Gender Stereotyping in Pictorial Sports News: A Case Study

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Although the women's liberation movement has succeeded to a great degree, gender stereotypes are still prevalent in many fields. This paper examines the media coverage of sports in pictorial sports news in the "Sina Sports Picture Bank" at **sports.sina.com** (http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/). A total of 1141 sample sports photos and captions were collected and compiled by creating a constructed month. The results show that the distribution of the coverage of men and women in sports is severely imbalanced. The characteristics of the language used in the sample captions were also analyzed. For example, references to women more typically employed expressions such as "性感 (sexy)," "激情似火 (hot as fire)," and "风情万种 (full of amorous feelings and expressions)." Finally, four types of stereotypes of women were identified: (a) the appearance of the female (both athletes and non-athletes) was over-emphasized, (b) women were the sexual objects of men, (c) traditional social roles of women were glorified, and (c) women were emotional.

Nowadays, there is a widespread agreement that women should be entitled to the same rights as men. However, women's rights cannot be guaranteed and there is still an absence of equality between men and women such as the union of marriage, in the home, and in the workplace. Therefore, feminists are trying their best to disclose the inequality and stereotypical values about women in social phenomena. For example, mass media are perceived as the main instruments in conveying respectively stereotypical, patriarchal, and hegemonic values about women and femininity (Zoonen, 1991). Therefore, the study of women's image in mass media would increase our understanding of the cultural values embedded in them, as well as the social structures and values based on and related to gender and perceived gender differences.

Several social scientists have researched the images of women and gender stereotypes in the mass media. For example, Betty Friedan (1963) based *The Feminine Mystique* in part on a content analysis of women's magazines. In *The Difference: Growing Up Female in America*, Judy Mann (1994) finds that the media produces images of women in ways that imply value only in terms of sexual objectification. She stresses the importance of communicating the unhealthiness of these societal norms to teenage girls so distortions may be challenged and young women realize the fallacy and connotations in "girls are values for looks and not for other thing." Similar results can also be found in Butler (1990), Peirce (1990), Zoonen (1991), Schlenker, Caron, & Halteman (1998), and Ma (2000), to name just a few.

In the sports field, although women's participation in sports has increased dramatically since the 1970s, the media has not yet recognized a new model of the athletic female (e.g. Kane, 1989; Kinnick, 1998). Specifically, women receive strikingly less coverage than men, even in sports in which women in fact constitute a majority of the participants (e.g. Bryant, 1980; Cohen, 1993; Daddario, 1992; Duncan, Messner, & Williams, 1991; Kane, 1989; Li, Li, & Jing, 2006; Liu, 2000; Ma, 2000; Mi & Zhang, 2003; Yan, 2004).

Research repeatedly indicates that media coverage of women's sports typically reflects traditionally held values about feminine passivity, glamour, and sexuality (Kane & Lenskyj,

1998). Several studies have found that female athletes in magazines often appear in passive poses (Duncan, 1990; Kane, 1989; Lopiano, 1996). It is also common for the media to focus on female athletes' non-athletic roles or achievements. In addition, media often focus on a female athlete's appearance (Daddario, 1992; Duncan, 1990; Hilliard, 1984; Kinnick, 1998; Mi & Zhang, 2003), show her as being emotional (Duncan, 1990; Kinnick, 1998) or dependent (Hilliard, 1984), or display her in sexually suggestive positions or clothing (Daddario, 1992; Duncan, 1990; Li, Li, & Jing, 2006; Lopiano, 1996). According to Rowe (1999), the media's portrayal of female athletes represents a power struggle, and one that currently favors a male-dominant reading.

There are also many researchers who have paid much attention to sports photos (e.g. Duncan, 1990) because they are also the potent sources of information about dominant ideas related to women and sports. Although they present images that generally appear unaltered and "real," they are not simple "message[s] without a code" (Barthes, 1985, p. 5). According to Hall (2000), they are the result of particular treatment, choices, and placements that communicate cultural messages. Readers' ideas about what they see are impacted by the presence of certain codes contained within media messages. Hall (ibid.) further cautioned that although many neutralized codes do not determine a specific reading of an image, neutralization does tend to heavily favor a preferred (i.e. intended by the media producers) interpretation. In this sense, analyzing codes may help to identify the underlying structures of a particular culture; just as understanding the ideology may help denaturalize the codes. Duncan and Hasbrook (1988) argue that photos of women athletes are often embedded with "ambivalence." An ambivalent photo contains mixed and conflicting messages. It does not allow for a straightforward reading by the audience because the athletic characteristics of the photographed woman are obscured, subverted, or challenged by the presence of traditional markers of femininity.

To sum up, the researches assume that images of women in the mass media have been defined in terms of men. The mass media constantly portray women as being subordinate and inferior to men, or as sexual objects. Most of the previous research on media sports coverage is concerned about the way the traditional media represent women athletes, such as newspapers, magazines, or television, including those done by Chinese researchers. Furthermore, much of the above-mentioned research focused on specific sports or athletic events such as the Olympic Games, or general sports broadcasting during brief periods of time ranging from a few weeks to several months, especially in North America (e.g., Duncan, 1994). In order to reveal current cultural values embedded in sports, as well as possible changes, repeated analyses of media sports coverage in different cultures are necessary. In China, women put up "half the sky" and their sports level is not worse than that of men. For example, women won more gold medals in the Olympic Games (from 1984 to 2004).

Therefore, it is assumed that the media in China should give more attention on women's sports. However, this is not the case in newspapers according to Mi and Zhang (2003) and Yan (2004). The author believes that it is necessary to do some research on the pictorial sports news on the internet, one of the latest forms of mass media, because some feminists claim that women should have more space and freedom to thrive in the virtual world. Whether it is true or not needs to be tested with concrete cases.

Table 1. Numbers of Gold Medals Won by Chinese Athletes in Olympic Games

Year	Male	Female	Total
1984	10	5	15
1988	2	3	5
1992	4	12	16
1996	7	9	16
2000	11.5	16.5	28
2004	12.5	19.5	32
Total	47	65	112

Note. Retrieved from http://www.olympic.cn/athletes/olympic_champions/list2.html

Methods

The research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

 1. Did the pictorial sports news at sports.sina.com reflect a balanced coverage in terms of content on both male and female sports activities?
 2. What were women in the pictorial sports news depicted as? Good athletes, sexual objects, wives, girlfriends, or mothers (like many advertisements often do)?
 3. Did the pictorial sports news objectively reflect women's status in the sports field?

The following are three research hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: There were much more pictorial sports news items about men than women.
Hypothesis 2: When women were the focus of the pictures, there were stereotypes toward them.
Hypothesis 3: The pictorial sports news items collected did not objectively reflect women's status in the sports field.

The author chose the sports column of sina.com for the following two reasons: (a) sina.com is one of the most popular comprehensive websites in China. The content in this website should reflect the reality of the mass culture., and (b) there is a "Sina Sports Picture Bank" at http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/ in the sports column of sina.com, which contains all the pictorial sports news (including both pictures and captions) dated from April 21, 2004. About 40 sports news pictures appear each day.

The author used the "Sina Sports Picture Bank" (http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/) to get sample pictures. One day in each month from July, 2004 to December, 2006 was chosen (the first day of July, 2004, the second day of August, 2004, and the third day of September, 2004 ... on the analogy of this, a total of 30 days were obtained), so that one constructed month was created.

The unit of analysis was each of the photos and captions appearing in the constructed month. Most of the time, there were links under each caption, which lead to more related pictures, but they were not included in this study. Occasionally, there is no picture above the

captions. In this case, only the first picture appearing while clicking the link under each caption was counted. Both quantitative (content analysis) and qualitative analysis (semiotic analysis for news photos and discourse analysis for captions) was used in this study.

The sample news photos were divided into four categories for purposes of comparison: (a) men-only, (b) women-only, (c) both, and (d) neutral. Pictures in the "both" category contain information about both men's and women's sports or other activities, while "neutral" ones do not focus on either men or women. For example, pictures of scenery or sports shoes as advertisement were considered to be more or less "neutral."

In order to get comparatively complete pictures of women depicted in the pictorial sports news in the "Sina Sports Picture Bank," the images of women in categories "women" and "both" were examined carefully, and they were divided into seven groups: (a) athletes (within competition ground), (b) athletes (out of competition ground), (c) sports babies, (d) wives, or girlfriends, or mothers, (e) spectators, (f) movie stars or famous singers, and (g) others.

The language of the captions of the sample news photos was also analyzed in great detail to find out the stereotypical cultural values toward women depicted in the photos.

Results

A total of 1141 sample news photos were collected from the constructed week (the detailed dates and websites of sample news photos can be found in Appendix A). As presented in Table 2, women received 199 photos (accounting for 17.4% of total) and the corresponding figure for men was 776 (accounting for 68.0% of total).

The number of photos on women was much fewer than that of men. There were also 90 photos devoted on both men and women (accounting for 7.9%) and 76 neutral ones (accounting for 6.7%). Consequently, the distribution of the coverage of men and women in sports as they were depicted in the "Sina Sports Picture Bank" is severely imbalanced.

The identities of women depicted in the news photos in "women" and "both" categories are shown in Table 3.

A total of 289 photos (199 for "women" and 90 for "both" categories) were collected, among which 141 belong to group (a) athletes within competition ground (accounting for 48.8%), 42 in group (b) athletes out of competition ground (accounting for 14.5%), 29 in group (c) sports babies (accounting for 10.0%), 21 in group (d) wives, or girlfriends, or mothers (accounting for 7.3%), 13 in group (e) spectators (accounting for 4.5%), 11 in group (f) movie stars or famous singers (accounting for 3.8%), and 32 in group (g) others (accounting for 11.1%).

Less than half (48.8%) of the news photos in "women" and "both" categories caught the focus of women while they were in the competition field. In other word, women in most of the photos had no direct relationship with sports.

Table 2. Number of Photos in Four Categories

	Men	Women	Both	Neutral	Total
Number	776	199	90	76	1141
Percentage	68.0%	17.4%	7.9%	6.7%	100%

Table 3. Identities of Women Depicted in the News: Photos in "women" and "both" Categories

	Women	Both	Total
Athletes (within competition ground)	117 (58.8%)	24 (26.7%)	141 (48.8%)
Athletes (out of competition ground)	30 (15.1%)	12 (13.3%)	42 (14.5%)
Sports babies	26 (13.1%)	3 (3.3%)	29 (10.0%)
Wives, girlfriends, or mothers	7 (3.5%)	14 (15.5%)	21 (7.3%)
Spectators	4 (2.0%)	9 (10.0%)	13 (4.5%)
Movie stars or famous singers	6 (3.0%)	5 (5.6%)	11 (3.8%)
Others	9 (4.5%)	23 (25.6%)	32 (11.1%)
Total	199 (100%)	90 (100%)	289 (100%)

Discussion

Pictures

Consistent with earlier studies of media presentation of men and women in sports, the data collected for this paper revealed distinct contrasts between how men and women (both athletes and non-athletes) were covered in the pictorial sports news in the "Sina Sports Picture Bank". Male athletes were generally represented as manly, strong mentally and physically, and forceful. Women athletes were instead presented according to cultural stereotypes which associate femininity with weakness, dependency, emotion, and submissiveness. Many a time women (both athletes and non-athletes) were framed in terms of their social position; for example, as girlfriends, wives, or mothers. Generally speaking, the stereotypes of women depicted in the sample sports photos can be summarized into the following four types:

1. *The appearance of the female athletes was over-emphasized.*
Very frequently, the female athletes' photos were selected not on the basis that they were competent in doing sports activities, but on their glamorous or typically feminine appearance. The pictures in Type 1 are photos of some well-known female athletes chosen from the collected samples. Most of the time, they did not appear in the competition fields, but in some parties, press conferences, or business activities. This kind of stereotype discounted or trivialized their athletic abilities.

2. *Women were the sexual objects of men.*
Women participated in sports, especially activities considered as inappropriate for women, were often depicted in a depreciative manner. They were often marginalized, made invisible, trivialized, infantile, and reduced to sexual objects. There were female athletes or sports babies who were shown as sexy, young, and having slender figures. Most of the time, they were wearing wonder bras, miniskirts, or low-cut clothes that made them suggestive or

sexually appealing. For example, a photo of Anna Kournikova appeared on August 2, 2004 at http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20040802.shtml. As the cover girl of Maxim, one of the popular male sports magazines, she was wearing a bikini and was illustrated as sexually appealing. More examples are shown in Type 2 in which there are a basketball baby, a sports model, and two third-page girls.

3. *Traditional social roles of women were glorified.*

The mass media constantly portray women in the home and men outside it. There is no exception in the "Sina Sports Picture Bank." The sample photos frequently focused the coverage of women on their family situations. Most of the time, they were wives, girlfriends of male athletes, or mothers. They usually appeared to be happy, lovely, or gentle (see examples in Type 3).

4. *Women were emotional.*

Some of the sample photos focused on the moments when women were crying, or shouting because of grief or anger. The same could not be easily found in their male counterparts. It seems that to the photographers, women are emotional by nature (see some examples in Type 4).

All in all, the audience tends to have the impression that the women in sports news photos were beautiful, sexy, good at casting amorous glances, slender, graceful, gentle, or emotional. In addition, the sample news photos constantly transmit the information that women were valued for looks, or in other words, their appearance is for the visual pleasure of men. The fact is that sports photos have typically been conservative works that reinforce rather than challenge traditional values and male-centered power dynamics.

Captions

The language used in the captions of sports news photos is a powerful tool in the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. The descriptors involving sports skill were often absent in description of women in sports activities. Instead, references to women (both athletes and non-athletes) more typically employed expressions like "优美 (graceful)," "性感 (sexy)," 激情似火 (hot as fire)," "风情万种 (full of amorous feelings and expressions)," and "清水出芙蓉 (as beautiful as pure lotus flowers above water)," etc.. When women were mentioned, their nicknames were often used, such as "库娃 (Anna Kournikova)," "莎娃 (Maria Sharapova)," and "精灵小郡主 (smart little princess)," to show their femininity. In most cases, they were just called "美女/美少女/美妇/红粉/娇娃 (beauties)," "女友 (girlfriends)," "三版女郎 (third-page girls)," and "宝贝 (babies)," such as "篮球宝贝 (basketball babies)," "赛车宝贝 (formula one babies)," "足球宝贝 (football babies)," etc. Furthermore, the verbs used to describe their activities were often "亮相 (to strike a pose on the stage)," "出场/登场 (to come on the stage)," "秀 (to show)," "斗艳 (to compete for beauty of looks)," "上演 (to perform)," etc. From the description of women in the captions, the audience tends to have the feeling that all women in sports news photos were showgirls. Here are some examples chosen from sample captions:

1. 篮球<u>宝贝</u>激情<u>出场</u> (Basketball babies came on the stage full of enthusiasm)
2. 科比的香车<u>美妇</u> (Coby's cool car and beautiful wife)
3. 辣妹<u>性感</u><u>亮相</u>慈善音乐会 (Sexy spicy girls appeared on charitable concert)
4. 意大利网球赛<u>美女</u>纷纷<u>出场</u> (Beauties appeared one after another when Italian tennis matches began)
5. 库娃迈阿密<u>亮相</u><u>身材</u>依旧 (Kournikova strike a pose in Miami with sexy figure)
6. 网坛<u>红粉</u>巴里岛霓裳<u>秀</u> (Tennis beauties attended fashion show in Bali Island)
7. 超模<u>性感</u>F1悉尼<u>上演</u> (Sexy F1 supermodels performed in Sydney)

To sum up, not only the choice of photos but also the language in the captions of the sample photos reflected stereotypes of women. On this account, the sports coverage of the pictorial news items at sports.sina.com continues to contribute to the reproduction of traditional expectations of men and women and to the construction of a social stratification, that enhances and naturalizes gender differences. The website overlooked the fact that women are taking an active part in sports activities all over the world. As a result, all the three hypotheses were tested to be true with hard evidences. The general findings of the present study add to earlier findings that media consistently reinforce the categorization of sports according to traditional views on gender-appropriateness.

Possible Reasons

There are three possible reasons that lead to the results of the sample analysis. First, few women hold positions of responsibility within the sports media and most of the gatekeepers lack gender consciousness, therefore the choice and interpretation of news photos tend to represent the standpoint and perspective of men. Second, media speak the language of "markets." More men than women are expected to be the readers of sports news, so in order to get higher CTR (click-through rate), the coverage of women in sports media was intended for a male audience. Third, traditional bias towards women still plays an important role in the mass media. Women are supposed to stay at home, raise their children, refrain from making important decisions or undertaking any other important act, subordinate themselves to men, or act as sexual objects. There is still a long way to go in changing the traditional public views.

Suggestions for Future Studies

Due to the limitation of time and space, the author only collected a small amount of sports news photos for this paper. In order to get a more complete picture of the gender stereotyping in sports news, more samples should be collected in the future studies and more cross-cultural studies are also necessary. It is also the author's expectation that people conduct investigations on why women's sports remain underreported.

Notes

[1.] Sports babies in this paper include the cheerleaders and sports models, such as the basketball babies, football babies, and the third-page girls.

[2.] The images of women whose identity cannot be decided, such as little girls, are put into the "others" group.

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Appendix A.
Dates and Websites of Sample News Photos

Date	Online Source
04.7.1	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20040701.shtml
04.8.2	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20040802.shtml
04.9.3	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20040903.shtml
04.10.4	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20041004.shtml
04.11.5	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20041105.shtml
04.12.6	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20041206.shtml
05.1.7	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20050107.shtml
05.2.8	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20050208.shtml
05.3.9	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20050309.shtml
05.4.10	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20050410.shtml
05.5.11	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20050511.shtml
05.6.12	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20050612.shtml
05.7.13	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20050713.shtml
05.8.14	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20050814.shtml
05.9.15	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20050915.shtml
05.10.16	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20051016.shtml
05.11.17	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20051117.shtml
05.12.18	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20051218.shtml
06.1.19	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20060119.shtml
06.2.20	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20060220.shtml
06.3.21	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20060321.shtml
06.4.22	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20060422.shtml
06.5.23	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20060523.shtml
06.6.24	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20060624.shtml
06.7.25	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20060725.shtml
06.8.26	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20060826.shtml
06.9.27	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20060927.shtml
06.10.28	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20061028.shtml
06.11.29	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20061129.shtml
06.12.30	http://sports.sina.com.cn/photo/20061230.shtml