

Socialisation and its impact on beach volleyball



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Throughout history, following feminist or other reflexive and tradition-breaking paradigms, the binary division of gender (man and woman) that exists has become clear. The stereotypes concerning both genders are so deeply enshrined in our minds that we find it difficult to let go of conventional thinking; and easily impart these ideals into all facets of society, including sport. This stereotypical thinking is a catalyst for gender inequities not only in sport, but society as a whole. Our perception regarding the differences between sportsmen and women stems from hegemonic ideals of masculine dominance that date back to the ancient Olympics.

Although equality between genders is gradually percolating the world of sport, agents of socialisation persist in fuelling the conventional thinking that is the source of gender inequities ever-present in our culture. Of these agents, mass media is the chief culprit. The connection between sport, gender and media is blatant, especially in the sport of beach volleyball. In fact it is one of few unisex sports where the female athletes are dominating the arena in terms popularity and media attention. But for what reasons?

This is a question that will be answered in this report. Throughout this analysis, the influence that marketing and media has on sport and its capability to reinforce Australian society's views of gender roles will be evaluated. In particular, the implications of marketing and media will be analysed in relation to the sport of beach volleyball. Sociology is a branch of social science that concerns itself with studies of the social life of human groups and individuals. It encompasses patterns of social relationships, social interaction, and culture.

Whether it is scientific or systematic, sociology is basically the study of society. Society's make-up comprises people, groups, networks, institutions and organisations. It is basically a large-scale system composed of many parts known as microcosms. 1, 2 One such microcosm is the sociology of sport. Sport is an important part of everyday social life around the world. The Olympic Games, soccer's World Cup, the Tour de France, Wimbledon and the Super Bowl are worldwide events that capture the interests of billions of people.

Although it's not just sporting events on a global-scale that make this microcosm important, sport in general is a culture that seems to have an unwavering ability to provide reason for social interaction between individuals or groups of people; shaping our perception of the world. 3 Sports sociology is a sub-discipline of sociology that focuses on sport as a social phenomenon. There are several areas of research covered by sports sociology. However, the main field that will relate to this report is sport and socialisation.

Socialisation is a fundamental concept throughout the social sciences and explains the process by which individuals learn to conform to social norms and learn how to behave in ways appropriate to their culture. It includes learning the cultural attitudes, values and roles of society. In short, socialisation is the transmission of culture into all facets of society, including sport. Australian sport is an institution of enormous significance, particularly in relation to the construction and maintenance of gender patterns. A common view is that the institution of sport is one of our most gender-traditional social arrangements which fosters sexism and support for

patriarchy. ” (Harry, 1995) 10 Sport is one of the most prominent and hegemonic social institutions and cultural practices in society today. It is hegemonic if it is widely accepted in a culture and when that acceptance reinforces the dominant gender ideology of the culture. 7, 8 Hegemonic masculinity is a particularly idealised form, stressing toughness and competitiveness, and claiming superiority over women.

Even though women are now more widely accepted, they still have to find a place within the existing patriarchal framework. 7 Sabo and Jansen (1992) wrote that sport, as a hegemonic social institution, naturalises men's power and privilege over women. This does not just apply to the playing field, but also in the coaching and administrative arenas of sport. 9 There is a reciprocal relationship between sport and gender. In sport, “ women experience a strong discrimination stemming from a pervasive gender ideology. ” (Collins, M et. al, 2003) Gender ideology legitimizes gender statuses and prevents resistance by normalizing the gender order. 2 Sport is uniquely positioned to reinforce the key elements of basic ideology that directly highlight the idyllic notion that women are inferior to men. Women have been “ welcomed unconditionally as spectators and cheerleaders for men's games” (Lenskyj, 1986). In this capacity, women have been invited to subscribe to a highly traditional interpretation of sports and of gender roles. Women's participation in sports has been another matter. It has often been resisted, considered unfeminine, and been a basis of questioning the sexual orientation of those women who took sports too seriously. 2 Boslooper and Hayes's (1973: 45) comment with regard to gender norms in sport in the 1970's is still applicable today: “ society cut off the penis of the male who

enters dance.... and places it on the woman who participates in competitive athletics". Through gender ideology, culturally specific behavior and appearance expectations are imposed on women (femininity) and men (masculinity).¹⁴ These expectations can be labeled as gender imagery. Gender imagery is the symbolic representation of gender in culture, and is presented through mediums such as media.² Media has a strong cultural and social impact upon society through its absolute ability to influence the way we behave and think, playing an important role in enforcing socially acceptable norms and ideologies; including that of gender.⁵ Sport is a powerful symbol and enactment of gender difference, making its role in media quite substantial. Male domination in sport is not subtle. It is practically naturalised by the media as an inevitable consequence of the male athletes' superiority in skill and strength. They are therefore perceived as better athletes, thus being more worthwhile to watch.¹⁵

She's extraordinarily beautiful, but on top of that, she's a phenomenal athlete. ' ¹⁵ Its not just how they are described, but also how they are marketed in media which reinforces hegemonic ideals. Dr. Murray Philips, author of ASC surveys said that, ' language used in the stories often differed from gender to gender. ' ¹⁶ Construction and continuation of hegemonic masculinity is evident in the objectification of sporting stars. Whereas the objectification of women is centrally concerned with passivity; objectification of the male sporting star is more defined by action, strength and performance. The sporting achievements of female athletes are often trivialized through the way they are presented in favour of assuring the public that despite their involvement in sport, they still have feminine

qualities. ' Female athletes are often photographed in inactive roles, to emphasise their feminine qualities. ' (Amezdroz et. al, 1999) They often wear revealing outfits that accentuate sex appeal, in hope of attracting sponsors and spectators; as did the twelve female athletes who posed for the controversial ' Golden Girls of Athletics' calendar in 1995. 15

This form of exposure is known as ' sexploitation'. Sexploitation is used to describe forms of marketing that attempt to gain media coverage focusing attention on the physical attributes of the female athletes, rather than their sporting prowess. As a result, the value of female athletes is judged primarily in terms of their voyeuristic potential, instead of being judged for the qualities that define them as an athlete. However, if this approach is successful in attracting media and sponsorship, the increased interest is not on their performances and successes, but on their sex appeal. 7 This is a generalized issue for all female athletes; however ' sexploitation' has definitely consumed the sport of beach volleyball. In January 1998, the Federation of International Volleyball (FIVB) introduced uniforms for female performers not for technological, practical or performance benefits; but rather to intentionally focus any attention onto the athlete's body. 17 Beach Volleyball is one of the few sports where women attract more attention than their male counterparts; but people aren't necessarily watching it for the sport. They are watching it for the ' skinfest'.

The bra-style tops and bikini bottoms that can not exceed six centimeters in width at the hip is unsurprisingly part of what made women's beach volleyball one of the most watched sports at the Athens Olympics. 18 On the other hand, there are the male athletes who are restricted to wearing a

singlet and shorts that sit above the knee. “ As women’s bikinis have slowly shrunk to the ‘ barely there’ Brazilian cut bikinis on display at Athens, the disparity between men and women has become more glaring. ” (Mathewson, C. 2004) As one of Queensland’s top junior beach volleyball players says, “ Yes, sex appeal sells. ”

Sexploitation is prominent in female beach volleyball. In order for the sport to attract attention and media coverage, the athletes’ sporting abilities were undermined to accentuate sex appeal. The 2004 Athens Olympics was a classic example of the media’s biased focus towards sexualisation over sporting prowess. When the Walsh/May team beat Brazil in the final, they embraced one another, falling on top of each other in the sand. The win meant standing atop the gold medal podium; yet, the commentary and the specific video used of this specific moment deemphasized the athletic feat and focused on the sexual nature of the shot.

Despite the endless amounts of video and digital images of the event at the media’s disposal; all which would tell the story of the win; media outlets selected images that did not emphasize the athlete’s strength, athleticism, or power, rather their ability to become a sexual object. ²⁰ This was a similar story when it came to broadcasting visuals of the female beach volleyball games. With a preponderance of close and tight shots on players and body parts, including especially clothing adjustments and shots depicting the players from behind; the camera angles were extremely sexualized. ⁰ More than 20% of the camera shots were found to be tight shots of the players’ chests and just over 17% of the shots were coded as buttock shots. This sexually orientated coverage “ leaves viewers with lasting memories of

players' bodies rather than of memories of athleticism. " (Bissel, K et. al, 2007) This analysis of the video coverage proves that sex and sexuality were used to not only promote the athletes, but to sell the sport to viewers around the world. According to the gender ideologies that exist in our hegemonic-based society, this form of exposure is a necessity for the survival of sports like beach volleyball.

Their popularity does not root from the athletes' physical prowess or sporting capabilities, but rather a sexually orientated perspective. In a society where masculine hegemonic ideals dominate, the femininity of female athletes is a vital aspect of media and marketing, as sex sells. Research has shown that males dominate media coverage. The apparent physical superiority of males over females seems to be enough to earn their coverage, and what exposure females can obtain is normally focused on their feminine qualities rather than their sporting capabilities.

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