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### An Examination of Gender Bias in Print Coverage of High School Athletics

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## **An Examination of Gender Bias in Print Coverage of High School Athletics**

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This study examined the balance of newspaper coverage in regards to male and female high school athletes by way of a content analysis. Using the Messenger Post, a small daily in upstate New York, this study explored whether or not gender biases exist within the publication. 328 photographs were gathered from the 2011 spring sport season (April 1 to June 13) and analyzed with a keen eye towards placement, color, and quantity. Results proved to contradict past research. The sample shows that males have a greater prominence in the newspaper – in each of the factors discussed above – but not by a significant margin. These findings are encouraging for female athletes, as the established notion and practice of male dominance in newspapers has been prominent for many years. This is an essential field of research, because it addresses a specific group of individuals who are underreported and neglected by the media.

### **Document Type**

Undergraduate Project

### **Professor's Name**

Emily Dane-Staples

### **Subject Categories**

Sports Management

An Examination of Gender Bias in Print Coverage of High School Athletics

Kevin English

Saint John Fisher College

### **Abstract**

This study examined the balance of newspaper coverage in regards to male and female high school athletes by way of a content analysis. Using the Messenger Post, a small daily in upstate New York, this study explored whether or not gender biases exist within the publication. 328 photographs were gathered from the 2011 spring sport season (April 1 to June 13) and analyzed with a keen eye towards placement, color, and quantity. Results proved to contradict past research. The sample shows that males have a greater prominence in the newspaper – in each of the factors discussed above – but not by a significant margin. These findings are encouraging for female athletes, as the established notion and practice of male dominance in newspapers has been prominent for many years. This is an essential field of research, because it addresses a specific group of individuals who are underreported and neglected by the media.

## **An Examination of Gender Discrepancies in the Photographic Coverage of High School Athletics**

For years, the “status quo” among media outlets’ coverage of male and female sports has been severely slanted (Pederson & Whisenant 2002). Males have received far more coverage in a number of different outlets: on television, radio and the internet. Research has also indicated that there’s a substantial gap in newspaper coverage of male and female athletics. Specifically, research has shown that this gap exists on the high school level. The trend shows that males continuously and significantly outweigh females in terms of their presence on the sports pages of newspapers (Pederson, 2002). This discrepancy has been shown in a multitude of ways, including the number and placement of articles written, and the number and placement of photographs taken. Other discrepancies can be found in the length of said articles and the ratio of color and black and white photographs between both genders (Pederson, 2002). Clearly, the issue at hand is the unfair treatment and lack of exposure for women’s high school athletics. The media’s slanted coverage favoring male athletics trivializes females even further away from the newspaper. This narrow-minded media philosophy is critical to critique, as their content reaches millions of people each and every day. By showing that female athletics aren’t as noteworthy or significant as male athletics, the wrong message is being sent to those who consume sports, especially the next generation. This common practice should attempt to be corrected, because of the millions of people that are affected by the media. Thus, this study aims to highlight and bring awareness to the established truth about male domination in the media on the high school level – otherwise known as Hegemonic Masculinity, a concept further discussed in the next section (Pederson, 2002). More broadly, this research explored the potentially bias coverage of high school athletics in print media. The ultimate goal is to bring awareness to the issue at hand.

Only upon examination and interpretation of the results can one begin to make change against the media's "status quo."

### **Literature Review**

Males have a clear domination over women in terms of newspaper coverage all around the world. While an international case will be noted, the vast majority of the focus will be placed on research conducted within the United States. Pederson (2002) proposes a Theory of Hegemonic Masculinity that can explain why this infatuation with male sports in the media exists in today's world. The theory Pederson states is that sports act to preserve the male characteristic of masculinity. This notion of masculinity is considered the defining characteristic of western society (2002). The view of women comes at a consequence in this theory. They are considered off limits, and out of the media's main priorities because of a focus on male power and control within sports. Women are seemingly ignored when it comes to photographs, or print, material (Pederson, 2002). Their presence in newspapers has not reached the level it has for males. This is perhaps because it would act as a threat to this established notion of Hegemonic Masculinity. Thus, Pederson describes female high school athletes as being oppressed because of the barriers they face to exposure, and the ever-prevalent desire for the media to continue their bias coverage of male athletics. Pederson & Whisenant (2003) further describe this concept of hegemony and the media. Hegemony is described as the "process of control through a variety of societal, political and economic factors. As a social theory, hegemony is the condition in which certain groups within a society wield authority over other groups" (2003, p. 305). This concept is able to be applied to the mass media's mindset of suppression of females in sports. They are a clear example of a group that "wields authority" over others (female athletics) in their lack of coverage. Pederson & Whisenant's ideas confirm the notion of male domination in the media as

a legitimate and workable theory. Furthermore, their research also indicates reasons why female athletes as a whole are often neglected by the media.

Pederson & Whisenant cite female athletes' acceptance of the "status quo" as a reason why there is continued disparate coverage of them (2003). This points to an established system of thinking that's flawed, one that's been in place so long that it's become an accepted practice. The notion also arises that women accept this oppression as a norm, and don't work to overcome the obstacles that lie in front of them, thereby preserving the status quo (Pederson & Whisenant, 2002). Along the lines of this practice being an established norm, a look at the 1988 Olympic Games point to a specific instance of female suppression. Males who covered the game were generally biased towards male events, meaning they gave much of their attention and efforts towards covering male events. Meanwhile, females took more of a diverse and balanced approach, covering both sexes with some semblance of balance (Duncan, 1990). Duncan further exemplifies the gender gap by pointing out differences in photographic coverage, pointing to differences in the way poses and body positions, facial expressions, and camera angles were utilized. In this sense, Duncan notes that males captured women in more provocative poses, while female photographers chose to display both sexes in neutral lights. While the information is somewhat outdated, this example only serves as a timeframe that represents this longstanding issue.

In another more recent study, Pederson & Whisenant (2003) examined the view of high school athletics directors towards the newspaper's coverage of male and female athletics. Based on the author's hypothesis, there's a clear coloration to this ignorance and resistance towards increased exposure for female athletics. Pederson & Whisenant surmise that athletic directors will claim newspaper coverage between genders is no different in terms of: amount of coverage

(articles, and length of articles), quality of coverage, and, depending on gender, view of newspaper's coverage from the athletic director's vantage point. Pederson, Schneider and Whisenant (2003) further examine the question of if newspaper coverage is driven by those who are in power. So, rather, than examining those in power as athletic directors, their study delves into the gender and subsequent coverage of male and female sports of newspaper staff writers. The overwhelming majority of these newspaper staffs are males, and, in fact, one-hundred percent of sports editors noted in the study are indeed males. While findings indicate that both genders are equally responsible for the underrepresentation of females in the media, this brings up the notion of females accepting the status quo, and at issue, not having much of a choice because of their lack of power and control in what is actually produced in newspapers (Pederson & Whisenant, 2003). While relating to the workplace of sports department of newspapers, this is also another instance in which the theory of hegemonic masculinity is mentioned and understood, lending more credence to its usage as a theory in newspaper coverage of gender in sports.

Pederson, Schneider & Whisenant further note the issue women face on a more global scale, citing that the "print media coverage of sport in Australia is overwhelmingly devoted to and contributed by men" (2003, p. 379). This helps explain that this conflict at hand is widespread, and not limited to certain areas (the United States). Pederson, Schneider and Whisenant give greater meaning to the lack of female voices in the industry by introducing one and explaining her feelings. USA Today reporter Christine Brennan noted that, "I'm afraid we're (women) going to need another twenty to thirty years of women getting into the business to help [provide] equitable coverage of females" (2003). Kowalski, McHugh, Mosewich and Vangool (2009) examine a case in which female athletes feel pressure to perform to the media's

expectations and demands, leading to a conforming to the norm of male athletics (and in particular track and field). This supports the notion that the status quo has been adopted. Clearly, the established research in this area of study shows a long-running issue involving women in sport. Breaking down barriers and establishing new norms will require time and an increase in awareness to a problem that many (including both males and females) have generally accepted due in part to the media.

Borland & Bruening (2010) offer another clear-cut example of female underrepresentation. While the example isn't directly involved in the media, it speaks to the wide reach of the theory of hegemonic masculinity, and draws a parallel to the issues female athletes are facing. This study looks at women's college basketball, and how African American women lack support and strength in the coaching fraternity. This lack of strength comes from suppression from outside forces, most notable those that are already in power, or coaching positions. According to questionnaires given out to African American assistance coaches in the study done by Borland & Bruening, stereotypes were mentioned most frequently as a barrier to entry into the coaching ranks. Ideas for breaking out of this mold included an increased emphasis on networking. This act reinforces the thought that women are forced to work extra-hard in an effort to gain respect in a male-dominated world.

This research study further explores the nature of newspaper coverage of male and female high school athletics within a small market. As most of the previous research has explored widely circulated print, it is possible that with a more defined readership area that the types of coverage given to these athletes will be altered.

## Research Questions

1. Is there a significant difference in the placement of male and female photographs in the Messenger Post?
2. How significant is the relationship between the number of color and black and white photographs of male and female high school athletes?
3. Overall, which gender will be greater represented in terms of the number of photographs printed?

## Method

### Subject Selection

This study included a content analysis of newspaper photographs of high school athletes (male and female) taken from the Canandaigua Messenger Post in the State of New York. A total of 63 issues of the Messenger's sports section were examined during the spring sports season containing a total of 328 photographs. The descriptive research was conducted over the beginning of the 2011 high school spring sport season (start time of April 1 to June 13). The spring sport season was chosen with an eye towards erasing any potential biases (Pederson 2002). Biases that could occur in the fall season might include an emphasis on football, thus skewing females' photographic data. Another potential for bias to be mindful of derives from who is *taking* these pictures. Currently, there are seven contributors to the Messenger's sports staff, all of which are males. This notion can lead to male-orientated thinking, which could put female athletics last in line.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Sport sections of the newspaper were collected each time the paper was released (six times per week, Sunday-Friday) for examination and interpretation across both genders. Factors that were taken into account include the type of photograph (black and white or color) placement of the photograph (what page of the newspaper) and which gender the photograph depicted. Data was collected through a meticulous read through of all 63 issues, which amounted to 550 pages from April 1 to June 13. Each time a photograph of a high school athlete was found, it was carefully marked and classified under the appropriate category (male or female, color or black and white and page number). All issues of the sports page were gathered between April 1 to June 13, allowing for every single photograph printed by the Messenger to be accounted for and analyzed.

### **Data Analysis**

SPSS, a statistical analysis computer program, was utilized to examine relationships between the pertinent variables. Using the program, frequency analyses, and Chi-Squared tests were run in order to better understand gender relationships. Findings taken from 550 pages of newspaper content were examined for trends involving the theory of Hegemony Masculinity; that is, to repeat, the notion that males are a more prominent force in the collective mind of western culture. The results of frequency analyses and Chi-Squared tests will be discussed in further detail in the next section.

### **Results and Discussion**

Each particular variable (color, placement, and quantity), when examined independently, was vital in gaining an understanding of the bigger picture of gender in the Messenger. The findings have indeed showed which gender receives more photographic coverage, and in

particular, which gender enjoys more visible coverage. It is crucial to compare each of these factors among both genders, in order to point out and examine any trends that are comparable to past research. However, the findings in this particular study are not supported by previous research, as well as the established theory on male domination in the media.

### **Frequency of Male and Female Photographs**

Contrary to the prevailing notions found in the literature review, there *was* balance in the Messenger's coverage between male and female athletics at the high school level. Of the 328 photographs examined among 63 issues of the newspaper, 175 contained male athletes, whereas 148 photographs depicted female athletes, and 5 displayed both genders. In other words, a difference of just 8% was found among the genders (54.1% males to 45.1% females).

Additionally, males were found to be more prominent figures on the front page, as well as on page one of the newspaper. But the relationship between genders was not significant. Male photographs were discovered on the front page 83 times (54.6%), while females were featured on the front page 69 times (45.3%). The remaining pages show that male's out-number females on all pages save for page 3. However, the sample size is minimal, with 13 or fewer photographs being discovered of any single gender after the first page. Interestingly, a spike in photographs was found on page 7, where 13 male athletes and 8 female athletes resided.

### **Color Photograph Relationships Among Genders**

The overwhelming majority of photographs printed by the Messenger were in color (93.5%). No significance was discovered upon running Chi-Squared tests. For the quantity of color photographs among both genders,  $p=.828$ . Furthermore, for the location of both genders on the front page,  $p=.228$ . Tests were not run in order to determine the significance regarding black and white photographs because of their scarcity. Black and white photographs accounted for

only 6.5% of all photographs printed by the Messenger in the spring sports season. In terms of the quantity of photographs and their division among both genders, males were represented 164 times in color (54.3%) while females were depicted 138 times (45.6%). Additionally, males were found on the front page 83 times (53.5%), while females were represented on 69 occasions (44.5%). Both genders were depicted in a singular photograph in three cases (1.9%).

### **Conclusion**

Overall, it is clear that the Messenger does not promote the Theory of Hegemonic Masculinity, proposed by Pederson (2002). In fact, it appears the Messenger shatters the societal norm. Their coverage of male and female athletics is nearly equal, and though the scales remain tipped in the favor of males, females clearly are not lagging far behind. From this, one can surmise that the Messenger Post does place an emphasis on high school female athletics.

No significance was found when examining relationships pertaining to color, placement, and quantity of photographs within the Messenger Post. Furthermore, males held a minuscule 8% advantage over females in terms of their overall placement in the publication. These findings are encouraging for what lies ahead for female athletes in the newspaper, as results proved to contradict prior research in the field of sports and gender.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are a number of different limitations involved with this study, as well as a number of different approaches to examine this specific topic further. When examining the photographs, those who are taking the pictures should be taken into account. Further research could be conducted when examining a potential relationship between photographer's gender and the gender of the subject(s) they choose to shoot. For this particular study, an emphasis was placed on ensuring only those photographs that were taken by the Messenger staff – and not submitted

by fans, parents, etc. – were analyzed. For future studies, it would be suggested to keep a keen eye on whom the photo is credited to, as staff photos certainly provide the best insight into what the newspaper values in terms of male and female athletics. User generated content, previously referred to as photographs taken by fans or parents, should be discarded at all times.

Another potential relationship could be found when examining a newspaper that has a larger circulation than the Messenger, one that likely covers more of the national sports scene opposed to the local sports scene. To surmise, it's likely that there would be a tremendous discrepancy between the coverage of both male and female high school athletics, simply for the fact that the coverage is geared towards national interests. The question then becomes how the Messenger would stack up to a comparable publication. In this scenario, future research could be completed by finding a similar newspaper in terms of size (circulation) location (suburban, rural, both) as well as a number of other factors. For example, proximity to a professional or semi-professional sports team could be examined. Perhaps the presence of this team pushes the coverage of high school athletes off the page completely. Surely, the presence of hyper-popular professional teams would account for the presence, or absence, of high school athletes.

Another study could include a follow-up content analysis with the Messenger, and examine if this trend holds true for not only the spring sport season, but for example, the winter sport season. It is worth repeating that newspaper coverage in the fall would likely be slanted towards males because of their participation in football. Perhaps the winter sport season, with an equitable amount of sports available to both genders, would provide for trends that either follow, or contradict these findings from the spring. Determining the Messenger's goals would also be more easily found this way, as a more accurate read on their goals and values would be easier to find over an elongated period of time.

Finally, future research can examine gender bias trends in newspapers by shifting the focus from photographs to articles. By examining the number, placement, and length of photographs across both genders, a better idea of the particular publication's goals and objectives can be obtained. Of course, such a study would be privy to biases, so a strict eye towards who is writing these articles and the timeframe for which they're examined would be essential in getting meaningful, interpretable data.

Ultimately, this study has brought hope to female athletics on the high school level. The Messenger Post's proven equitable coverage of male and high school athletics can serve as a guide for what newspaper should strive for. And this research can serve as the platform from which change can ultimately be made, allowing for its content to influence those in power to shift the way in which they approach female high school athletes – and female athletes as a whole.

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Table 1

*Data Analysis of Gender, Color and Placement of Photographs*

Color/Page Location	Male	Female	Both	$\chi^2$
Color Photographs	164	138	5	.828
Front Page	83	69	3	.228
Page One	70	62	1	n/a
Page Two	3	2	1	n/a
Page Three	2	6	0	n/a
Page Four	1	0	0	n/a
Page Five	0	0	0	n/a
Page Six	1	1	0	n/a
Page Seven	13	8	0	n/a
Page Eight	2	0	0	n/a

*Note.* “Both” column indicates a photograph that had both male and female athletes in a singular photo. Chi-Square analysis compares each gender singularly and the photograph placement or type.