

## Gendered Images in Sport Film: What Messages are being Sent?

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*Social learning theory states that we look to images that surround us to help us to learn how to behave as a member of society; sport provides some of these images. Sport images are used in daily life to provide information and entertainment; therefore it is critical to understand what specific images are teaching us. The depiction of male and female athletes has been researched across multiple forms of media, each showing significant differences in how each gender is depicted. However, most of this research is hindered by geographic or national specificity. This research chose to explore the potential differences in gender portrayal in sport films, which are not bound by the same restrictions. Using six sport films, three targeting each gender, behavioral characteristics were counted to determine the manner in which athletes and non-athletes of each gender were scripted. Loglinear analysis showed three significant lower-order interactions; one, the gender of movie target audience and the character role, two, the gender of the movie target audience and the gendered behavioral characteristics portrayed, and third, the character role, and gendered behavioral characteristics. As movies can be constructed in whatever manner desired to fit the anticipated commercial appeal, the significance of the target movie audience is not surprising. However, as different messages about proper social behavior are being delivered in each, audiences are receiving different messages about gender behavior.*

### INTRODUCTION

Next to research on Title IX, the portrayal of women in media is the most commonly researched topic in the field of Sport Studies (Cohen 2001). In past years, women were seldom recognized at all in media forms. While women are now getting some coverage, the strong disproportional amount of coverage and the actual participation numbers presents a false image of what women in sport really look like (Eastman and Billings 2000). Currently women make up about forty percent of participation yet they receive less than fifteen percent of all media coverage including television, newspaper, radio, and magazine (Coakley 2007). Many sport studies researchers argue that this small amount of coverage implies that, to publishers of sport media, women are not worth the coverage. At the very least, this disproportionate coverage implies that women are not participating in the amount that they actually are.

This disproportionate representation has the potential for powerful impacts on society. Social learning theory claims that viewers learn about reality through the created images (Emmers-Sommer, Triplett, Pauley, Hanzal, 2005). The observation of these images teaches viewers which attitudes and behaviors are considered normal

(Scharrer, Kim, Lin, Liu 2006). Especially problematic for young women these days is the bombardment of images that are unhealthy. Young female readers of magazines often “internalize the ideals presented and... attempt to define their own self-concept by emulating the role models presented” (Thomsen, Bower and Barnes 2004:267). As the ideals presented are increasingly unattainable or unhealthy, this presents a serious problem for young women today (Clay, Vignoles and Dittmar 2005). Female athletes are told they need to be strong to perform well and sexy to be accepted by greater society (Thomsen et al. 2004).

A major theme in the body of research about women in media is the type of coverage that women athletes in sports do actually receive (Coakley 2007). Across all forms of media, women receive different quantities and types of coverage than men receive (Cohen 2001). Analysis of the content of magazines also demonstrates the “hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity” (Curry, Arriagada & Cornwell, 2002, p. 397) within texts, advertisements, and selected photographic imagery. This has been confirmed in sport specific magazines as well as popular culture magazines (Thomsen et al. 2004; Hardin, Lynn and Walsdorf, 2005; Baker 2005).

While much of the research conducted has been geographically or nationally specific, this linking of “text to the everyday life” varies based on location (Hardin et al. 2005). Some research has begun to explore a media that does not have these limitations; that of the silver screen. Movies have become a billion dollar industry, and have the potential for translation into any number of languages (Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) 2007). Research has demonstrated that movies inform the general population about societal expectations and serve to perpetuate stereotypes (Lauzen and Dozier 2005; Stern 2005). While most of this research has not utilized a single genre of film, it would be important to consider as the target viewing audience is likely to change based on movie category (comedy, action, romance, etc.). Directors, screenwriters and editors often look to anticipated viewing audiences to help shape what the final product will look like (Emmers-Sommer et al. 2005).

Movies are consciously constructed projects, with characters, images, and casting all coming from specific parties. In 2006, the United States Box Office totals for

the year exceeded \$9.49 billion Dollars (MPAA 2007). The increasing availability of technology has allowed for these box office numbers to be underestimated. Box office sales now only account for approximately one fifth of total film earnings (Stern 2005). As the rate of films being released has increased approximately five percent each of the last three years (MPAA 2007), the available material for viewing is growing, and its potential impact on society needs to be understood.

In this instance, the conscious construction nature of images is not different than the other forms of media already discussed. However, specific media guides, newspaper articles, and sports broadcasts are often restricted by geographical region or monetary availability to purchase or view such goods. The motion picture industry, however, is very consistent and doesn't have the same geographic limitations. The same version of a mainstream movie is released in all the theaters, regardless of geographic location. The type of images seen in Ohio will be seen in Calgary. The story will be the same in New York as it is Tokyo. For this reason, movies have a greater potential of influencing personal conceptions of images in consistent manners to the largest number of people. It was the purpose of this research to begin the understanding of the portrayal of women in sport films. Specifically, this research attempted to discover if some of the same patterns of representation of each gender that are found in print and broadcast media are also found in motion pictures.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Through observation, members of society learn acceptable behaviors (Hughes and Seta 2003). Although mental schemata are often stereotypical, this is necessary to allow navigation through the social environment. Research has shown that, regardless of age, individuals are able to identify what is "appropriate" and "inappropriate" for men and women in terms of occupation, physical appearance, character traits, and roles in relationships (Scharrer et al. 2006; Thomsen et al. 2004; Hughes and Seta 2003; Johnston and Swanson 2003).

Bandura's (1994) social learning theory explains how these images are seen as a guide to acquisition of behavior that will allow person's to succeed in society (Scharrer

et al., 2006). Specifically, three variables, behavior, person, and situation all combine to influence development and what is ultimately learned (Phares 1992). This triangle of variables is seen in the movie-goer, the behaviors that are exhibited on screen, and the situation in which they are exposed to a film. Different from other theorists, Bandura does not believe that reinforcement of outcome behaviors is necessary for learning to occur. Thus, awareness and observation can be enough for people to learn expected behaviors (Phares 1992). For movie-goers, there may or may not be reinforcement given, as parents allow attendance to certain movies potentially implying appropriateness or a peer group's response to suggestions to view certain films. For all attendees, there is most assuredly awareness and observation as rapt attention during a film is required to understand humor, track character development, and follow the plot line.

Socialization into society and into sport specifically comes over time and in many different ways (Coakley 2007). While agents of socialization can come in many forms, information overload has become the norm in society and it is almost impossible to determine all of the agents and the magnitude and type of impacts received. Parents and peer groups have been shown to be the most influential in children's socialization into sport (Coakley 2007). However, as technology has developed and family structure has changed, the influence of popular media is also a powerful agent of socialization. One recent examination of television commercials demonstrated this immediate and persuasive nature of images (Scharrer et al. 2006). After being shown a commercial that featured a single gender playing with a toy, children were more likely to declare that the toy was *only* appropriate for the portrayed gender (Scharrer et al. 2006). This small exposure is just one example of why constructed images in media need to be more fully understood and analyzed.

The quantity of coverage, although increasing for female athletes, is not the only critical element that should be examined (Eastman and Billings 2000). The *how* of depiction also has an impact on viewers. Research has shown that children tend to overestimate the frequency of events that align with their stereotypes (Hughes and Seta 2003). Therefore, if stereotypes are begun early, and not challenged but

reinforced through media imagery, there is a natural tendency to perpetuate the idea that male and female athletes are not equal.

Most forms of media are consciously constructed. While live news broadcasts are fairly spontaneous, other materials such as newspapers, magazines, and sport media guides are all prepared in advance to convey certain images and messages. Media guides for sport teams are often the first introduction of schools, teams, and specific athletes to potential recruits, members of the press, and the fans of sport programs (Kane and Buysse 2005). As media guides are constructed to represent the image that the university wants to promote, they are a good medium to examine the different messages that universities send about their men's and women's teams. In the first year of coding, less than half of the women's covers showed the women in uniform and in active poses on the court (Kane and Buysse 2005). Longitudinal analyses demonstrate that the images of men's and women's teams have become more similar over time, but still more frequently show a male domination of on the court, active, and in team uniforms (Kane and Buysse 2005). This perpetuates the mindset that women are substandard athletes or should be treated differently than the men are.

Media guides are not the only types of planned images that reinforce gender stereotypes. Cuneen and Sidwell (1998) conducted a content analysis of advertising models in *Sports Illustrated for Kids* (SIK). Males were depicted in advertisements over females by a ratio of 12:1. And within those images, men were more likely to be shown in team sport settings playing prominent roles while the females were not active or placed in supporting roles (Cuneen and Sidwell 1998). Advertising also shows a racial bias towards Black females. The percentage of Black women portrayed as athletes was significantly higher than the percentage of White women portrayed as athletes (Baker 2005). This utilization of print media presents a unique bias to truly understanding any disproportionate coverage. Models selected for use in advertisements must possess a certain level of attractiveness to be utilized in order to "tell the story" in quick time (Mullen, Hardy and Sutton 2000). This basic of marketing then excludes anyone who is not attractive regardless of their athletic talents. As movies are not a single snapshot,

audiences are more forgiving of a lack of attractiveness as they are given time to learn about a character's other valued qualities (Lauzen and Dozier 2005).

Print media is not the only exemplar of this type of biased coverage and portrayal. Broadcast journalism and television commercials also find their own ways to maintain gender boundaries and preferences. During the 1992 Summer Olympics, Higgs and Weiller (1994) found that "less than half of the coverage (44%) went to women athletes" (as cited in Eastman and Billings 2000). Furthering this explanation, the type of coverage that women receive was the more traditionally appropriate sports (swimming, gymnastics) and not the team and contact sports (Eastman and Billings 2000). In examining domestic participation and aptitude of each gender in television commercials, males performed significantly fewer domestic chores than females and were more often portrayed as relatively inept when compared to their female counterparts (Scharrer et al. 2006). These examples further demonstrate that the "natural" abilities of each gender are still firmly entrenched in traditional gender ideology.

Not all magazines are produced for the same reasons nor consumed by readers of identical demographics. *Glamour* and *Vogue* are primarily constructed to provide readers with fashion and beauty information while *Time* and *Newsweek* are constructed to inform readers about national and world events (Hardin et al. 2005). Each magazine will be targeting particular readers with their choice of content in articles, advertisements, and use of popular icons, which may account for some of the variance in research findings when examining magazine content. Even when the target audience is controlled for, cultural hegemony is present (Hardin et al. 2005). Women's magazines such as *Shape*, *Real Sports*, *Sports Illustrated Women*, and *Women's Sports and Fitness* still have the majority of images framed as "sports cuties" rather than serious athletes. This further implies a lower status for women, as their accomplishments are not being advertised (Baker 2005). In mainstream magazines, sexual women are used to demonstrate a relationship between product usage and the availability of the woman in the image. Use this product and you too can have an attractive woman at your side. If she happens to be a famous athlete, she may have more face recognition, but it is

doubtful that the product being sold is related to her success in athletics (Curry et al. 2002). This category of research is labeled sexualization (Kane and Buysse 2005). Female athletes are no longer being shown as the wholesome girl next door who also happens to be an athlete, but as strict objects of sexual desire that are on display to tantalize heterosexual men (Kane and Buysse 2005).

Female athletes describe the conflict they experience when navigating the “sociocultural expectations of femininity and the reality that a larger stronger physical body type is required to compete at elite levels” (Thomsen et al. 2004:269). This is seen within the realities of competition as well as from Hollywood. The “recent trend in action heroines has been toward women who can perform not only the violence and physical stunts associated with traditional masculinity but also the beauty and sexuality associated with traditional femininity” (Coon 2005:3). This is labeled as ambivalence (Kane and Buysse 2005). This category of portrayal shows female athletes as athletes, but also as embodying the traditional female image of being pretty and feminine. This gives a mixed message to viewers. Are they women or are they athletes? While some would claim that they are both, the need for reinforcement of the traditional implies that without it there would be an “image problem.”

The “image problem” in athletics refers to the implication of hetero- or homosexuality of the athlete. Historically, one of the major hesitations to the inclusion of women in sport has been the fear of the downfall of the family and value teaching to children (Cohen 2001). Strict gender role depiction that is seen in television series, commercials, and advertising determines which behaviors and activities are likely to be met with social penalties or social rewards (Scharrer et al. 2006). Straying too far from the feminine ideal and traditional expectation, such as participating in sports, has led to the label of lesbian being placed on female athletes (Griffith 1998). This category of research that looks at the evidence of the “invisible ‘L’ word” shows how the construction of images is done in such a way to provide assurance of heterosexuality (Kane and Buysse 2005). These image producers do not come right out and say ‘she is NOT a lesbian,’ but women are depicted with their children, husbands, and boyfriends.

This is to reassure the public that while she is an athlete and is stepping out of her traditional role, she hasn't strayed too far from what we expect of her.

Sexualization, ambivalence, and the use of the invisible "L" word have all been examined in multiple forms of media. However, as most of these media forms represent a single moment in time, they cannot be used to compare different types of portrayals, by different genders, in different points in time. Therefore it is possible that when examining sport films, different patterns of representation will be found.

Categories of previous research specifically relate to female images, however research regarding gender identity cannot be truly understood unless both the male and female are examined (Cohen 2001). As the impact of these images and their ability to inform society about appropriate gender roles and behaviors has been well documented, it is critical that the examination continue to other forms of media. It is the purpose of this research to determine if the gender differences between athletes documented in other media is also present in sport films. Specific understanding will be placed on understanding both between and within gender characterizations of athletes and non-athletes.

1. How do sport films utilize traditional gender behavior and characteristics to create their specific character roles?
2. Does the intended audience of the film alter the depiction of each gender and character role?
3. How do sport films address the issue of sexuality of athletes?

## **METHODOLOGY**

There were three general variables of concern for this research. One, the gender of the movie and its target audience, two, the role of athlete or non-athlete in the film, and three, the behavioral characteristics demonstrated by the movie characters. As previous research has examined all three, maintaining that current standard needed to be considered.

### *Movie Selection*



In order to conduct a currently relevant study, only sport movies released since 2000 were considered to be part of the sample. Most previous research has made a comparison between male and female images, and that comparison was continued within this study. In order to have some baseline of comparison, three movies with female lead characters (female movies) and three movies with male lead characters (male movies) were selected.

Using the website [www.the-numbers.com](http://www.the-numbers.com), information about movies was acquired and analyzed. Since the numbers of movies with female lead characters were fewer than the number of movies with male lead characters, determination of which years had female movies was looked at first. To determine the male movie for the same year, it was determined to look at the highest grossing box office male movie that was an actual sport movie. An actual sport movie was defined as an active sport movie, where actors played traditional sports and was not simply a comedy or drama movie with a sport theme.

Moving backwards from the current year, 2004 was the first year that had a movie with a female lead character (*Million Dollar Baby*). The top box office gross movie for that year for males was *Miracle*, so it was also selected. In 2003, *Bend It Like Beckham* (female movie) and *Radio* (male movie) were selected. There was no female lead movie in 2002 or 2001, but in 2000 *Girlfight* was released. The top grossing male counterpart for that year was *Remember the Titans*. The six final movies then selected for coding were *Million Dollar Baby*, *Miracle*, *Bend It Like Beckham*, *Radio*, *Girlfight*, and *Remember the Titans*.

### *Coding*

Coding for the movies consisted of observing specific images, behaviors, and character traits as seen during each movie and tallying the specific number of instances that a particular characteristic was shown. Descriptors of male and females were compiled from Johannesen-Schmidt and Eagly (2002), Cuneen and Sidwell (1998), Adler and Elmorst (1999), Johnston and Swanson (2003), Diekman and Goodfriend (2006), and Shaw and Slack (2002) to form an initial coding chart. These articles included descriptors of male and female language, behaviors, desired characteristics in

each gender, historical gender behavior, and current gender role descriptors that were all included in the initial coding list. Any duplicate adjectives were omitted, but all others were included to form the initial behavioral characteristics to be noted: three neutral behaviors, six character roles, ten male characteristics, and ten female characteristics.

A pilot study was done on one female movie, *A League of Their Own*. By doing this pilot, descriptors that had been omitted from the initial list were added prior to the larger data collection. A male movie was not selected for pilot study as the prevalence of male focused research has been well documented and not as likely to ascertain any original characteristics that were excluded. The final coding sheet consisted of four neutral behaviors, six character roles, five visual images, ten female characteristics, and fourteen male characteristics (see Table 1).

Table 1: Final coding characteristics

Category	Coding Characteristic		Category	Coding Characteristic
Male	Active		Female	Called by first name
	Aggressive			Dependent on male figure
	Assertive			Domestic skills
	Called by last name			Emotional support
	Competitive			Feminine
	Decision Maker			Helpless
	Dominating			Passive
	Endurance			Refined/manners
	Exercise own will			Tidy/organized
	High status			Showing emotion
	Power			
	Speed		Role	Father
	Strength			Heterosexual
	Wage earner			Homosexual
				Husband
Behavior	Alcohol consumption			Mother
	Cursing			Wife
	Drug usage			
	Smoking			
Image	Handsome			
	Pretty			
	Ugly			
	Womanly shape			
	Sexualized			

The coding was done by two graduate students, one male and one female. Both were instructed on how to tally for each character during the pilot screening, and any questions were answered by the researcher. Coders independently watched each film as to not influence their individual recognition of characteristics.

*Data collection procedure*

Each movie was watched a total of three times. The first session was to familiarize the coder with the plot of the movie, gender and name of characters, and gender of both the director and screenwriter. After the first session was completed, the coder labeled the coding characters across the top of their coding chart. While each coder watched the movies independently, a cross check was done to ensure that all relevant characters were to be included in each coder's analysis. During the second viewing of the movie the actual tallies of behaviors of characters were noted. Each time a character exhibited a particular characteristic, the coder would tally within the chart. Within a single scene, the category of behavior was coded only once unless there was a new topic of conversation. For example, if the entire scene was a practice session, the session would be coded as "endurance" or "active" once, not tallied differently every time a new drill during the same practice began.

The movie was paused as necessary for the coder to accurately record each characteristic. For the image section, it was in the coder's opinion as to whether the "sexualized" characteristic is the predominant image. Similar with the role section, the coder's opinion dictates what type of role is being exhibited. In order to receive a tally in these role categories, it is not enough to have the character labeled as a particular role. For example, a character that is a father in the movie, will always have the position of father in a scene regardless of the content. The tally will only be made if the character is exhibiting a "fatherly" action (e.g. discipline, comfort).

The third session of the movie watching was done the same as the second session, but with a new tally sheet. By conducting the same analysis again, any potential errors or omissions were determined and accounted for. To compile the results of these two tally sheets, the higher number of tallies per category was counted as the final score. By keeping the higher score as the final, one is assuming that the

coder interpretation is the same as the previous session, but one instance was not observed and tallied correctly.

### *Data Analysis*

Prior to any analysis occurring, inter-rater reliability tests were done using Pearson's  $r$ . Having achieved an acceptable level of continuity ( $r=.8816$ ), specific analyses were conducted. As this involved frequency of categorical data, loglinear analysis was used to determine any significant interaction effects (Field 2005). All of the behavioral tallies for each of the movies were compiled and broken into their specific categories and totaled for each. Each character was labeled by gender and whether they were an athlete (A) or non-athlete (NA). Then the individual character tallies for all movies were combined with those from the same category.

To recognize the potential impact of multicollinearity, a regression matrix was done for each set of male and female tallied characteristics (Field 2005). While none of the female characteristics produced a correlation of concern, several pairs of male characteristics seemed to have commonality. The category of endurance seemed to be highly correlated with aggression ( $r=.926$ ), power ( $r=.903$ ), speed ( $r=.947$ ) and strength ( $r=.944$ ). As these characteristics logically represent the requirements of a successful athlete, it made sense to collapse this group of categories (Field 2005). To reduce the impact of error, only the category of endurance (reabeled as qualities of athlete) was then used in the loglinear analysis, creating a final of ten categories used to represent male characteristics and ten categories to represent female characteristics.

To combine scores from each coder, the average number of tallies for each character and each characteristic were computed. For example, if Coder A had five instances of "passive" for a particular character and Coder B had seven instances of "passive" for the same character, the average of six was used for the SPSS analysis. As the information collected is of a categorical nature, and contains multiple levels of some variables, loglinear analysis was used to determine any significant effects. Higher-order effects would examine any relationship between the gender of the movie, the role portrayed, and the characteristics presented. Lower order interactions involving only two of the variables are also of interest.

### *Limitations of the study*

All three of the male movies selected happened to be movies that are based on true stories. This presents a serious threat to cinematic freedom in creating characters the screenwriter may have liked or envisioned. Due to the fact that they are inspired by events that took place in the 1970's and early 1980's, the impact of Title IX and likelihood of subsequent inclusion of women into the plot is diminished.

The second movie specific factor that may bias the results is the inclusion of other themes to the movies. *Bend It Like Beckham* has a strong influence of religion on all of its characters. *Radio* includes the issue of dealing with an adult with severe mental disabilities. *Remember the Titans* has the undercurrent of race relations and *Girlfight* deals strongly with the issue of socioeconomic class. Since the themes vary, using these movies will still get a broad coverage of many topics as often represented in other movie plots. Due to the box office revenues of each of these films (with the exception of *Girlfight*) and subsequent large viewing population, these pictures will still have the greatest potential impact on societal views.

A final issue that needs to be addressed is the issue of multicollinearity. While the collapsing of variables make the initial calculations more balanced, this is the first research that examines behavior in this manner. With such a small sample, a true separation of characteristics might not be visible, making the grouping inaccurate. Further research should be done to examine this potential issue, and only a cautionary acceptance of these results should be done.

## **RESULTS**

Data from each of the six movies was collapsed into total characteristics, in each character role, for each movie gender focus. All of the data for the female and male films and the tallies for gendered characteristics can be seen in Table 2 below. Each individual character tallies are not seen in the chart below, but each gender and character role depicted at least some male and some female characteristics. No single character provided all of the data for one gender characteristic category.

Table 2: Behavioral Characteristics for Films

Film & Character Role	Total Number of Characters	Female Characteristics	Male Characteristics	Total Characteristics
<b>Female Movies</b>				
Female Athlete	6	180 (45%)	219 (55%)	399 (100%)
Female Non-Athlete	8	158 (84%)	31 (16%)	189 (100%)
Male Athlete	9	70 (47%)	78 (53%)	148 (100%)
Male Non-Athlete	8	100 (45%)	124 (55%)	224 (100%)
<b>Male Movies</b>				
Female Athlete	0	0	0	0
Female Non-Athlete	9	87 (66%)	44 (34%)	131 (100%)
Male Athlete	17	117 (42%)	162 (58%)	279 (100%)
Male Non-Athlete	11	107 (39%)	168 (61%)	275 (100%)

These individual tallies provide the baseline for addressing the research questions, however do not highlight some of the more specific comparisons between the genders. Within the parentheses is the overall percentage of gendered characteristic to the total characteristic portrayed by a specific character category.

## **DISCUSSION**

### *Differences in Gender Portrayals*

Previous research has demonstrated that an athlete’s gender helps to influence how they are portrayed in the media. Male athletes are shown in dominating positions that are specifically linked to their athletic performances (Kane and Buysse 2005). Female athletes are less likely to be depicted consistently in this manner, as their sexuality, attractiveness, and adherence to social expectations is more often the focus than their athletic talents (Hardin et al. 2005). While there was no statistically higher-order interaction present between movie gender, character role, and behavioral characteristics, there were some interesting patterns of portrayal for similar character types but in different gendered movies. This study shows that there is still adherence to traditional behavioral characteristics in sport films.

Historically, athletes have been male, so the characteristics that are seen as necessary for an athlete to succeed are identified as male. As times have changed, and female athletes are emerging, they are displaying more male characteristics. In the previous research category of ambivalence, the mixed messages about the appearance

of the athlete compared to their athletic abilities are of interest. As movies are not still shots, ambivalence in this research will look at the overall ratio of male characteristics to female characteristics throughout the entire movie.

Beginning by examining the portrayal of athlete roles in the films, all athletes regardless of gender and movie target audience display more male characteristics than female (see Table 2). While this isn't surprising given the historical context of athletics, there is still a difference in portrayal based on gender. Female athletes display masculine characteristics 55% of the time, and male athletes demonstrate masculine characteristics 53% of the time in female movies and 58% of the time in male movies.

When attempting to make comparisons about the depiction of female athletes in male and female films, none can be directly done. In the three male films selected for this research, there are no female athletes present. While both *Radio* and *Remember the Titans* have cheerleaders present, due to the historical nature of the films, the cheerleaders in these are not the gymnast/dancer/cheerleader combination that is the norm in today's cheerleading industry. Even if the presence of these characters were seen as athletes for the purpose of this research, they did not contribute to the movement of the plot in the films. Again, the historical context of the films may be the cause of the lack of female athletes present, but the absence of these characters could still be reinforcing the traditional beliefs that only males can be athletes.

It is interesting to note that male athletes in female films are seen as more balanced (closer to an equal time split between male and female characteristics) than in the male films. A female audience might not desire to see such a difference in athlete to non-athlete characters. Perhaps a more consistent behavior exhibited by all male characters is preferential for female viewers. As this interaction is significant for both the movie target audience and role of the character played [ $\chi^2 (3) = 566.354$ , ( $p < .001$ )] as well as the interaction between the movie target audience and the gendered behavioral characteristics [ $\chi^2 (1) = 13.933$ , ( $p < .001$ )], these seemingly small percentage differences are not necessarily recognized.

Male athletes when compared to their non-athlete counterparts display masculine characteristics a smaller percentage of the time. In female movies, male non-athletes

are shown exhibiting male characteristics 55% of the time as compared to the male athletes exhibiting male characteristics 53% of the time. This comparison is 61% for non-athletes and 58% for athletes in the male films. This difference in percentage could be due to the fact that male athletes may not have to “prove” their masculinity as much as their non-athlete counterparts. As the epitome of male has been traditionally defined as “athlete”, for those who are not, they may need to be more convincing in their displays of masculinity. The audience is left with no doubt that all men, regardless of character role are “proper” men. Men may show compassion and caring towards their teammates and families (traditionally feminine qualities), but they are still showing greater quantities of bravery, strength, and dominance (traditionally idealized masculine qualities).

As the athletes require traditional male characteristics to be viewed as authentic, the non-athlete characters have the freedom to be depicted in whatever manner is desired by the creators of the picture. However, in order to balance what may be perceived as a more masculine image of the athletes, a stronger proportion of traditionally gendered behaviors may be selected. This research shows that this is in fact the case.

For each gender of non-athletes, they depict a higher number of their traditional characteristics appropriate for their gender. So even when film directors, are not hindered by the availability of images in reality, they still select behavioral representations that are traditionally gendered. The significant interaction between the role in the movie (athlete or non-athlete) and the behavior demonstrated illustrates this important difference [ $\chi^2 (3) = 119.432, (p < .001)$ ].

There is a striking comparison when you look at the females in non-athletic roles. In *Bend It Like Beckham*, there were 137 female characteristics displayed and only twenty-three male characteristics. Even when there were fewer female non-athlete roles in the films of *Million Dollar Baby* and *Girlfight*, there were eleven female to four male and ten female to four male respectively. Directors are clearly conscious of depicting female non-athletes in the traditional sense, without male attributes.

*Sexuality in Sport Films*



All of the female movies show great concern surrounding the issue of sexuality. In each case the female athletes had more references to heterosexuality than the female non-athletes. The male athletes and non-athletes in the female centered movies also showed this same pattern. Male athletes were more likely to have some reference to their sexual orientation than the male non-athletes.

Homosexuality was only addressed in three of the six movies, *Bend It Like Beckham*, *Remember the Titans*, and *Miracle*. Within *Bend It Like Beckham*, lesbianism was vehemently denied by the female athletes after misconceptions are presented by other characters. One of the supporting male characters did come out and admit his homosexuality with support from a female friend, but with embarrassment to make the claim to his male friends.

In *Remember the Titans*, one player makes a homosexual display to a fellow teammate, but in a manner that does not confirm or deny his sexual orientation. One of the male leads is shown as a single father. The uncertainty about his orientation is not left in question though as the opening dialogue confirms that this man was formerly married, implying his heterosexuality. In *Miracle*, several references to the conquest of women convey the heterosexuality of the athletes.

Clearly this study has shown that the motion picture industry seems to present some of the same patterns of portrayal as other mediums. Female athletes are shown as active individuals who can display some traditional male characteristics, but at a balanced level. Female characteristics are introduced and incorporated into the films for both genders, but are most specifically shown through particular character roles. The viewing audience is given reassuring images that these powerful women are still "proper" women i.e. interested in family, have domestic skills, and are heterosexual.

In what could have been the final scene of *Girlfight*, the female athlete defeats her boyfriend in the ring. The movie does not stop there. It goes on to show a resolution between the strong female athlete and her boyfriend so the audience sees that they will live a long, happy life together. Contrast this to the ending of most male boxing movies e.g. Rocky with Stallone's arm raised in the ring as the final cut. Granted, the "little woman" is close by, but we never really know if they will ride off into

the sunset, happily ever after. The comparison of these two scenes demonstrates how far we need to go to treat these athletes similarly.

The cultural assumption that gay is wrong (Cohen 2001) is also clearly illustrated within all of these movies. Directors make sure to portray both males and females as heterosexual with proper attention being paid to understanding traditional gender roles within society. While the coming out of one male character in *Bend It Like Beckham* seems to be a good start to reflecting the reality of society today, it is clearly in the minority of movie images.

It is interesting to note that the subject matter of these films tended to disagree with other types of media depiction of women's sports. Research has demonstrated that traditional women's sports, and those that are deemed "socially acceptable" receive most coverage (Eastman and Billings 2000). Here we have two films with female boxers as the main characters; with boxing clearly being a combat sport used to prepare men for battle (Coakley 2007), this may be an indication of a changing acceptance of women in these sports.

Further research needs to be done to examine these motion picture trends. The limitations of these particular movie selections, especially the male movies being based on historical events, need to be accounted for to see if these same trends occur for historical events that would incorporate the passage and implementation of Title IX. By using a wider variety of movies; historical, total fiction, male leads, female leads, and different time periods a greater certainty of results could be created. More recently, films that have both a male and female athlete character could also yield interesting results. As the target audience is both genders, it would be interesting to discover how directors balance the behavior of each of the characters.

Finally, research needs to be done on the effects that these images actually have on the viewing population. Does the presence of these female lead sports movies create awareness and activeness on the part of the viewing public, or is it only viewed as entertainment? Do these movies serve as an empowering experience for female athletes, or do they view these as actresses playing a part? Do these movies reinforce

cultural stereotypes and traditional gender roles? Until the actual effects of these images are understood, researchers are only dealing with part of the puzzle.

This research has clearly shown that the portrayal and patterns of female athletes represented in print and broadcast media carry over to the motion picture industry. Through careful scripting and directing, sport films carry disclaimers about what it means to be a female athlete. Activities of women athletes in these films seemed to be balanced by the portrayal of the non-athletes in strict traditional gender roles. This sharp contrast only goes to further show how far female athletes have to go in order to be counted even in the same ballpark as the men.

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