

## GENDER BALANCE IN ESPN AND espnW CONTENT

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**Ancheta AS, et. al.** With an increasing number of females participating in sports, coverage of women's sport is still disappointingly unbalanced. The launch of espnW seemed like an excellent platform to expand coverage of women's sports. The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which the pattern of disproportionate coverage persisted when the content of top headlines/stories presented online by ESPN and espnW were compared. For five days in each of three weeks in April 2018, two pairs of researchers analyzed: (a) top headlines/stories, (b) buzz articles, and (c) photos located at or near the top of articles. A content analysis at the article and paragraph level was conducted based on codebooks developed to provide information related to (a) differences in the proportion of the content focused on female sports/athletes on each site, (b) the type of sports covered on each site, (c) the extent to which content was repeated from one day to the next, and (d) differences in the number and content of photos displayed on each site. Results indicated that differences in the proportion of content coverage of females were present: 23% of espnW article content focused on female athletes versus 31% of espnW article content focused on male athletes, and there was an even greater imbalance on ESPN where only 2% of the top headline articles focused on females. These results parallel previous studies' findings of gender bias in sport media coverage.

**Key Words:** gender bias, sports media, content analysis, ESPN, espnW

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### INTRODUCTION

Media coverage of sports has a long history of privileging male athletes/sports (Messner, 1988; Weber & Carini, 2012). With the potential to provide more balance in coverage, ESPN augmented its website in 2011 with content designed for female athletes and fans in a section titled 'espnW.' Laura Gentile, Vice President of espnW explained that the mission of espnW was to: "represent our commitment to serving female fans and athletes on a dedicated platform ... we are excited to create a specific community for females to talk sports and be inspired both as a fan and as a participant" (Potts, 2010, para. 2).

While female athletes and sports have historically been underrepresented and disparately represented (Fink, 2015; Kane, 1988; Messner, 1988; Popa & Gavrilu, 2015; Weber & Carini, 2012) in all media forms (e.g., TV, radio, print, and web), the development of espnW was not universally greeted as a positive development. Dicaro (2010) gave voice to the perspectives that it would be counterproductive to provide a 'girlier version' of sports and that a sub-site could sideline women's sports while giving ESPN a reason not to cover women's sports on their main site. Messner (as cited in Thomas, 2010), suggested that while an espnW section could provide coverage of women's sports for fans, it might, in the end, ghettoize women's sports.

Changes toward more substantive coverage of female sports and athletes have been mixed. For example, an analysis of descriptors used in coverage of men's and women's basketball tournaments found them comparable (Kian, Mondello, & Vincent, 2009). In addition, a content analysis of *Sport Science* videos on ESPN did find comparable representations focused on athleticism for males and females; however, there remained the problem of far more coverage of male athletes compared to female athletes (Shifflett, Murphy, Ghiasvand, Carlton, & Cuevas, 2016).

More frequently, researchers report slow or no changes in coverage and in some cases decreases in coverage of women's sports (Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013). Compounding the challenge was the finding that a majority of editors (53%) disagreed or strongly disagreed when asked if in general, the media does not provide enough coverage of women's sports; and 60% believed there is little interest in women's sports coverage (Laucella, Hardin, Bien-Aimé, & Antunovic, 2017). Weber and Carini (2012), in a review of 11 years of *Sports Illustrated* covers, noted that the proportional coverage had not significantly changed. Messner and Cooky (2010) reported that televised coverage of women's sports in 2009 amounted to 1.6% of the time across three major networks and 1.4% for ESPN's *SportsCenter*. In addition, continuing a pattern of focus on individual sports when covering female athletes, Martin, McNary, Suh, and Gregg (2018) reported females from individual sports were more likely to have photographic coverage compared to male athletes in individual sports and Duncan (1990) examined how photographs could reinforce male hegemonic perspectives in the context of sport. Duncan noted "how meanings are constructed in photographs and how sport photographs in particular may reproduce patriarchal relations" (p. 23) reflected through position, angle, emotional displays, and action versus passive contexts.

Fink (2015) pointed out that while participation among women and girls has increased dramatically, there remain persistent and substantial differences quantitatively and qualitatively in the media's coverage of male and female sports. When disparities are as dramatic as mean coverage time of 40.55 minutes for males compared to 1.92 minutes for females on ESPN's *SportsCenter* (Martin et al.,

2016), it is clear there is a long way to go. Some will point to market forces as the reason for the differential coverage of male and female sports however, Fink (2015) noted that this "fails to acknowledge that sport consumption is a mediated process: what is covered, how often it is covered, and the manner in which it is covered all impact audience perceptions of value and quality" (p. 336).

This study sought to examine the extent to which the pattern of disproportionate coverage persisted when the content of top headlines/stories presented online by ESPN and espnW were compared. These questions were considered:

1. Is there a difference in the proportion of coverage of female athletes/sports provided on ESPN and espnW?
2. Is there a difference in the type of sports covered on each site?
3. To what extent was content repeated from one day to the next on each site?
4. Were there differences in the number and content of photos displayed on each site?

## METHODS

This study investigated how female and male athletes and sports were covered in the content of top stories (espnW) and headline articles (ESPN) via content analysis. The sample selected was comprised of articles from each of five days across three weeks in April of 2018. ESPN's top headlines consisted of six articles plus an *Insider* commentary which was not included in the sample. The top right listing on espnW included five top stories followed by a section called 'The Buzz' which consisted of five links to social media items.

Analyses were conducted at the article level and paragraph level (Weber, 1990) for top headline articles from ESPN and top stories from espnW. At the article level ( $n = 161$  top stories/ headlines,  $n = 74$  buzz items), content overall was coded first, followed by a more detailed analysis of the content of each paragraph in the ESPN headline articles and espnW top stories ( $n = 2173$ ). Paragraphs were not analyzed for the buzz items as the content was comprised of imported social media exchanges rather than espnW content. Photos located at or near the top of an article on both ESPN and espnW were also coded ( $n = 51$ ).

### Coding

An initial codebook was developed for article, paragraph, and photo analyses prior to the first week of coding. The analysis categories selected at this stage were based on previous research and the purpose of this study. Subsequently an iterative process of analysis, review, discussion, and revision produced a final codebook for articles that included these categories: (a) duplicate content (i.e., ESPN articles on espnW), (b) sex of athlete(s) or coaches, (c) video and commercial duration in seconds, (d) if a photo accompanied an article, (e) type of article, (f) repetition of article from previous day(s), (g) sport type and level, and (h) length of article (number of paragraphs). The codebook for paragraphs focused on: (a) sex of individuals referenced in the paragraph, (b) name of sport, (c) sport type and level, (d) athletic skill/achievement, and (e) emotional focus. The codebook for photos contained information for (a) sex of photographed individuals, (b) sport, (c) photo pose (e.g., action, portrait), (d) location (on or off court/field), (e) number (one or multiple) of people in photo, (f) athletic skill conveyed, (g) emotional content, and (h) article type with which the photo was associated.

All content was coded by members of the research team. A pair of researchers coded samples from the first week while the other two researchers coded samples from the second week. For the third week, one member from each of the previous weeks coded the last sample. Researchers coded independently to minimize bias, and inter-rater consistency among members was examined for each of the variables associated with the articles, paragraphs, and photos.

### Data Analysis

Data for discrete variables were summarized with percentages for each category of a variable. Continuous data were summarized with measures of central tendency and variability. Following compilation of these descriptive statistics, an inferential statistic (Z test; Blommers & Forsyth, 1977) was used to examine the main question of whether or not there was a difference in the proportion of top headlines/stories focused on women on the ESPN site compared to the espnW site. At the paragraph level, a Chi-Squared test was conducted to examine the

relationship between the location of the paragraph (espnW or ESPN) and its focus on male or female athletes and sports.

Three secondary questions, designed to expand on information related to the main question and add to existing literature, were then investigated related to (a) the type of sports covered on each site, (b) the extent to which content was repeated from one day to the next, and (c) differences in the number and content of photos displayed on each site. For these questions, percentages were compared.

### RESULTS

Summary descriptive information for data coded from articles (excluding buzz items) and paragraphs are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Summary for Articles and Paragraphs on each Site

	Articles		Paragraphs	
	espnW	ESPN	espnW	ESPN
<i>N</i>	74	87	1055	1118
Female	23%	02%	31%	5%
Male	31%	85%	40%	84%
Both male/female	45%	13%	27%	11%
Photo w/article	24%	17%	NA	NA
Video w/article	34%	63%	NA	NA
Duplicate of ESPN	31%	NA	NA	NA
Repeat of article	10%	0%	NA	NA
Individual sports	34%	08%	39%	06%
Team sports	47%	86%	49%	86%
Collegiate sports	16%	14%	21%	16%
Professional sports	49%	76%	52%	73%
Athletic skill focus	NA	NA	15%	18%
Emotion focus	NA	NA	19%	18%

*Note.* NA signifies that the analysis was not applicable.

The objectivity of the data varied from good to excellent with the proportion of agreement statistics ranging from .70 (sport level) to .99 (type) for articles; .81 (sport level) to .95 (sport) for paragraphs; and .73 (pose) to .96 (sport) for photos.

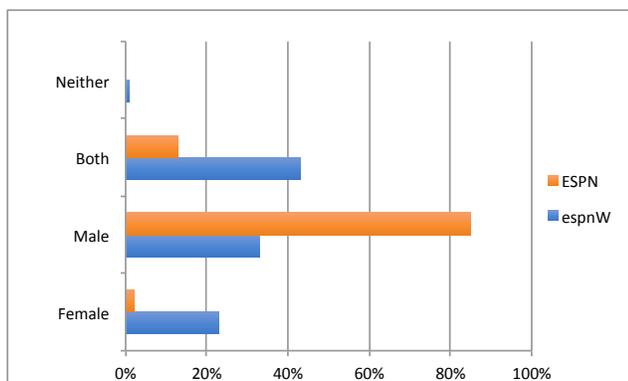
Articles ( $N = 161$ ) in the category of top headlines on ESPN ( $n = 87$ ) and top stories on espnW ( $n = 74$ ) across three weeks in April were analyzed. An additional 74 buzz items were coded at the article level as they were listed with the top stories on espnW. From espnW, 1055 paragraphs were

analyzed from top stories. The number of paragraphs analyzed from articles on ESPN was 1118.

For each top story or headline article across the three weeks, if a photo was included near the top it was analyzed. Among the 33 photos, there were 15 photographs associated with top headlines on ESPN and 18 photos accompanied top stories on espnW. Another 18 photos were included with buzz items on espnW.

The main question pertaining to balance in top story/headline coverage between the two sites was examined with a Z test for proportions. The proportion of top stories focused on women from each site were compared (see Figure 1). There was a statistically significant difference in proportions with a  $Z = 4.00$ ,  $p = .0001$ . Analyzed at the article level, on the espnW site, only 23% of the top stories focused entirely on female athletes. Another 45% contained information on males and females, and 31% of the top stories on espnW focused on male athletes. The only articles in this sample covering women on ESPN pertained to the USA Gymnastics scandal and an MMA fighter where the focus of both was on the victimization of female athletes in the context of sexual assault.

**Figure 1.** Comparison of espnW and ESPN coverage of male and female sports and athletes.



At the paragraph level, the relationship between the site and the amount of coverage by gender in articles was examined with a Chi-Squared test of independence. With a Chi-Squared value of 462.9,  $p < .0001$ , there was a statistically significant relationship. On the espnW site, 31% of the

paragraphs focused on women compared to 5% on ESPN.

Important secondary questions were explored related to (a) the type of sports covered, (b) the extent to which content was duplicated or repeated from one day to the next, and (c) differences in photos displayed on each site. When top stories were considered at the article level, ESPN, which was primarily focused on male athletes, had a greater proportion of its coverage related to team sports (86%) compared to espnW (47%).

With respect to the extent to which content was repeated within a site, there was no repetition of articles on ESPN while on espnW, top stories (10%) and buzz content (76%) were repeated from a previous posting. With buzz content it was particularly noticeable that some content was repeated over multiple days.

In a similar fashion, duplication of content across sites was considered: To what extent was content residing on the espnW site duplicating content from the ESPN site? Items were identified as duplicates when a unique ESPN URL and espnW URL led to articles with identical content. Across the top stories on espnW duplicating content on ESPN (31%), 11 of the duplicated articles were focused on men, 11 of the articles referenced both men and women, and one focused on a female. When duplicated articles included references to women and men, most often the women were family members (e.g., sister, wife, mother) of male athletes or coaches, not female athletes themselves.

Photos associated with top stories from the espnW site were of women 28% of the time, of men 28% of the time, and in 39% of the photos, both men and women were included. In contrast, 60% of the photos associated with ESPN top headlines were of men, 7% (one photo) of women, and 20% included men and women. With regard to the nature of the photos, the content was comparable on the two sites when comparing espnW top stories with ESPN headline articles (see Table 2). On the espnW site, the sports represented were primarily gymnastics (five photos), followed by baseball (2 photos), football, tennis, boxing, and golf (each with one photo). On the ESPN site, the sports represented were predominantly football (four photos), followed by

baseball (three photos), basketball (two photos), and gymnastics (two photos).

**Table 2.** Type of espnW and ESPN Photos

	espnW (top stories)	ESPN	Buzz
Portrait/still	50%	47%	67%
Game-action	22%	0%	0%
Non-athletics related <sup>a</sup>	28%	33%	33%

*Notes.* <sup>a</sup> Non-athletics related pertains to photos not specific to athletics (e.g., fans).

Videos accompanied 25 top stories on the espnW site compared to 55 videos associated with top headlines on the ESPN site. The median length was longer for espnW videos compared to ESPN videos (78 seconds vs. 57 seconds) and the duration of commercials preceding videos was comparable (30 seconds).

## DISCUSSION

In this study, a content analysis of the highlighted articles and associated photos on ESPN and espnW across three weeks was conducted. At the time of data collection, the articles selected from ESPN were under a heading titled 'Top Headlines' and the articles from espnW were under a heading titled 'Top Stories.' The focus of the analyses for this study was on the difference in coverage of male and female athletes and sports.

The results were consistent with media coverage in other formats with the representation of females still being far less than males. In fact, when examining the proportion of articles focused on female athletes/sports, even espnW presented less coverage focused on females than males in their top stories. When analyzing only espnW content, 31% was focused on males, 23% on females, and 45% of the articles included both genders. However, females in a significant proportion of the articles mentioning both males and females were not athletes or coaches. Each site had a comparable number of paragraphs in their top stories/headlines (1055 espnW and 1118 ESPN). Strikingly, rather than espnW providing a balance of coverage, when looking at the combined coverage across the two sites, over three times as much of the paragraph content 'above the fold' in top

stories/headline articles was devoted to males (1358 paragraphs compared to 375).

From another perspective the espnW platform provided more coverage of female athletes and sports than what would be found in the top headlines on ESPN where just two articles in this sample had a female focus. Those two focused on the sexual exploitation of female athletes, not coverage of their athletic endeavors. Thus, even in these few ESPN cases, there was a dominant male figure in the story and the female athletes were victims.

With respect to the types of sports covered on ESPN as compared with espnW, 86% of ESPN articles were covering team sports; for espnW it was 47%. The combination of much greater coverage of team sports on ESPN and that coverage being exclusively focused on males, plausibly magnifies the problem of casting female sports as 'lesser' and male sports dominant, particularly in light of the historical tendency to view individual sports as more appropriate for women (Hardin, Chance, Dodd, & Hardin, 2002).

Content was also more repetitive on espnW as compared with ESPN. Out of 87 articles, ESPN had no repetitions. In contrast, espnW had seven articles out of the 74 top stories that had already been posted at an earlier time. In addition, 23 of 74 top stories on espnW were duplicates of content on ESPN. This exacerbates the imbalance in coverage. With 31% of the espnW articles being duplicates from ESPN, the actual amount of coverage of women's sports was significantly less than what it would be if the content on espnW represented additional coverage focused on female athletes. Furthermore, duplicate content indicates that fewer resources are being devoted to the coverage of female athletes and women's sports, and to espnW in general.

With regard to images, fewer of the photos associated with top articles were located on the court/field for espnW (44%) compared to ESPN (53%). In addition, female athletes were the exclusive focus 28% of the time on espnW while 60% of the photos associated with ESPN top headlines were of men. The sport with the most photos associated with espnW top stories was gymnastics. The sport with the most photos associated with ESPN top headlines was football. These differences not only convey the dominance of football, but also reinforce what has

historically been the perspective that one of the 'appropriate' sports for women is gymnastics. Unfortunately, since baseball and football (off season) photos were presented on espnW as well as ESPN, this potentially conveys that the most newsworthy sports are men's sports.

The 'above the fold' presence of espnW's section called 'The Buzz' - a social media feed, was a concern. Nothing comparable to this appeared on the ESPN site. What this amounted to was comparable prominence (since buzz items were listed with the top stories) allotted to trivial social media content compared to serious coverage of female athletes. The elevated presence of the buzz section alongside the top stories on espnW supported the fears expressed by DiCaro (2010) and Messner (as cited in Thomas, 2010) regarding the potential for espnW to marginalize female athletes and sports. Interestingly, while this was the case at the time of data collection, presently the espnW site does not have social media content links located with their top stories, which are now under a heading of 'Top Headlines'. However, the espnW home page now has a left column with links to ESPN content and the header highlights links to men's events. In addition, links to headline articles from espnW now resolve to the ESPN site taking the reader completely out of the espnW site.

If the focus of ESPN is on men, then findings related to espnW site content were disappointing as the focus on women was not comparable. The same concerns surfaced with regard to the duplication of articles from ESPN on espnW. There is plenty of content to report in the female sports realm. There is no need for duplication or repetition. Collegiate sport information offices for example typically provide information on their women's sports that could be an important and readily accessible resource for sports writers.

Since Title IX in 1972, there are now more women and girls engaged in sports than ever before. These athletes are no different than male athletes. However, ESPN structured its content so that males and females are separated.

The media has the power to influence target markets. Providing balanced coverage between men's and women's sports can expand the popularity of women's sports. In contrast, unbalanced coverage

perpetuates the status quo of men's sports remaining more popular and dominant compared to women's sports. For example, whereas professional baseball was frequently mentioned on the ESPN site, the women's National ProFastpitch professional softball league, which was engaged in spring training and drafts, was not mentioned in any of the articles examined for this study. Though a limitation of the study was sampling from just the month of April and only top stories/headlines, the findings suggest that there was content that could have been included but was not. Others have noted the same lack of coverage for women's sports even through times of notable newsworthy activity. For example, Eastman and Billings (2000), reported that "when the LPGA championship concluded, when the French Open tennis tournament began and ended, and when the WNBA season began and ended, no significant rise in women's sports coverage occurred" (p. 201).

## CONCLUSION

From the perspective of substantive coverage through top stories, based on the data examined in this study, espnW was not providing the "total access to female athletes and the sports they play" as originally posited (Wang, 2015, para. 10). It appeared that espnW, rather than focusing predominantly on female athletes or sports, highlighted additional (to ESPN) coverage of male athletes. This may well serve the female fans of male athletes/sports, but it neither meets the needs of the fans of women's sports nor champions the achievements of female athletes.

Comparing these findings to previous studies (Eastman & Billings, 2000; Messner 1988; Trolan, 2013; Weber & Carini, 2012), there were similarities. ESPN had almost no coverage of female athletes or sports in their top headlines and espnW actually had a greater proportion of their top stories focused on male athletes or sports compared to specifically female athletes and sports. On a positive note, a recent look (November 06, 2019) at the espnW home page found that all of the highlighted articles were focused on women's sports in that day's headline articles.

Even assuming espnW would have content predominantly covering women and ESPN predominantly covering men, the concern expressed by some researchers at the outset (e.g., DiCaro, 2010)

regarding the marginalization of female athletes with a separate site seems to be confirmed. The espnW site is not even a primary link on the ESPN site. Readers need to search through sub-lists of links which certainly relegates news of women's sports to a hard to find space which itself, in this sample, devoted only 23% of its top stories to female sports or athletes.

Though not a focus of the analysis, some overall characteristics of the sites bear mention. The all caps for ESPN but lower titling before the 'W' for espnW conveys a dominance for the main site which is devoted to men's sports. Relatedly, whether on the home page for the ESPN site or the espnW site, the text in the tab for browsers says ESPN. An additional note is that quite often the photo on the home page of espnW had about a third of the image taken up with a heading. In contrast, on the ESPN site all the photo real estate on the home page was clearly visible. Finally, from the ESPN site there was no visible link to espnW while on the espnW site there was a dedicated link to ESPN at the top.

Going forward, serious attention should be given, and action taken, to address the very limited coverage of women's sports on ESPN. For espnW, at least in the area of its top stories, there would need to be a shift in emphasis towards more coverage of female athletes and sports in order to better represent and advance the extraordinary talent of today's female athletes. While the site editors may feel the need to provide fans with a wider range of material on espnW (e.g., social media, fitness/health tips), content 'above the fold' should be focused on serious and compelling coverage of female athletes and sports. Only in this manner can female athletes and sports achieve some level of parity with their male counterparts. Otherwise, as DiCaro (2010) noted, the end result could be nothing more than a 'girlier' version of sports which most certainly maintains the cultural dominance of males as the serious athletes.

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