

# Equal Effort, Unequal Stage: A Study of the Impact of Media Coverage on Audience Perception of and Interest in Women's Sports

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**Abstract**—Women have made great strides in the field of sports. In the past century, they have gained a foothold in traditionally male-dominated sports and even managed to break records set by their male counterparts. Yet, one place where men and women remain unequal is in the media coverage of their respective sports. Media coverage tends to not only devote more hours to men's sports, but it also gives differential coverage to men's and women's sports. The effect is a de-emphasis on women's sports, which perpetuates the belief that women's sports are less interesting than men's, and even that females are inferior athletes. This research paper aims to study how, exactly, exposure to media influences viewers' perceptions of and attitudes towards women's sports. Specifically, drawing on Media Studies and Psychological Theory including the Framing Effect, the Agenda Setting Theory, and the Mere Exposure Effect, this paper tested whether greater exposure to women's sports media influenced the way individuals perceive women's sports. The findings indicated a slight positive correlation between increased media exposure, and favourable perception of women's sports. The paper concludes with a discussion on the implications of equal media coverage for women's and men's sports.

## Introduction

In the past century, great strides have been made towards equality between women and men. Yet, it remains an uphill battle for women who must continue to push for equality in their home, their workplaces, and in public life. This gender-based inequality is especially true in the arena of sports, where women, both historically, and even today, are perceived as inferior to men. Historically, for example, women weren't allowed to play in the Olympics and, once they were allowed, they barely received any media coverage. In fact, it was only in 1992 that the media coverage of women's sports finally exceeded that of dogs and horses. (Higgs & Weiller, 1994)

In recent years, there has been a legislative push to level the playing field and work towards equality for men and women in sports, including the passing of acts that support equal federal funding opportunities which essentially encourage women to participate in sports. (Scheidler & Wagstaff, 2018) Though the situation has improved, even today the media coverage of women's sports remains significantly less as compared to men's sports. For example, although 40% of all professional sports participants are women, women's sports, combined, only receives about 4% of all sports media coverage. (UNESCO, 2020)

Not only do female athletes receive less media coverage, the coverage they do receive is often biased. It portrays women's sports as slow, boring and less exciting, and tends to focus on the female athletes' physical attributes or their roles as wives and mothers, as opposed to their athletic skill and ability (UNESCO, 2020) This discrimination is not only visible in everyday media coverage but also in bigger events like the Olympics where it's been shown that if a men's team wins the finals the media gives significantly more coverage and time, as compared to when a women's team wins the finals. (Coche & Tuggle, 2016)

## Theory

In order to understand why male and female athletes receive this differential treatment in media coverage, it is useful to look to Media Studies theories. According to the Agenda Setting Theory, developed by Max McCombs and Donald Shaw during the 1968 American Presidential election, the media has the ability to influence the importance of topics on the public agenda based on how much coverage time they assign to it. (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) As a result, audience perception on the importance of a topic is directly correlated to the amount of media coverage devoted to that topic. Connecting this to women's sports, the minimal media coverage is one possible explanation as to why women's sports are perceived to be less important than men's sports.

Another theory, known as the Framing Theory, posits that the frames or mental schemas that are presented by the media influence the information processing of individuals, thus leading them to learn only certain things about a topic and perceive the information in a particular way. (Goffman, 1974) Put another way, "the audience is thought to adopt the frames of reference

offered by journalists and to see the world in a similar way” (McQuail, 2010, pp. 557) This, when applied to scenarios where women’s sports are de-emphasised would consequently shape the opinion of sports fans.

Finally, looking to psychological theory to understand how media exposure influences our preferences and biases, the Mere Exposure Effect states that an individual’s view on a topic tends to be more favourable when he or she has greater exposure to that topic. (Zajonc, 1968) Hence, due to the lack of exposure, many sports fans may possess an unfavourable opinion of women’s sports, or think that they are not as important. Similarly, when the media is more focused on women’s sports that are perceived as “feminine” (i.e. gymnastics, synchronised swimming), fans tend to believe that women should only participate in feminine and not masculine sports. (Scheidler & Wagstaff, 2018)

### Research Question

Bleak media coverage of women’s sports perpetuates the misconception that women’s sports are boring and less desirable as compared to men’s sports. This perception manifests itself as an implicit bias towards men’s sports; many people prefer to watch men’s sports, but don’t even realise why or have not had adequate exposure to women’s sports to be able to draw an equal comparison.

What steps can we as a society take to ensure that men’s and women’s sports receive equal attention and appreciation? The Mere Exposure Effect suggests that exposure to a stimulus creates a more positive attitude towards that stimulus. Applying that idea to women’s sports, this study attempts to measure how exposure to women’s sports changes individuals’ perception of and attitude towards it.

### Hypothesis:

Greater exposure to video footage of women’s sports will result in a positive change in an individual’s perspective or attitude towards female athletes and women sports.

### Methodology

For this study, 26 people of mixed gender and age groups were recruited, and split into 2 groups (the experimental group and the control group). Both groups filled out a questionnaire, adapted from The Interest Questionnaire (Rotgans, 2015), about their interest in women’s sports (See Appendix A). The responses were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = Not true at all; 5 = Very true for me), and responses were averaged to calculate total interest.

The control group filled out 2 questionnaires – one at the beginning, and one at the end of the study. The experimental group filled out 5 questionnaires – at the beginning and end of the study, as well as at weekly intervals after exposure to the experimental stimulus.

In this experiment, the stimulus was video footage of women’s sports, including badminton, cricket, hockey and boxing. (See Appendix B) After watching these videos, members of the experimental group were again asked to fill out the questionnaire. After 6 weeks, the results of both groups’ responses were tabulated, to track any changes over time.

### Data Findings

The below table notes the average response (1=not true at all, 5= very true for me) for each question asked in the questionnaire. The different experiment cycles allow us to track and analyses the change in responses over time.

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14
Experiment One													
2.85	2.21	2.64	2.64	3.29	2.86	2.71	1.86	4.36	2.86	2.85	2.31	3.93	4.79
Experiment Two													
3.56	2.00	2.56	2.78	2.78	3.06	2.72	2.00	4.00	3.17	3.00	2.22	3.67	4.72
Experiment Three													
3.00	1.92	2.50	2.67	3.00	3.00	2.42	1.83	4.08	2.58	2.83	2.50	3.50	4.83
Experiment Four													
3.23	2.15	2.62	2.77	2.85	3.23	2.46	1.92	4.08	3.00	3.23	2.31	3.85	4.46

Experiment Five													
3.15	2.15	2.77	2.23	2.46	2.85	2.62	1.77	3.77	2.54	3.62	2.23	3.08	4.69
Control 1													
3.44	2.33	2.56	2.33	3.00	3.00	2.72	2.00	4.17	3.33	3.17	2.28	3.67	4.61
Control 2													
3.21	2.13	2.61	2.57	2.90	3.00	2.61	1.90	4.08	2.91	3.12	2.31	3.61	4.68

**Data Analysis**

Experimental group:

- Over the course of 3 months, the average interest in women’s sports rises by 0.3.
- Here, we can speculate that people would rather do something else than watch women’s sports in their free time as the average drops by 0.06.
- Here, the average interest of people watching women’s sports rises by 0.11, perhaps because they enjoyed the sports they were watching.
- Most people have not been interested in women’s sports since they were young and the average drops by 0.41.
- Most people do not read about women’s sports as the average drops by 0.83.
- The stimulus appears to have had little influence on this question, as respondents indicate that they plan to watch about the same amount of women’s sports in the future, and the average remains about the same.
- People are not completely focused on women’s sports, as focus decreases and the average drops by 0.09.
- Most people don’t attend women’s sporting events and don’t really plan to change that as the average drops by 0.09.
- Initially, respondents agreed that women don’t get enough media coverage. However, the average response to this question dropped by 0.59, perhaps because of their increased exposure to women’s sports throughout the study.
- While some initially agreed that there is no difference between male and female athletes in terms of athletic ability, the average perception drops by 0.32 after watching the videos.
- At the same time, people want to encourage others to give women’s sports a chance, as the average rises by 0.77.
- People do not agree that women’s sports are more interesting than men’s sports and the average drops by 0.08.
- People agree, to some extent, that men and women have the same potential in sports but the average drops by 0.85.
- People agree that more women should be encouraged to play sports and the average only drops by 0.10.

**Control group:**

- The control group’s interest in women’s sports dropped by 0.23 over the course of 3 months.
- In their free time, some people have stopped watching women’s sports and the average dropped by 0.20.
- People have started to look forward to watching women’s sports as the average has risen by 0.05.
- Some people have been interested in women’s sports since they were young and that interest has risen as the average has risen to 0.24.
- Some people have stopped reading about woman’s sports as the average has dropped by 0.10.
- People plan on watching the same amount of women sports as the average has remained exactly the same.

7. People focused on watching women's sports has dropped by 0.11.
8. People watch about the same amount of women sports everyday but the average has dropped by 0.10.
9. People agree that women's sports don't get enough media coverage but the average dropped by a mere 0.09.
10. In terms of athletic ability some people's views have changed and they believe that men and women have different athletic abilities as the average has dropped by 0.42.
11. People want to encourage others to watch women sporting events and the average has dropped by only 0.05.
12. People think that women's sports are more interesting than men's sports and the average has increased by 0.03.
13. People believe that men and women have the same potential in sports but the average has dropped by only 0.06.
14. People believe that more women should be encouraged to play women's sports and the average has risen by 0.07.

### Summary of Notable Findings

The response to Question 1 (I am interested in women's sports) is notable, because, in the Experimental Group, we observe a 0.71 rise between the first and second week trials. Even by the end of the trials, there is still a 0.3 rise between the responses of the group in the first versus last week. In the Control Group, on the other hand, we observe a 0.23 drop in self-reported interested in women's sports. This suggests a direct positive correlation between increased exposure to women's sports and interest in women's sports.

Interestingly, Question 9 (I think women's sports get enough media coverage) is one where we see the average drop in both the Experimental (0.59 drop) and Control (0.09 drop) groups. This is perhaps because as participants in the Experimental group continued to watch media coverage of women's sports, their belief about the amount of coverage the sports received changed.

In Question 11 (I encourage people to watch and attend women's sporting events), we see the most notable increase in the average answer for the Experimental Group (0.77 increase), while the average in Control Group saw a slight decrease (0.05 decrease). This, again, suggests that exposure to media coverage of women's sports also shapes people's interest in and attitude toward the sport.

For many of the other questions, the change in response was negligible or inconclusive. Other confounding factors that may have influenced the study results include: the relatively small sample size, the fact that other world/sporting events happening outside of the study may have influenced their perceptions of women's sports independently, and the inherent prejudices or biases that participants brought to the study which were not accounted for.

### Conclusion

The research findings indicate that exposure to footage of women's success in different sports has had a slight positive impact on the way people view women's sports. Therefore, the hypothesis was partially proven, as there was evidence of a moderate positive change in participants' attitudes and perspectives towards female athletes and women's sports.

This subject also merits further study, to better understand the role of media in shaping public perception; and how, by giving equal coverage to women's sports, media can effectively promote female athletes, their sports, and help establish a more equal world.

## Appendix A: Questionnaire sent to all participants

Introduction: I am a student of class 11 and I am doing a psychology study on how people view women's sports. For this purpose I would appreciate if you could kindly fill out this questionnaire on an anonymous basis.

1. I am interested in women's sports
2. In my free time I watch a lot of women's sports
3. I always look forward to watching women's sports because I like them.
4. I have been interested in women's sports since I was young
5. I read about women's sports in the newspaper
6. Later in my life I plan on watching more women's sports
7. When I am watching women's sports I am fully focused and don't pay much attention to things around me
8. I attend women's sports events regularly

9. I think women's sports get enough media coverage
10. I believe there is a significant difference between male and female athletes in terms of athletic ability
11. I encourage people to watch and attend women's sporting events
12. I think men's sports are more interesting than women's sports
13. I think men and women have the same amount of potential in sports
14. I think more women should be encouraged to play sports

## Appendix B

### Links to Sports Highlight Videos shared with each participant during the course of the study

Week 1 - Badminton: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=iOAItS2jyq4>

Week 2 – Boxing: [https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=OVXxD\\_I7oUI](https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=OVXxD_I7oUI)

Week 3 - Hockey: [https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=37\\_7fXsbdNM](https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=37_7fXsbdNM)

Week 4 - Cricket: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=ofh8Sgm7hcg>

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