (2004) found that despite increased interest and participation in sports for female participants since the post-Title IX era, there still remained challenges in media attention allocated to women in sports on ESPN. The results of the study determined there was a ratio of 25:1 in regard to the number of stories devoted to male and female athletes, respectively during the examined time frame. Discrepancies also existed in coverage during ESPN's Women in Sports Weekend, as male athletes garnered 60 stories on the Saturday and Sunday over the course of the studied period and only one story was devoted to female athletes. Furthermore, the findings revealed there was less coverage in 2002 than there was in a previous study (Tuggle, 1997) that examined ESPN's *SportsCenter*.

Another study focused on *SportCenter's* coverage found the program set the sport agenda for consumers (Turner, 2014). The researcher discovered that the sport show had the power to drive interest, changed what was considered newsworthy information, and packaged and presented content that appeared salient to its audience. In essence, *SportCenter* determined and defined importance during the investigated time frame of the inquiry. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the amount of airtime ESPN's flagship program allocated on its show for female athletes in comparison to male athletes. It was important to continue to develop a better understanding of how the Walt Disney Company's media property treated female athletes on their popular sport highlight show. Given that ESPN represented the largest revenue stream in its parent company's portfolio (Badenhausen, 2014), more research was needed to ascertain how the influential sport media outlet set agendas on *SportsCenter*. Thus, this study sought to determine if there was a difference in the amount of time spent when female or male sports were covered.

## Method

Three researchers collected data from ESPN's 11:00 p.m. *SportsCenter* over the course of seven days. *SportsCenter* was selected for this study because it is the flagship program for ESPN and widely considered a pop-cultural phenomenon since its inception back in September of 1979 (Turner, 2014). The influential nature of ESPN was further explained in a report by *The Wall Street Journal* that cable and satellite providers paid the sport media network \$6.04 per month (Molla, 2014). Consequently, coverage extended to a sport on ESPN's *SportsCenter* was valued by audiences and perhaps prompted viewership for future sporting events (Adams & Tuggle, 2004). Conversely, sport entities that lacked television coverage tended to struggle in terms of sustained financial success (Pedersen et al., 2007). Therefore, the data collection process commenced January 20, 2015 and concluded January 26, 2015. The time frame was selected because there were a number of female sporting events (e.g., Australian Open, college basketball) during the examined period. For accuracy purposes a pre-test was conducted, as the researchers independently observed and recorded data for the same four 11:00 p.m. *SportsCenter* shows. The pre-test was important, for it helped to ensure that the investigators accurately collected data for the final analysis. With handheld stopwatches, the researchers recoded any sport highlights or interviews within the 60-minute sport show. The researchers filled in their own individual chart that was broken down by the episode date and the time – in minutes – devoted to both female and male highlights and interviews. Commercials and information gathered from the pre-test were not included in the final analysis.

## Results

The mean of men's sports coverage time on ESPN's *SportsCenter* was 40.55 minutes and the mean of women's sports coverage time on ESPN's *SportsCenter* was 1.92 minutes. The independent samples t-test found the difference was significant,  $t(12) = 25.317$ ,  $p = .021$ .

## Discussion

Throughout the last half century, new sport opportunities for female athletes produced tremendous results. For instance, female sport participation numbers have consistently increased, fandom and popularity of women's sports have escalated, and both women and men are paid equally at tennis Grand Slams are only a few progressive outcomes for female athletes over the last several decades (Cooky et al., 2013). In spite of the growth and development by girls and women in sport, they have not made significant inroads into the powerful sport media. As the current study examined the coverage afforded to athletes by gender on ESPN's *SportsCenter*, the findings revealed there was a statistically significant difference in the amount of reported information that female sports received in comparison to male sports. In terms of the research question for this study, coverage devoted to female athletes paled in comparison to male athletes. The results also revealed that very little had changed between *SportsCenter's* reporting of female sports in the past (Eastman & Billings, 2000; Tuggle, 1997; Turner, 2014) and what the current study discovered. Although there were 321 women's college basketball games played and a number Australian Open tennis matches that featured female athletes during the examined time frame, female sports only garnered 3.2% of the reported content on *SportsCenter*.

The findings suggested that Walt Disney's owned sport network's flagship program helped to marginalize the athletic accomplishments of female athletes. This directly aligned with previous research that asserted hegemonic philosophy allowed individuals or groups to construct authoritative power through the creation of practiced norms conveyed through the media (Fink, 2014). Furthermore, power and dominance was exacted through non-coercive symbols constructed through social institutions such as the media (Patrick & Thrall, 2007). What limited media coverage symbolized was unimportant, irrelevant, insignificant, and inconsequential. *SportsCenter* covertly and subtly minimized female sports and rendered them trivial to audiences. The popular sport highlight show assisted the preservation of male power and privilege (Kane, 2013), as *SportsCenter* devoted the bulk of its coverage to sport accomplishments by males. Moreover, the program supported the notion that the athletic prowess of males was normal and thus it is likely consumers viewed their activities similarly. Conversely, the opposite was plausible for female athletes, as sports that lacked media attention often incur various issues such as sustained success (Pedersen et al., 2007).

According to previous research, media was not effective at telling us what to think, but they had the power to suggest what we should think about and how to think about it (Carroll & McCombs, 2003). Additionally, research discovered media transferred salience (Wanta, 2013). If it was salient to report in the media, it ultimately became salient to media consumers. The results of this study clearly revealed *SportsCenter's* presented a male-oriented, male-dominated agenda during the time frame of the study. Given this information, *SportsCenter* helped to advance the agenda that male sport activities were far more superior and valuable than female sport achievements.

What should not be understated is the powerful presence of *SportsCenter*. It is the most consumed sport show on television (“ESPN Customer Marketing,” 2015). Content displayed and shown on the popular sports program garners the attention of millions on a daily basis. Hence, the show has tremendous influence over its viewers. Coverage on *SportsCenter* creates value in the minds of consumers with respect to the leagues, teams, and athletes featured on the show. Given many fans rely on the highlight program for sport news and information, it is reasonable to surmise *SportsCenter* could play a substantial role in the development of female sports. Presently, the show alienates female accomplishments and marginalizes their sport activities to near obscurity. This practice of alienation certainly does not reflect ESPN's parent company, Walt Disney and its Disney Institute, which works with various Fortune 500 companies, health care providers, and college and universities administrators on leadership enhancement strategies. According to the Disney Institute “A leader is far more than a label – leadership is about taking actions to create sustained, positive transformations within an organization” (“Disney Institute,” 2015, para. 1). The definition offered by the Disney Institute brings into question the accuracy of ESPN's moniker as the self-proclaimed worldwide leader in sports when its flagship program disenfranchises an entire segment of the sport industry. Thus, increased coverage on *SportsCenter* could serve a catalyst in the transformation of consumer behavior in regard female sports. The content is generally available, as there were various women's college basketball games and tennis matches during the examined time frame of the investigation. Since the public typically holds sport leagues, teams, and athletes to higher social responsibility standards than most other industries (Stoldt, Dittmore, & Branvold, 2012), it is reasonable that similar demands are placed on a sport media outlet's program to help foster change in terms of consumer behavior with respect to female sport activities.

The results of this study challenged the symbiotic relationship that media has with sport (McChesney, 1989; Pedersen et al., 2007). Given the findings of this study mirrored the results of previously examined female and male sport coverage on *SportsCenter* (Adams & Tuggle, 2004; Tuggle, 1997; Turner, 2014), it is sensible to conclude that media and sport share a symbiotic relationship primarily with male-oriented sports. What makes this apparent decision to not report on female sports rather peculiar is that ESPN has a contractual relationship with women's college basketball and the Australian Open, which features female athletes. Showcasing their accomplishments on *SportsCenter* could potentially serve a promotional tool to proliferate viewership and ultimately increase sponsorship value for current and prospective clients. ESPN and its popular show may be missing out on an opportunity to generate more revenue into the organization. Instead, *SportsCenter's* hegemonic content undermines the achievements of female sports. It is incredibly difficult to garner the respect and credibility when programs such as *SportsCenter* fail to allocate airtime for female athletes. This brand of agenda setting helps in the construction of consumer value systems. When female sport coverage is significantly less than their male counterpart, the perception is advanced that there is little to no importance in the sport because of the lack of media attention.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

There were a couple of limitations in this study. Since data was only collected from one media program, the results cannot be generalized. Moreover, the researchers only analyzed the 11:00 P.M. *SportsCenter* show. *SportsCenter* had more than 10 shows per day, so the research might have changed if the researchers focused on other show times. To acquire a broader view of media coverage, future research needs to focus on multiple sports shows as well as different print and Internet sites. Thus, future research needs to collect data from the other weeks of

women's sporting events such as the WNBA championship, softball matches, the women's college basketball tournament, etc.

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