

Feminine and Masculine Linguistic Comparison in Team Sport through Notre Dame University's Media News Archives



Ellie Lengacher

Abstract

This unobtrusive qualitative research was aimed to explore the linguistic differences in media news archives between male and female athletes in sport. Data was collected unobtrusively through Notre Dame University's athletic online website where media news archives were gathered from the sports of soccer, basketball, and lacrosse in the 2019 year. Open coding was then achieved with the help of varying verbs and adjectives collected. Upon analysis, four patterns emerged from the open coding process. These themes being latent gendered linguistics, a double standard, overemphasizing qualifications of female athletes, and structural disparities. Results concluded that there continues to be major differences in the ways women are talked about in sport compared to men.

Theory

Advertisements act as symbols of meaning for a society. Visual images are powerful agents in impacting the ways people think about various topics; so much so, that modern day advertising has impacted and continues to impact people's values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Because of how persuasive western culture has allowed advertisements to become, it has begun to affect our understanding and experience of the world around us, including the ways in which we view modern masculinity and femininity. Erving Goffman would have gone so far as to say that gender display within advertisements has given meaning to our everyday lives. Through close examination, Goffman attributed these differences of gender discrepancies to how society, specifically western culture, implements social structures and interactions immediately after childbirth. He heavily argues that neither gender presents themselves as fragile and submissive or powerful and authoritative upon infancy, but that society places these expectations on genders through various measures such as media advertisements. After all, the goal of western media in general is to grab attention or evoke a reaction from a specific audience. Henceforth, Goffman discusses that advertisers know their audience well and are able to present products accordingly through various masculine or feminine displays, especially in contemporary America.

Latent Gendered Linguistics

It was noted that the most used verb throughout was "earned". This specific verb was used at a total of fourteen times. For the verb, "earned" to be used in almost every article written about female athletes could have potential to suggest that the actions completed by these female athletes occurred by happenstance. To use the verb "earned" has the potential to insinuate the successful performance these female athletes presented was simply a fluke or occurred by chance. Another seemingly interesting verb that was chosen to describe female athletes play was "flirted". To flirt is to attempt to attract someone, usually in lighthearted intent. What does flirting have to do with sport? Used a total of five times, this verb choice could be viewed many different ways; however, would end up eluding to the fact that by using this verb, the writer is insinuating that female athletes should not be taken seriously. This feminine word is directly depicting female athletes as carefree, buoyant, relaxed women who are unable to handle the gravity of athletics.

The most used verb for males was "dominated", which was used a total of eight times. This was followed by carried (7), cut (7), built (6), force (6), and hit (5). Other verbs that were of frequent use were exploded, powered, ripped, heave, monster, controlled, rocketed, capture, fought, and grabbed amongst many others. These latent masculinity verb choices lend the reader a tool to begin viewing these male athletes as extremely physical and capable creatures.

A Double Standard

After coding the prescribed data set, it is clear that adjectives used for female athletes were exceedingly generic. Its incomprehensible why media would portray an athlete as "nice" or "shy", but when it comes to female athletes, there tends to be a double standard. Woven in these depictions by media is an athlete who is characterized by attributes such as toughness and strength. However, a female athlete needs to demonstrate graceful strength and elegant toughness. The generic, submissive adjectives examined in this study that were used for female athletes verified this double standard.

Diversely, male athletes are then reassured and solidified through sport what society has told them all along. Masculinity is characterized by qualities that sport "naturally" possesses. Therefore, while it is abnormal for a woman to desire "lethal", "heroic", and "thunderous" attributes, male athletes find it comforting to be reassured of these messages that are shown through media. On the contrary, female athletes must find a way to display these athletic qualities in a polished, sophisticated way in which society accepts.



Overemphasizing Qualifications of Female Athletes

Singling out specific players was a code throughout. Female athletes were rightly so being accredited for their athletic achievements, but being recognized in a way in which the reader blatantly knew which female received what statistic. One could easily infer that without the oblivion of it all, it would be difficult for media to persuade society into thinking women are more than competent athletes. Whereas, throughout the articles, the mention of an individual male athlete brought about a depiction of team cohesion within their sport and assumed proficiency of each individual male within that sport.

The mention of a national ranking was also a code throughout the data. Out of all fifteen articles regarding female athletics, thirteen possessed the mention of a national ranking. Contrast to the fifteen articles pertaining male athletics, only five contained any mention of a national ranking while the other ten did not.

In a sense, one could say that the illustration of this theme comes from the need to convince readers, and society in general, that female athletes are capable of athletic achievement. Where it is assumed that males are more than equipped in the realm of athletics, it is needed for media to overemphasize the qualifications of female athletes.

Structural Disparities

Various headers throughout different articles were labeled and assigned to particular sports that could be perceived as gender discrimination. Women's soccer contained bullet-pointed "Notes" to end there. Men's soccer, however, consisted of these "Notes" as well as "Player of the Game" and "Stat of the Game". Three out of the five articles for women's basketball only entailed a summary of the game without any suffix heading. The other two articles included "Notes" and "Stat of the Match". Out of all five articles on the men's side, "Notes", "Stat of the Match", and "Coach's Take" were all a given. Women's lacrosse contained suffix headings such as "Notable numbers", "Coach's Thoughts" and "Players Thoughts". On the other hand, men's lacrosse pointed to "Attacking Player of the Game", "Stat of the Game", "Notes", "Player of the Game" and "Goal of the Game".

Headings in the men's articles such as these point heavily toward accrediting individual male athletes with being the best of the best. A certain play they exercised was the best of the game, or a particular shot they made nobody could top. This eludes to a masculine lens that readers are obliged to view the article through. On the other hand, headings of the women's articles shape a feminine lens that the reader is forced to look through as well. Although women within the articles are given a voice by being heard through interviews after the game, they are not being acknowledged for achieving the best statistic of the game like male's are.

Reflection

In contemporary America, this research reaches broad issues of society when contemplating the language behind how women are spoken about in society in general. Sport is simply a category of society and when unequal linguistic messages are being discovered within this fraction of the greater world, there will continue to be negative implications on society as a whole. To improve this issue, one could find hope in first becoming cognizant of gendered language that they themselves, and those around them use. Because socializing young kids to believe gendered language is normal, female athletes themselves often see nothing wrong with double standard feelings or continually overemphasizing their qualifications to receive respect athletically. When female athletes themselves are blind to this matter, equality most certainly will not be reached. Furthermore, if society as a whole continues to be blinded by this topic, the gap of inequality will only grow wider. Deeper conversations involving the matter need to become more readily addressed, followed by equal linguistic coverage by media sources who are reporting athletics.

Conclusion

The initial research question that was on the premise of asking if there are linguistic differences about the ways in which males and females were talked about in athletics. After data was coded and analyzed, the results concluded that there is much work to be done in the realm of sport regarding gender equality within linguistics. Themes that emerged from this research included latent gendered linguistics, a double standard, overemphasizing qualification of female athletes, and structural disparities. These themes echo the long journey women have taken to simply get where they are today to fight for equality in the athletic world. It is easy for readers to glance at these themes and this research and not give much attention to the equality women receive in sport. One may even say that it doesn't matter too much in the grand scheme of society. However, when so called latent messages are being broadcasted to young kids, their socialization regarding gendered language becomes the norm and society takes two steps back. Our culture needs athletes, male and female, to continue striving for equality because when sport succeeds, society succeeds.