

Media coverage of women's sports



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It may be argued that the media coverage given to women's sports, especially cycling, results in less participation uptake. Through the framing and stereotyping of female sports coverage coupled with statistical evidence, it is clear that there is a disparity (Brookes: 2002). This research project design aims to explore the factors underlying the disparity and will do this by analysing television and media content and interviewing consumers of televised sport. Firstly, I will set out the core theories surrounding gender representation in general and audiences, before focusing on the relationship between gender and audiences for sport, in particular cycling and the gender representation within it.

Additionally, this essay will also set out the ways in which primary research will be undertaken with a focused, multi faceted approach and will include interviews and content analysis. Finally, on completion this project will go some way to explore gender disparity within the sport of cycling and attempt to give some reasons why this is happening. Upon reflection, it will suggest the positive and more difficult aspects of the project and highlight ways in which these difficulties may be overcome for moving forward.

When beginning this project, I firstly believed it was important to explore broader topics with regard to audience and gendered representation to give an in-depth background to the subject matter. Therefore, I found Roland Barthes ' Images, Music, Text' to be very insightful (Barthes: 1977). This text explained theoretical ideas behind images suggesting they are constructed intentionally by the creator to present an idea to an audience. I believe this is an important study for my own research project as it involves decoding meanings in moving images and furthermore will assist in answering why a

disparity in the television coverage, which is resulting in disproportionate representation between genders, is occurring.

Following this, I then began to explore the specific topic as a whole with special focus on gendered representation and sports relationship on the television, and how this differed in Hollywood films and in sports coverage. Therefore, I found Hills and Kennedy's chapter 'Representation of coaching through film' very insightful (Hills and Kennedy: 2012). Their argument centred on three films where the audience observed a coach-player relationship and found that "the majority featured a male protagonist in the role of a coach, who performs masculinely" (Hills and Kennedy: 2012: 40). I was struck that the majority lacked female representation and that the "carefully crafted, idealised constructions of masculinity in Hollywood" (Hills and Kennedy: 2012: 40) were exceptionally apparent in these films. I believe this article can be transferred into my own research project as it depicts that "the media do not simply reflect or represent gender difference, but they help construct that difference" (Saco: cited in Hills and Kennedy: 2012: 41). This idea was further supported as "portrayals of masculinity in sports films help construct the gender identities for their audience" (Hills and Kennedy: 2012: 42) and if this is something that is happening in blockbuster Hollywood films, such as, 'Coach Carter' it follows that this is also to be the case in the coverage of sports, supporting the argument that the majority of the audience think women playing sports is not a normal occurrence. This text is incredibly important to my own research project, as I believe it gives insight into a potential cause of gender disparity and stereotyping within sporting media. What started as a "backlash against feminism..." (Hills and Kennedy:

2012: 43) became a gender imbalance that can be viewed across the majority of sports coverage on television.

Another very relevant paper focusing on these key issues so far is Scraton and Flintoff ' Gender and Sports: A reader' (Scraton and Flintoff: 2002). A chapter I found particularly relevant was ' Sports, Bodies and Gender', as this area of study explores the relationship between sport and the media.

Furthermore, it also investigates sports' feminism and how women's' sports have a significant lack of power in the media compared coverage of male sports. Hegemonic athleticism and other hegemonic constructions are steadied through sport and this is argued by Scraton and Flintoff who state that sport is " socially constructed out of gender, race and class..." (Scraton and Flintoff: 2002: 17). Furthermore, they suggested that despite sports being " gender contested" (Scraton and Flintoff: 2002: 24) it is apparent that " men's sports are still dominant in commercial value..." (Scraton and Flintoff: 2002: 24).

Moreover, ' Women, Social media and Sport' by Pam Creedon is an article that has been fundamental to developing my understanding of this topic (Creedon: 2004). It investigates how an audience views sports with the modern development of social media. This is an area that is relevant to my own research, as " 60% of sports fans now go online for updates" (Creedon: 2014: 711). Despite this, Creedon invokes that although this development has brought about some changes " the values used to cover and construct representations...of women's sport have not changed" (Creedon: 2004: 711). Using the example of the 2012 Olympic Games, Creedon further explores this and suggests that although throughout this sporting event women were

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given more air time, the “ media coverage remained gendered...” (Billings et al: 2014), for example, the bikini wearing beach volleyball players made the news multiple times. Therefore, this clearly portrays how although in today's society “ the Internet and web have radically changed...the coverage of women's sport remains insultingly trivial...” (Creedon: 2014: 715).

The key theories I found in Whiteside and Hardin's ' Women (not) watching women' is another academic work that I believe is relevant to my research design project (Whiteside and Hardin: 2011). Their article investigated the issue that although “ a lot of women play sport...they do not watch it on television” (Whiteside and Hardin: 2011: 122). This is fundamental to this research project as, if more women watched women's sport coverage this would mean it would increase and thus also would the sponsorship of professional female athletes. Similarly, the research of Whiteside and Hardin offers many suggestions as to why women are not viewing sport at home including not enough spare time and wanting to achieve other more important things first. It is argued this differs with their male counterparts, who will allocate specific time slots to view sport. Finally, Whiteside and Hardin also consider whether sexual orientation of participants would create different reactions to viewing sport.

To conclude, all the media texts used within this literature review convey the issues facing gender equality within sports coverage. I believe the text that makes the greatest contribution is Duncan and Hasbrook's chapter ' Denial of power within televised women's sports'. It can be said this is because it highlights many of the hypotheses that this project aims to investigate and in addition conveys key theoretical framework I wish to pursue.

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Having begun this project and completed a literature review of material, I am able to establish the questions I wish to focus on within this project. I believe the disparity within television coverage is great and therefore this must be analysed with the theoretical framework of representation and audience. Thus, using broader work such as Barthes alongside more specialized work, for example, Creedon, conclusions will be able to be made to establish why this disparity is occurring.

As acknowledged above when beginning this research question it has been important to begin with wider topics of argument before narrowing down and focusing on more specialist theories. Therefore, I began my theoretical framework with a focus on Roland Barthes who suggests images are coded messages for an audience (Barthes: 1977). The audience and their perception of the content is an important part of this research project and thus through three categories of messages their meanings may be broken down. The first area is linguistic messages, which assists the audience into formulating the opinion the media platform wants them to have (Barthes: 1977). Text -or in the case of this research project- commentary is an addition of this and is the most important part. Therefore, the combination of these two messages aims to target the audience with the right message. However, I believe this could be affected by the dominant discourse within society and thus when investigating the commentary within the content analysis I will keep both Barthes argument and my own hypothesis in mind. Other aspects of Barthes argument focused on coded and non-coded messages and suggests that some images are merely raw, what we see in these is what is meant but other images or in the case of this research

project, video, have more hidden meanings (Barthes: 1977). These are understood with reference to our own cultures and knowledge and will differ between people or countries (Barthes: 1977). Therefore, this must be considered when analysing the coverage for this project and the ideology behind the audience must be considered.

Having looked at the wider arguments, it is then possible to become more specific and discuss the theories that are specific to this research project. Thus, the debate around gendered representation in sport has been investigated. This will provide a more concentrated idea of the arguments surrounding the topic I wish to research and will investigate areas of the hypothesis posed. It is constantly suggested that due to its large amount of output, television coverage produces the largest monetary source for companies. As such, there have been many debates with regard to television that suggest that gendered representation is not equal. Thus, it can be said that when researching this, both the realism and entertainment values of the coverage must be considered (Brookes: 2010). As " 60% of sports fans go online for updates..."(Creedon: 2014: 711) it can be argued that the way sports fans engage with sports has changed and gendered representations in the media such as newspapers is less common. This is also due to the way in which sports stars are depicted on social media sites, for example, Instagram, creating less of a gendered representation divide. However, it must also not be disregarded that gendered representations are still dominating media texts in modern day society (Creedon: 2014).

Having suggested the theoretical framework that will be followed when completing this research project, the methodological approaches must also

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be explained. The methods used for this research project design will include both quantitative and qualitative research approaches and therefore will have a mixed methodological approach. I have raised some issues and asked some questions in this design and I will research based on observations and the understandings of others. When undertaking the qualitative methods, both social constructionism and subjectivism will be applied using the format of questionnaires and individual interviews. This is because it uses knowledge theories “ that emphasize that the world is constructed by human beings as they interact” (O’Leary: 2017: 382) and furthermore because through personal experiences I will be able to build a foundation of fact for my project.

The content analysis within this project will review the television coverage of the Tour de France and La Course (the women’s equivalent). The stage covered is the same course for both men and women and the live coverage is 4 hours for the men, and 2 for the women. Before I begin analysing it, I will set out a list of areas, which will be focused upon, and these will include the number of interviews and hours. Moreover, alongside this the language used by pundits within the commentary will be assessed to see whether this differs between genders. I believe the language used by individuals is a key point to explore in this project, as this is what would influence an audience and would in turn affect things like, sponsorship and future coverage.

I will be using data collected from people through face-to-face interviews with specific individuals who are knowledgeable on the topic this project is focusing on. I will also be using data collected from analysing television coverage from specific days of cycling of both men and women.

Furthermore, during interviews it will be important to remember to have a good rapport with participants and to display understanding and knowledge of the topic so to ensure they feel comfortable with the topic being discussed. This will allow for the most successful results to be achieved. Due to the sensitive nature of some of the topics an ethnographic approach will be employed for this topic as it is the “ personal aspects that are the most favourable” (Freund and Fieldings: 2013: 330). As stated above it is important to have a curiosity with regards to the subject and this should be considered by myself as the researcher and additionally using an ethnographic approach will mean the interview can happen in the participant’s own environment.

Moreover, another aspect that must be considered is the privacy of the subject; something that is essential when collecting data from participants as trust must be established (Krotoski: 2010: 4) and be maintained at the data collection stage.

To conclude, this project focuses specifically on women’s representation in sport and uses theoretical framework to support this. The academics that will be focused on most are Margaret Carlisle Duncan and Cynthia A. Hasbrook. Alongside this, scholars for example Pam Creedon have also played a key part in influencing research with their focus on the 2012 Olympics and women’s’ role in the media within this. Finally, this research design project will also go some way to consider why there is a gender disparity within sport and more specifically within cycling. It will further invoke that the low number of women watching sport is due to a lack of leisure time and other commitments, such as family. Moreover, it will also consider whether

traditional gender roles are somewhat imparted through hegemonic conventions that society feeds subconsciously and therefore rapid change is not possible.

Commentary draft:

This research project has been worked on for some months now and, as it is something that I find interesting has been exciting to work on. Through keeping a diary of the research I have completed, I believe I am able to clearly portray how I arrived at the design. The commentary will discuss areas, which have worked well and others, which have had to be redesigned so they fit within constraints, such as the time frame. It has been an exciting project to work on and I believe has the basis to be an interesting piece of research.

I approached the project firstly by focusing on broad topics of research that discussed audience and arguments that surround their engagement with gender and platforms. I believed that to be important as my project centres on the representation of the sport of cycling and how the audience's consumption differs with regards to gender. Having then completed broader research, arguments that were more focused and specific to the chosen topic were investigated. This work centred on gendered representation in sport and whether this is something that is changing or not. Moreover, as the majority of theorists suggested there was a disparity I also wanted to investigate why this is occurring. As a result of this, I have built up strong arguments using theorists and scholars, and similarly have supported this with my own primary research.

The research for this project begun with investigating theorists who explore audience and the way they interact with visual content. I became more focused on the idea of gendered representation in sport having considered my own passions and that I found many of the arguments I was studying were replicated within sport, especially my own sport of cycling. Therefore, it was a natural progression to focus the topic around this area and the disparity within it.

Deciding the content for my literature review was very challenging as there was a lot I wished to include. I chose the works based on those that stood out clearly to me and which explained the argument I wished to convey in the best way. Beginning with broader topics of audience and then focusing I found was the most successful way of achieving this.

As I have progressed with this project I have changed my view on certain aspects, such as, which academics to include and what footage I can accurately analyse in the given time. Therefore, as a result of this I have limited the analysis to one day making it more manageable within the timeframe of this project. More specifically, I have developed an increasingly concise argument and focused on academics that have studied gendered representation within sport, for example, Pam Creedon.

The hardest thing to overcome when completing this research was creating the theoretical argument. I found after researching broader theories, such as, Barthes, many academic studies of gendered representation in sport were too dated and did not match with modern televised coverage of today. As a result of this, I also believe this is potentially the weaker part of the

design project. Therefore, I have made an effort to support it with specific theorists, such as ones who look at hegemonic conventions and societies subconscious acceptance of gender stereotyping.

The strongest part of this research design project is the data analysis and interviews. I think the mixed methodological approach created a well-rounded argument that allows the exploration of my research question and get an in depth analysis of the problems within the questions posed.

Another aspect of concern was that I was conscious that before beginning this research project I had not completed research of this length before. Therefore, when studying I used multiple research-focused books to assist with planning this project and forming the framework of my ideas. However, the research guide that has been most helpful when writing my design project has been O'Leary, Z. (2017). *Doing your research project*. 3rd ed. This guide gives a comprehensive account of each step needed to be taken to achieve a well thought through project and thus, I used its methods to create my own design.

From undertaking this research project, I have learnt a lot regarding both the practical aspect of designing the project and in addition the formation of the theoretical framework that must be created from the foundation of a hypothesis. I believe I have designed a research project that would be interesting and informative to an audience, one that poses questions and has the research base to be able to offer credible answers.

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